



Because of the foresight of Blumenthal Performing Arts leaders, ticketing sales and services representatives like Cynthia Glenn, above, have been able to maintain customer service from home during the COVID-19 pandemic.

THE SHOW GOES ON

BLUMENTHAL CONTINUES TO SERVE THE COMMUNITY DURING UNCERTAIN TIMES

by LIZ ROTH AUS BERTRAND

In the last few months, the world has changed in ways few people could have ever predicted. Every person and every business has been affected by the worldwide pandemic. How does a performing arts organization – a business dedicated to bringing people together – continue to function in the midst of a public health crisis in which social distancing is the new normal?

Here's a look at how Blumenthal Performing Arts has managed to continue operating, retain its staff, care for its customers, and even successfully launch sales for its biggest Broadway season ever. At the heart of this behind-the-scenes production has been preparation, collaboration and innovation.

PREPARATION

Several years ago, on the heels of a major ice storm, the leadership team at Blumenthal Performing Arts made an important decision. The organization needed to be better prepared if another event temporarily closed offices and theaters, so they took an inventory of all their business practices to see what changes and investments would be necessary.

"We did not know what that event would be, but we knew we would face it someday," says Steve

Brace, Blumenthal's vice president of administration and chief financial officer. Each department helped compile a list of essential equipment, software and capabilities.

There were some obvious needs, like transitioning from desktop computers to laptops; moving files to the cloud where employees could securely store documents and collaborate on projects; investing in new communications applications like Microsoft Teams and Zoom; and training staff to use them so they could continue to work effectively while off-site.

In all, there were about a dozen items to follow up on. "We got it done," says Vice President of Marketing & Communications Wendy Oglesby. "Blumenthal, as an organization, had to invest in that – they had to believe that was important."

These preparations have paid off, enabling Blumenthal to continue operating despite a scenario no one could have expected, affecting hundreds of performances and spanning months rather than days.

One of the biggest and most important investments was moving to a cloud-based contact center system. That crucial decision has enabled customer service agents to receive calls and work remotely in exactly the same way they would onsite in Blumenthal's call center.

"We knew that when you have a weather situation there's a great intensity where people need to talk to you – they need reassurance, they need to know what's going on," says Oglesby.

"We're one of the few performing arts centers in the country that has made the leap to a cloud-based contact center system," says Paul Myrick, director of ticketing and marketing technology, whose first major project for Blumenthal back in 2018 was to lead a team

in replacing the outdated, hardware-based phone system with a call system that functioned completely over the internet.

Since then, customer service representatives and other Blumenthal employees have used a rotation system to occasionally work from home to get comfortable with equipment, test the new systems put in place and ensure that there were no wi-fi connection issues. Blumenthal's leadership knew that if an unexpected event were to happen, it would be essential to maintain the same high level of customer service, providing accurate and timely information to the public as well as having the capability to issue refunds, offer credits and more.

Maintaining the public's confidence during a strained time is essential, not just for the short-term but for the future too. When things return to normal, people will know they can safely purchase tickets without fear of losing their money should something unexpected occur.

Blumenthal has also been able to give the public something to look forward to with the announcement of next season's power-packed lineup of Broadway national tours, including highly anticipated returns of *Hamilton*, *Wicked* and *Dear Evan Hansen*.

Subscription sales have been remarkably strong. "People are very excited for the new season," says Richard Powers, Blumenthal's director of ticket sales and customer service. "We've had folks telling us it's great just to have something else to think about right now ... something positive and something to look forward to."

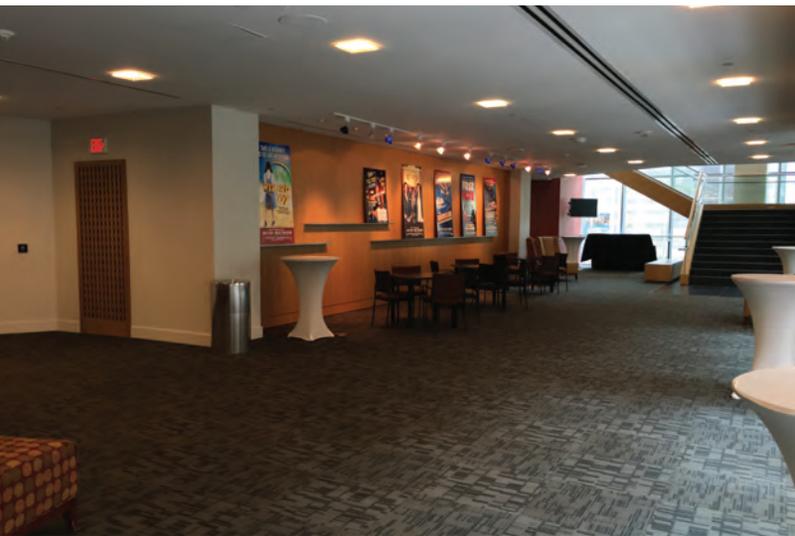


Myrick

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Thanks to early preparations, Blumenthal Performing Arts' staff has been able to continue receiving calls and work remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. Above, the staff stays in touch with meetings via Zoom.



