

Tickets to Success
Interview with Scott Perrin
January 2007

At a birthday brunch for a mutual friend, Scott Perrin told this anecdote from his years as a successful Off-Broadway producer.

Over 60% of New York City theater tickets are sold through TKTS. Most theater producers focus their marketing on the 40% of box office sales, but with my show, "Secrets Every Smart Traveler Should Know", I chose to focus on the place the majority of tickets are sold. Tourists typically buy tickets in advance to one show and hope to see two others during their visit, so there are a lot of people waiting in line with no preconceived plan.

We went out to the TKTS line well-dressed, wearing red jackets, to match the color of the TKTS booth. Later on, we wore yellow jackets, to match Playbill which was handing out a theater guide. We spoke with tourists individually, asking "Do you want to see a play or a musical?" Almost 98% said "musical". Then we asked "Do you want to see something serious or something funny?" Again, 98% said "funny", and we would recommend "Secrets Every Smart Traveler Must Know – the funniest musical". If they wanted to see another type of show, like a serious drama, we gave them our best recommendation. More often than not, the next person in line would overhear and say, "But, I'd like to see a funny musical.

This technique was brilliant. Why? Because Scott distilled all of sales and marketing into a ninety-second conversation. He created a situation in which one person asked another the ultimate question "What do you want?" or in other words, "What would make you happy?". He then offered advice and a solution in response. On the most basic level, he delivered what everyone desires – to have his or her needs matter and to be happy. On a business level, he sold more tickets and reaped the profits.

Based on this story, I asked Scott for an interview. He replied, "Talking to a theater guy for a business book is either inspired or insane." The following is the result of our discussion:

When you walk in the door to Scott Perrin's living room, simultaneously walking into Scott Perrin's business office, you are immediately struck by the sense of light,



space, and warmth. Soon after comes the realization that beyond the white couches and beautiful photos of his wife and family, there are wall-to-wall books, music, and oh yes, a concert grand piano in this not-quite-usual Manhattan apartment. Later, I learned that Scott has worked on musical arrangements with Elaine Stritch and other Broadway luminaries at that piano, and the theatrical posters high on the walls are from shows he produced. Scott is as polished and as warm as his headquarters. Greeting me dressed in suit and tie, he exuded the casual comfort typically reserved for those dressed in say, jeans and a jersey.

Scott produced a number of successful off-Broadway shows, “Our Sinatra” and “Secrets Every Smart Traveler Should Know”, based on the Fodor’s travel guide written by his sister Wendy Perrin, an editor at *Condé Nast Traveler* magazine. His mother, Lesley Davison is a comedy writer with credits going back to *Laugh-In*. His father was renowned pianist and society band leader, Forrest Perrin. Over lunch, we talked about the origins and trajectory of his career.

Who is successful and why?

Mead Metcalf is successful. Mead runs a dinner theater in Aspen, Colorado, which performs a topical, musical revue – one of the very few remaining in the country. He is successful because he is the master of his domain, lives where he wants to live, loves what he does, and makes money doing it.

How do you know Mead?

Forty years ago, my parents were traveling through Colorado. In Aspen, they saw an ad for a musical revue that said “Broadway Songs and Patter”. They went to the show, and were surprised to discover that the material was stolen from a show my mother had written in New York. My parents confronted the producer, but rather than starting a lawsuit, they ended up starting a long friendship. My mother wrote songs for Mead for many years, and we vacationed at his home in Aspen throughout my childhood.

How did you learn to produce shows?

My mother is a comedy writer, and my father was a band leader and musical director which exposed me to the work of show business at an early age. In the circus, the management used to work in the circus – how else would they know how much feed to buy to feed the elephants each day. I grew up in a world of Broadway and cabaret performance and learned the business from the ground up. When I began producing shows, I approached it from the ground up not the top down because I had those important influences.

Could you give a specific example of how your approach is different?

I built the shows around our cast. Most musical directors work out arrangements and then teach them to the performers. For my shows, the musical directors and performers worked together one-on-one before rehearsals even began. We got

together and worked at the piano until each song sounded just right for each singer's range, style, phrasing and pitch. Whether working with seasoned veterans like Elaine Stritch and Margaret Whiting or relatively unknown performers, we presented their talents to everyone's best advantage.

What is your educational and theatrical background?

I was a theater major at Brown. I was the only theater major that had no interest in acting or the intellectualization of show business. I wanted to do commercial theater. I had taken a summer program at the Yale School of Drama, and convinced my advisor to count that for my performance credit requirement. He questioned why I thought I should be a theater major at all. I told him that running the marching band was like producing a mobile outdoor show. Just like any touring show, there was a cast, a crew, musicians, rehearsals, a script, and costumes. We literally took the show on the road every other weekend and performed for audiences larger than the Theater Department could ever hope to attract.