Booth Playhouse gets some renovations during the downtime that resulted from the coronavirus. Above is the lobby before, and at right is with carpet removed and the floor being stained.



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COLLABORATION

Launching a new season on top of handling the large volume of current postponements and canceled events has required unprecedented collaboration between departments while employees work from home. That's because there is no one-size-fits-all solution for handling programming changes.

"You kind of have to assess on a case-by-case basis," says Stephanie Cantrell Dowds, Blumenthal's director of programming, who oversees the organization's presentation of events spanning comedy, dance, music and Broadway tours. "For a couple weeks there, we took the stance of just pushing the pause button because there are so many unknowns. We're feeling a little better about rescheduling now, but a lot of them we're pushing out into 2021."

As Dowds and her team work to accommodate the needs of artists and reschedule Blumenthal presented events to the greatest extent possible, they are also fielding date requests from the more than a dozen resident companies, including the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra and Charlotte Ballet, as well as theater rentals from outside groups.

"Really, the hardest part has been trying to fit the calendar together ... like a big giant puzzle," says Dowds.

As each production change is confirmed, Blumenthal's marketing and ticketing departments swing into full gear to notify the public. Director of Marketing and Publicity Brandon Carter says his team has transitioned in the last month from normal advertising functions to more of a triage role, ensuring that messages about cancellations and postponements are concise and accurate, and that patrons who have tickets to the

affected performances receive proper communication.

"It was definitely uncharted territory when it comes to the sheer number of updates there were and updates that were constantly changing," says Carter about the initial weeks of the COVID-19 outbreak in North Carolina.

Each step of the communication process requires the coordinated effort of multiple people and departments, from updating the website, to drafting an email, to pulling the list of affected ticket buyers, to handling requests for refunds, ticket credits and more.

"I really give a lot of credit to the whole organization because it really does take everybody working in a unified sort of way to achieve these results," says Oglesby. "You can't have good external communications if your internal team is not aligned and not pulling in the same direction and is not sharing data and information."

While many things are happening behind the scenes throughout the organization, customer service representatives in the ticketing department and ticket buyers themselves have had to show great flexibility and understanding as information is updated and communicated as quickly as it becomes available.

"They deserve the credit because more than anyone, they're the folks on the front line," says Powers. "They're the ones getting the brunt of all this."

CARING FOR STAFF AND INNOVATING

In order to keep things running smoothly, Blumenthal's employees had to quickly adjust to new realities. But moving confidently toward the future with innovative ideas meant employees' own fears had to be assuaged. In a performing arts organization, many jobs are not typical 9 to 5 positions, and some are very closely tied to the daily operations of live entertainment, such as loading in sets, cleaning and



Carter

maintaining facilities, and welcoming guests to performances.

For many years, Blumenthal has focused on maintaining an efficient business model and growing its reserve fund to ensure continuity in operations since revenue streams in the performing arts industry are very cyclical. That fund, plus any available federal, state and local programs for which the organization qualifies, is now being used to maintain core operations and to retain staff during the closure of facilities.

“I’ve been incredibly inspired and grateful for Blumenthal’s take on this and how they’re taking care of their employees,” says Robin Tynes-Miller, ticketing sales and services manager. “I think it’s pretty unique. We have so many part-time people on our team, and I was worried about what this means for them. We’ve been able to keep them working on projects. Everyone’s been working really hard and using their time, and I’m just incredibly grateful for that.”



Tynes-Miller

Technical staff, front-of-house managers and facilities managers are busy updating emergency procedures, as well as aggressively pursuing online training courses, ranging from safety management and technical skills to mastering computer programs like Excel.

Blumenthal continues to pay its senior stagehands as well, about 18 in all, who are regularly contracted to work on productions at its six theaters. Although they are not direct Blumenthal employees, they also participate in the training courses. Their new skills will ultimately benefit the organization, and supporting them during this crisis is “the right thing to do,” says Bill Dantos, vice president of theater operations.