I even wrote a weekly newsletter *The Broadway Report* reporting statistics on current Broadway shows including gross revenue and attendance with charts to analyze shows like you might analyze a stock. That's how I built a basis of knowledge about the productions and was writing about the business of theater in real time.

Did you participate in the marching band?

Yes, I played the bass drum, cymbals, and the glockenspiel. It's just too hard to march with a piano. I did once get the men's rugby team to push an upright piano onto the field in exchange for beer.

Do you have any professional performance experience?

I play the piano, and, when I was 10, I played Winthrop in *The Music Man* at the Jones Beach Summer Theater. At 10 years old, I got the same paycheck and had the same level of respect and responsibility as the adults. The producers liked me so much they asked me back the next summer for *The Sound of Music* and the director cast a slightly unconventional red-headed Von Trapp family around me.

So, how did you shift from that focus to theater production?

For my "Senior Project" in high school, I arranged an internship with a Broadway producer. I answered phones, I handed out flyers at TKTS, and got sandwiches and coffee. Most importantly, I saw and listened to all the activities related to theater production. I knew then it was what I wanted to pursue. During college summers, I worked for other producers and continued to learn the business of Broadway.

And then?

At 22, I started producing musical revues at Rainbow & Stars, the 90-seat cabaret at The Rainbow Room restaurant. The shows included evenings of Cole Porter, Irving

Berlin, George Gershwin, etc.. The Rodgers & Hammerstein revue, *A Grand Night for Singing*, moved to Broadway and received two Tony Award nominations including Best Musical. It is currently the most licensed revue in the Rodgers & Hammerstein catalogue and has a cast album.

What additional knowledge did you gain about the business of theater?

From a business standpoint, I hired the Musical Director as an employee-for-hire, so I owned the arrangements. That is key if the only asset you have is a series of songs that everyone already knows. I would first sell the show to the Rainbow Room, and then take it on the road. I still get the royalties.

You produced "Secrets Every Smart Traveler Should Know" based on the travel guide by your sister, with your mother as Head Writer. What was it like to work with family?

It was great and like all theater, an intense collaboration. When my mother showed me the lyrics to one song, "Naked in Pittsburgh", I told her it had to be rewritten. It's about a guy in a hotel room in Pittsburgh, who is naked because the airline lost his luggage. But, in the first version, you couldn't understand what had happened to his clothes.

What happened when you told that to your mother?

She rewrote it. She's a professional comedy writer, she understood. In the second version, he had sent his clothes to the cleaners and they hadn't come back yet.

Tell me about your role as producer of the show – what did you do each day?

As Producer of a show, you run a small business and you are both Chief Executive Officer and Chief Creative Officer. Many professionals contribute: director; musical director; designers for lighting, set, sound, and costumes; and cast members. But I always retained authority to make the final cut.

The job of a producer changes daily. First, you need a theater and a date for opening night. Then you need to secure financing, hire the staff and cast and start rehearsals. Then, you need to arrange marketing - first for opening the show and then to sustain the show.

For the first year, I sat in the back and saw the show every night. I wasn't just there to supervise. I wanted to be there to give a pat on the back and lend encouragement. For the joy of a musical comedy to come across the footlights, the cast must be having a good time. I made sure they had a good time and felt good about the show. We had cake and celebrations for every conceivable occasion, such as 100th performance, birthdays, and special promotions. Yet, I was careful to be balance being friendly with maintaining enough professional distance.

What types of decisions were key to your success?

I did everything possible in the marketing arena to make the show break through, to put the show on people's radar. For example, running daily 1" x 1" ads in *The New York Times* was a valuable means of increasing and sustaining ticket sales.

How do you know what works?

I tried running ads three days a week to save money. But it didn't have the same impact. I ran the numbers and it was consistent. I don't have an explanation. Daily ads worked. Trying to save money didn't work.

I also learned that people bought more tickets when we put a cast photo on the flyer. I know because I actually stood at the TKTS booth and watched people look at the flyer, and saw who bought tickets and who didn't. We experimented with various versions, and the photo drove sales. It just did, so we kept it.

How did you develop your sales and marketing ideas?

In the tuna fish business, cans can stay on the shelf for weeks. But in theater, at 8:01 each night, your inventory disappears. There's no shelf life. Meanwhile, you have the same fixed costs to put on the show each night regardless of the number of tickets sold. Maximizing ticket sales is all about organization – working smarter, not harder and setting up a process.

And working to hone the process?

Right. I set up floor-to-ceiling charts. I looked at ticket sales every way possible: where the sales came from - Telecharge, box office, TKTS, special promotions, group sales, days of the week, times of the year. I ran the numbers every single day to maximize what was working best and pull the plug on what didn't work.

What did the numbers tell you?

Don't go wide, go deep. Less than 1% of America attends live entertainment of any kind, much less live theater. That's a tiny fraction of the population, and you're wasting resources if you're trying to appeal to anyone other than that fraction.

We tried mailing to individuals who had seen 7 Broadway musicals over the previous year. It didn't work. Apparently, Broadway audiences don't see Off-Broadway shows. Then, we mailed to people who had recently seen three or more Off-Broadway musicals. That worked much better. Learning from that, we did Playbill flyer exchanges with other Off-Broadway musicals. It was free, we hit the target market, and again, it worked.

How was that different from producers of shows that weren't profitable?

People have the numbers, but do they pay attention? People don't really believe there is a regular pattern. They may look at seasonal variations or holiday sales, but they don't do deep analysis.

Usually, ad agencies, Telecharge and the box office don't talk to each other or share relevant information in an actionable way. The ad agency gives advice, and they'd

love explain why a daily 1" x 1" ad works, but they don't know the reason either. You have to make decisions not necessarily based on reasons, but based on results.

I'm not a business genius, but I learned to harness TKTS to the maximum potential. By 2:30 each day (1/2 hour before TKTS opens for evening performances), we'd be out there and in continual contact with the box office. We stayed until 8:00 or we were sold out – whichever came first. Sometimes I had 4 people there, sometimes 8 people. I tested both ways and it turned out it didn't matter how many people were out there. What did matter was the personalities of the people who were working. More enthusiasm had more impact than more people. Those who didn't increase sales didn't get rehired the next week

I tried various compensation methods starting out with an hourly wage. As you might expect, it turned out a combination of a base pay and a bonus based on number of tickets sold worked best. We awarded the bonus each week so the workers saw immediate results of their efforts.

What are some of the tough decisions that you had to make?

Deciding when to close a show may be the most challenging decision for any producer. During a college internship with "La Cage Aux Folles." I created an analysis no one had done before. I took five years of box office data and created a day-by-day model and graph. The patterns were remarkably consistent year to year. On a show with weekly revenue of \$300,000 to \$400,000, we could predict daily ticket sales within \$2,000 – amazing! Then, it was possible to say, "OK, we may lose money for three months, but then we'll make money for the following six months."

At "La Cage...", we got to the point where we could expect some profitable periods in the future, but not enough to offset the unprofitable periods. That was the deciding factor and we kept the investors' best interests in mind. That was the first time a model like that had been used. I used the same technique for my own shows and still use that data as a benchmark.

What was the legacy of "Secrets"?

It ran for three years until 2000. When it closed, it was the ninth longest running off-Broadway show in history. Since then, there have been about 25 productions a year around the U.S.

How did you launch your hit show "Our Sinatra"?

I read about a tribute to Frank Sinatra performed by three singers at the Algonquin Oak Room cabaret. " The Oak Room performances of "Our Sinatra" were sold out and extremely well reviewed by *The New York Times* critic Stephen Holden. When I spoke with the singers, they told me they wished they could continue the show, and I decided to produce it.

"Secrets..." was running on West 44th Street, and there was an empty dinner theater next door. In New York City, dinner theater is not necessarily desirable but for Frank Sinatra, a dinner theater would be like recreating the golden era of Las Vegas – perfect!



I already had my team in place at TKTS plus a great review. I felt the best approach was to leave the show pretty much as it was – if it ain't broke, don't fix it - but to add production value. We added lighting, a sound system, costuming, and more polished staging.

We had one of the greatest "brands" in history: Frank Sinatra. But, we needed credibility for the theater intelligentsia. Bringing a show from a cabaret setting to Off-Broadway is like taking a baseball team from the minor leagues to the major leagues. The show had already been created, staged and arranged for

The Oak Room. But, to appeal to the Broadway intelligentsia I undertook a great expense and hired Richard Maltby as director.

Richard Maltby is the person on this planet most associated with "hit revue". He directed "Fosse" and "Ain't Misbehavin'" – the most successful revue in Broadway history. In theater circles, he is a celebrity. I knew having his name attached to the project would garner serious attention for the show, and it did. It was a serious investment in extremely specific marketing and a ringing endorsement for the quality of the show.