Performances are on hold, but buildings still need to be cleaned and maintained. Electrical, fire, and gas systems require monitoring. Incoming mail needs to be picked up and sorted, checks deposited, bills paid and customer refunds mailed. Every day there is someone from security, facilities and building services at each of the theaters Blumenthal operates.

Some building improvements are also taking place, like the installation of new cell phone antennas by contractors at Knight Theater to increase coverage. At Booth Playhouse, floor contractors in full hazmat gear are pulling up the carpet and staining floors.

Meanwhile, the number of hand sanitizing stations in theaters has been doubled and Blumenthal has purchased a new sanitizing system with hospital-grade disinfectant that works like a fogger system, breaking chemicals down to a very small size to ensure the most thorough cleaning possible.

Various departments have also had to come up with new tools to handle special situations. For example, many of the local nonprofit clients that use CarolinaTix wanted to offer their patrons the option to convert ticket purchases for canceled events into donations to their organizations. Blumenthal’s marketing department came up with a solution using a SurveyMonkey form so customers could dictate whether they wanted a refund, a credit toward a future show or to turn their purchase into a donation.

“If this situation calls for something more than what we normally do, we’re trying to step up and do more,” says Oglesby.

Say Hello to
Tom Gabbard
PRESIDENT AND CEO, BPA

Favorite television show during quarantine so far?
Star Trek: Picard, Starring Patrick Stewart. It's wonderfully done, but we also became friends when I worked with him producing two one-man shows he created. His contract said there had to be a plate of my wife's chocolate chip cookies in his dressing room. Lovely human being, immensely gifted actor.

Go-to takeout food right now?
We live in Elizabeth and have been ordering from within the neighborhood, pizza, salads and Mexican.

Have you taken up any hobbies recently?
Sadly, no.

Which room in your home are you working in?
Family room. My two favorite chairs, TV and wireless router are there.

Which 2020-21 Broadway season show are you most looking forward to?
All of them! But I'd love to see...

BROADWAY SEASON SWEAT

DIRECTIONS: Repeat each move 10 times. Repeat set until song is finished (if necessary).
WHAT YOU'LL NEED: Dumbbells, a chair and a yoga mat or towel. No dumbbells? Use everyday items such as canned goods, water bottles or milk jugs.

- 1) WARM UP**
 - ▶ GET READY (AIN'T TOO PROUD)
 - LARGE ARM CIRCLES
 - JUMPING JACKS
 - BUTT KICKS 10 PER LEG
 - HIGH KNEES 10 PER LEG
- 2) LOWER BODY**
 - ▶ THE SCHUYLER SISTERS (HAMILTON)
 - SQUATS
 - LUNGES
 - FIRE HYDRANT KICKS 10 PER LEG
 - DONKEY KICKS
- 3) CHEST**
 - ▶ APEX PREDATOR (MEAN GIRLS)
 - PUSH UPS
 - PLANK SHOULDER TAPS 10 PER SIDE
 - DB CHEST FLY
 - DB CHEST PRESS
- 4) TRICEPS**
 - ▶ OKLAHOMA (OKLAHOMA)
 - TRICEPS EXTENSIONS
- 5) BICEPS**
 - ▶ GONE, GONE, GONE (TOOTSIE)
 - DB BICEP CURLS
 - DB HAMMER CURLS
 - DB BICEP PULSES
 - DB BENT OVER ROWS
- 6) ABS**
 - ▶ SIT DOWN, JOHN (1776)
 - CRUNCHES
 - LEG RAISES
 - ALTERNATING HEEL TOUCHES
 - PLANK TO PIKES
- 7) COOL-DOWN**
 - ▶ MY STRONGEST SUIT (AIDA)
 - CHILD'S POSE
 - HIP FLEXOR STRETCH
 - HAMSTRING STRETCH
 - STANDING QUAD STRETCH
 - SHOULDER AND TRICEP STRETCH

DANCE IT OUT!
Find the playlist at BlumenthalArts.org/sweat

BLUMENTHAL BINGO

Purchased Broadway merch	Asked for a do-over pic at the lobby step-and-repeat	Been on a BTS tour of Belk Theater	Cheered on your fav show at a Tony Awards Viewing Party	Parked in the wrong garage
Pre-ordered drinks for intermission	Won a digital ticket lottery	Attended a Blumenthal Festival (Jazz, Shout, Comedy Experience)	Oops! Kicked your cup over on the floor during a quiet show moment	Scored some sweet Last Minute Tickets
Forgot your tickets at home. Will Call to the rescue!	Attended an Open Mic Night	FREE SPACE (because we miss you)	On a first name basis with (at least) one bartender	Playbill Settle Taker
Accidentally showed up at the wrong theater	Have a go-to pre and/or post show restaurant.	Hummed a showtune on the way home from the theater	PNC Broadway Lights Season Ticket Holder	Said "I LOVED IT!" to a stranger while exiting the theater
Flown through the MASSIVE ladies' room line at Belk Theater	Lost a digital ticket lottery	Snagged a Stage Door pic/autograph	Screenshotted your "spot" in the Hamilton online waiting room	Have backup tissues ready at all times.