Were there any changes in marketing from the Oak Room version?

One investor suggested we change the name to "Frankly Sinatra", which I felt was catchier and more marketable. But, the performers didn't like it. They felt what made the show work was that it was their personal tribute. Originally, they wanted complete artistic control, which I did not relinquish. However, I did let them keep their title to demonstrate my respect for their creative talent as I would expect them to respect my business talent.

We opened the show and it was a big hit. One final and important focus was to realize that the New York City cabaret audience is around 2,000 people, whereas the Off-Broadway musicals audience is far larger. I knew if *The New York Times* listed the show under "Cabaret Review" it would be the kiss of death business-wise. So, when we opened the show we made sure it was reviewed as "Off-Broadway Review".

What made the show special?

We set up the theater to evoke the feeling of a vintage Sinatra performance. I read everything I could on Sinatra's live performances. In one book, I saw an image of a ticket to one of his Las Vegas shows and noticed it said "Maitre d' Seating". What a phenomenally descriptive phrase! It says, "there will be a Maitre d', so tip him". It says "Get dressed up!" It says, "Get there early to get a good table." It says, "There will be food, and you can order champagne."

We printed "Maitre d' Seating" on the tickets, and people showed up dressed beautifully. Women wore furs coats and jewelry. Men wore suits and ties. That doesn't happen much Off-Broadway. It added to the elegance of the atmosphere and to the success of the show.

Thinking about Sinatra's success in Las Vegas, I came up with "Ringside Seating". We charged \$85 for "Ringside" seats up front. The regular price was \$45. Those Ringside seats consistently sold out regardless of season or day of the week. Even today, \$85 is a substantial ticket price for an Off-Broadway show.

How did "Our Sinatra" work out from a business perspective?

At the time I opened the show, an article came out in *Variety* about producing Off-Broadway on a low budget. The article explained in detail why the minimum capitalization required was \$400,000. I had just produced a hit show for \$200,000 and about half of that was a "reserve" which was never used! There are many successful producers, but, to my knowledge, I am the only one who has produced a show, according to *Variety*, on half a shoestring.

"Our Sinatra" was profitable within four months and ran for two years. So, I had two hits running next door to each other at the same time.

Did the show sell itself because of the title?

People like what they know. The title sold tickets because people at the TKTS booth recognized "Sinatra". But I was constantly thinking of new ways to promote the show. When we opened "Our Sinatra" on December 12, 2000, Frank Sinatra's birthday, the Empire State Building was lit up in blue for "Ol' Blue Eyes". We had a Sinatra Sound-Alike contest and people lined up down the block. These events garnered network news coverage, which translated into ticket sales.

We also did special promotions. On Valentine's Day, the ticket price included a rose and a glass of champagne. We advertised with the restaurant listings, not the theater listings, and we sold out.

How do you think up these promotions?

It's about taking advantage of opportunities when they arise. In 1997, my Jule Styne revue was playing at Rainbow & Stars (Styne wrote the music for "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes", "Peter Pan", "Bells Are Ringing", "Gypsy" and "Funny Girl"). One night I was riding up the elevator with a trumpet player from The Rainbow Room orchestra. We were both running late. He commented he had just come from a recording session with the Carol Channing (legendary star of many Jule Styne shows

who is rarely in New York City). I got off the elevator, walked directly to the phone, didn't even take off my coat, and called her hotel. I invited her to dinner and the show as a guest of Mr. Styne. Then, I called Jule Styne and invited him to dinner and "his" show with Carol Channing as my guest. They were both delighted as was my publicist since he got terrific pictures of a world-class celebrity at the show.

When we were running the Rodgers and Hammerstein show, "A Grand Night for Singing", we orchestrated the timing to coincide with the U.S. Post Office's unveiling of a new stamp celebrating the 50th anniversary of "Oklahoma!" We hosted a luncheon for the Postmaster General and original cast members at The Rainbow Room and had the original "surrey with the fringe on top" with "two white horses" going around Rockefeller Center.

Mary Rodgers, Richard Rodger's daughter, appeared on *The Today Show* with our cast. In the hour following the broadcast, we sold out the entire run. After that, we moved the show to Broadway.

How has your work created opportunities?

We offered the opportunity for established personalities to perform in a cabaret setting. These shows spotlighted the artists as singers or musicians. For Elaine Stritch, it was a first showcase rather than a Broadway show. For Jay Leonhart, it was an opportunity for his bass playing to be featured and appreciated. For myself, I created an opportunity to be Producer rather than small fry associate producer of another show.

How do you feel about having created those opportunities?

I feel proud. I wanted to produce successful shows and did.

Have you done much reading about positive thinking?

I don't actively think about it, but believe in it. People say I'm the most positive person they know, that I rarely get depressed or frustrated. I've found it takes so little energy to be positive and so much energy to be angry. It's easier to be positive.

I come from a background where you have to love what you're doing. In theater, everyone's doing what they love.

I do things people do for fun. For me, it's about both fun and profit. I love to throw parties for social or charitable purposes. People buying a ticket to a show or black-tie event expect to have fun. I'm selling the hope of having a good time.

Tell me more about what you produce now with The Event Office.

Producing an event is similar to producing a show without me personally being on the hook for ticket sales. We plan fundraising events. Anyone can hire a band and a caterer and a florist. But fundraising events have to make money, that's a real challenge.

We start out with a strategy meeting with the Board of Directors. We decide on the event concept, pricing, Chairmen, honorees, whether to do a silent auction, location,

date and time. My company also arranges the staging, decorating, catering, invitations, sound system and music.

We start planning six to twelve months in advance and manage all aspects of financial budgeting and tracking the details. Everything has to run smoothly. We are talking about events where seats may cost \$1,500 and a table may cost \$50,000. If we take in \$2 million, \$1.5 million goes to charity. The stakes are high and the results are meaningful.

How does your yacht represent your success?

Sailing has been a passion of mine since my first birthday party. There was a sailboat theme and I've loved boats ever since. When I was ten, I really wanted a boat and I got a Sunfish, and later on a Blue Jay. I bought my current boat six months after getting married. On the day we bought the boat, my wife and I had dinner on board. It was a freezing evening, the boat was on land, but we had dinner on our boat. It's named Godspeed after the boat that sailed the Jamestown colonists to America in 1607. My wife Robyn is descended from the captain of the original Godspeed.

I'm drawn to the idea that you can start from here and go anywhere.

That seems to be an allegory for your career.

Maybe it is.

What is special about sailing your own boat?

On my boat, I'm in charge. I decide where to go. I like to create my own destiny. I like to be in charge of things. I can't be in charge of Mother Nature, and that's an important facet to recognize. But I like the freedom.

There is no pretense on a boat. It is the opposite of benefit committee meetings of Park Avenue donors trying to impress each other. It's the real deal. It doesn't matter who you are or what you've done, it only matters who knows how to pull sail. You must know what you're doing, or you may die. This isn't a metaphor, it's reality.

There has to be discipline and there's little room for error. On average boats have sunk within eight minutes of someone detecting a problem. Little mistakes can add up, and then someone can get hurt. On a boat, everything has a place, there is a reason for everything and a right way to do things.

I look at business the same way – you better know what you're doing. I have no respect for people who don't take it that seriously. On a boat, they'd sink.

Captain Perrin, what voyages lie ahead?

When the next great show comes along....I'm looking forward to it.

The combination of Scott's early experience on stage, interest in Broadway show statistics, diligence to compile and analyze the numbers behind business decisions, observation of ticket purchasing behaviors, and paying special attention to bringing all the details together led to his success. Part talent, part instinct, part perseverance, these traits are a model way beyond Broadway.

Learning from Scott:

A valuable way to learn is to actively apply success stories to your own careers, rather than just reading passively. Please reread the Scott Perrin interview and write down four lessons applicable to your business and role. How can you put these lessons into practice?

After writing your list, you might compare it with these lessons from the interview:

1. If you understand your strengths, you can transfer them to other roles. Scott's "Diamond of Strength": statistics, detail management, music, marketing.
2. Employees are people first. The energy they receive impacts what they give back. Scott demonstrated this in his respect for the artists as individuals – naming the show, musical arrangements, and making sure they were happy.
3. All experiences can come to bear. In Scott's case, early internships which included handing out flyers at the TKTS booth later yielded him margins higher than the competition.
4. Launching a profitable event is like launching any other corporate initiative. Details and planning count. "To maximize ticket sales, it's all about organization – working smarter, not harder and setting up a process."
5. You need real discipline about making decisions, which includes continual testing of ideas, modifying your process and making sure details are right. Sometimes you don't get it right the first time, and that's fine. "You have to make decisions not necessarily based on reasons, but based on results."
6. The way you package something and describe it is important. Scott looked at a dinner theater, which could be a drawback and with "Our Sinatra", turned it into a positive.
7. Shows don't promote themselves without effort, neither do people. You have to do something. Take advantage of an opportunity, every opportunity. "As Producer of a show, you run a small business and you are both Chief Executive Officer and Chief Creative Officer." To a great extent, the same is true in any business role.