During the pandemic, when theaters were closed, Blumenthal got creative and provided some online distractions for Broadway fans.

Blumenthal Performing Arts
Published by Rebecca Marie [?] · March 19 · 🌐

Today's gift, **Andrew Lloyd Webber** serving as your personal piano accompanist for 'All I Ask Of You' from **The Phantom of the Opera!** BRB...singing along for the remainder of the day.



The song that came out on top was 'All I Ask Of You' - ALW
02:23

4,325,858 Views

Andrew Lloyd Webber
March 19 · 🌐

I didn't think I'd ever get such a response to this little tryout! Here I am in my own self-isolation. The song that came out on top was 'All I Ask Of You' - ALW

Blumenthal Performing Arts
Published by Rebecca Marie [?] · April 14 at 8:27 PM · 🌐

Don't resist the many TEMPTATIONS to watch this 4-5 times in a row... Bravo, **Ain't Too Proud Musical!** We cannot wait for your Belk Theater debut April 27 - May 2, 2021 as part of our new PNC Broadway Lights series!

Subscriptions are on sale now! For more info, visit: BlumenthalArts.org/Broadway



The Way You Do The Things You Do - REMOTE!
01:49

32,161 Views

Ain't Too Proud Musical
April 14 at 5:02 PM · 🌐

Even though we can't be together, the Ain't Too Proud family wanted to bring you all some sunshine today! Watch this video of "The Way You Do The Things You Do," created by our MD/Arranger Kenny Seymour.

A new online feature called The Blumenthal Daily offers curated selections of inspiring performances or activities led by local artists, Broadway stars and other entertainers. At the top, Andrew Lloyd Webber provides piano accompaniment for "All I Ask of You" from *The Phantom of the Opera*. Above, *Ain't Too Proud* performers do a remote version of "The Way You Do the Things You Do."

Beyond logistics, Blumenthal's team has also worked to creatively serve the community and fill a void left by empty stages and the absence of live arts experiences. "As a performing arts nonprofit, we are in a very unique position to provide much needed distractions from the stressors of day-to-day life," says Becky Bereiter, Blumenthal's communications & creative content producer, who oversees the organization's eight social media channels. "That's always been the case, but I feel now, that role is more important than ever. When I'm considering what to post, that's always top of mind. What can I share with our followers that will make them smile, laugh, happy-cry, feel hopeful?"



Bereiter

A tremendous amount of content has come from the Broadway and entertainment community, and Blumenthal is helping to share these resources and highlight these unprecedented moments. "Creatives are stepping up in so many incredible ways, letting the world into their homes virtually, sharing their talents in ways we never thought would be possible and confirming that we are ALL in this together!" says Bereiter.

Because there is so much entertainment to share, Blumenthal has also created new features to offer a curated selection to the public, including The Blumenthal Daily, on the organization's website. Every day, Blumenthal's team posts its pick for an inspiring performance or fun activity led by Charlotte artists, Broadway stars and other entertainers. An archive of all postings since April 1 can be accessed on the website: BlumenthalArts.org/daily.

LOOKING AHEAD

There are still many unknowns surrounding the timeline in which theaters and other places of assembly will be able to open again and how people will respond once they do.

"The level of uncertainty is just really challenging because it's always in your mind, kind of fogging every decision – it's just always there," says Carter in marketing.



Schoneman

"I can only speak for myself here but working for a performing arts organization is a unique experience," says IT Director Robert Schoneman, whose team oversaw many of the preparations that have enabled Blumenthal's staff to work from home. "That experience largely revolves around what we make – shows. I'm thrilled by what everyone is accomplishing with technology in this new normal, but I also eagerly await returning to normal."

Kindness and understanding are the most important things we can offer to one another right now, says ticketing's Tynes-Miller, recalling a team member's story about an upset patron who had phoned in the night before. The representative managed to calm her down and take care of her the way she needed. At the end of the call, the woman apologized and explained she was a nurse and had just come off a long shift.

"We don't know what they're going through," says Tynes-Miller. "This is a really scary and challenging time for everybody. We want to be the part of their day that brightens it. We've had some really wonderful calls with people who are so excited about the season and are so glad to have something to look forward to." ✨