

Arts and Leisure: Internet now offers many ways to get those hard-to-find tickets

by James Hebert

Buying entertainment tickets used to be a pretty basic operation. Park the car; step to the window; snap up your passes; enjoy the show.

They're out of tickets? You're outta luck. Unless a friendly scalper's around to relieve you of that stack of cash.

PRICE OF ADMISSION - Arts patrons used to have few options in getting a ticket to their favorite venue; the Internet has changed all that. CNS Photo by Earnie Grafton. Now, as Internet competition has thrown the market wide open, a dizzying array of options confronts (and confounds) ticket-seekers. There are sophisticated ticket marketplaces such as StubHub.com; bare-bones, localized sites such as Craigslist; auctions on eBay and other sites; and online sales through individual arts groups or that industry behemoth, Ticketmaster.

Those who liked the old way can still do the box-office mambo - if all the seats haven't been snapped up like a brutal game of musical chairs.

For a new breed of buyer, though, the wealth of alternatives offers plenty of advantages: A shot at scoring hard-to-get tickets, getting a great deal and maybe even slipping the clutches of those dreaded service charges.

But figuring out the right option for the right event? Now that's the ticket.

"I like having choices, and I have not been burned," says Pat Worthen of San Diego, a well-versed consumer who had posted an ad on the classified-ad site Craigslist seeking tickets to a Fall Out Boy show.

Worthen buys from "both conventional and nonconventional" outlets - sites such as Craigslist and the user-driven marketplace StubHub.com as well as local ticket kiosks.

"I am sure some buyers get fleeced, and I have compared tickets enough to know that some sites really boost the face value for profit," Worthen says. "I don't like opportunists and I won't stoop to paying more than I think it is worth; that's the buyer's choice."

The ticket business has changed immensely from a decade ago, when Pearl Jam launched a crusade against Ticketmaster, the band's members testifying to Congress about what they saw as an unfair monopoly in the ticket-peddling business.

That sound and fury wound up having all the potency of a blown amp: The government dropped its Ticketmaster probe, and Pearl Jam eventually went back to working with the entertainment-biz goliath.

But the Internet - which started taking off about the same time the band's campaign was fizzling out - has proved a more inexorable force than Eddie Vedder and Co.

The dizzying array of options has brought its own set of complications. For one, alternative outlets don't always mean lower prices: Tickets for Andre Rieu's San Diego concert that were going for \$71.25 apiece on Ticketmaster.com in late November were listed at a low of \$117 on StubHub.com, which doesn't sell tickets itself but acts as a kind of flea market for buyers and sellers.

While sites such as StubHub often have tickets when the box office doesn't, service fees - a longtime inspiration for Ticketmaster-bashing - can still be high. (StubHub charges a percentage rather than a flat fee.) And not everyone has the taste for the face-to-face money-changing that buying from a site like Craigslist

requires.

It's not as though Ticketmaster has gone away, either. It's still the world's largest ticketing company, handling 100,000 events annually nationwide, according to parent company IAC (which plans to spin off Ticketmaster next year). In 2006 it sold \$7 billion worth of tickets and had revenues of some \$1.1 billion - largely from service charges.

It remains the primary ticket service for many venues around the country. But Live Nation - the heavyweight national concert promoter that runs San Diego's House of Blues, among other venues, and accounts for about 17 percent of Ticketmaster's revenues - has not renewed its contract and may launch its own ticketing operation.

Live Nation is beginning to reinvent itself as a more wide-ranging entertainment company, signing Madonna recently to a 10-year contract and launching an artists division. Though the company hasn't announced a decision on ticketing, CEO Michael Rapino has said Live Nation wants to exploit "new revenue streams" and direct ticket-seekers to the company's own Web site.

FEE FRUSTRATIONS

One reason Ticketmaster's service charges still seem to rankle (as evidenced by Web sites with names like Ticketmastersucks.org) is that they're often perceived as arbitrary and hard to decipher.

Additional online purchase charges for that Andre Rieu show amount to \$29.80 for two tickets, or about 21 percent of their combined face value of \$142.50. That includes \$2.50 for "Ticketfast Delivery" - a fee levied on buyers who print the tickets out at home, on their own paper. Standard mail delivery is free.

For a show earlier this year by the kids' act Ralph's World, tickets were just \$15 apiece. But additional online fees for two tickets amounted to \$15.85, or a startling 53 percent of the \$30 purchase price. And that's not including a Ticketfast fee or the \$2 facility charge, which goes to the venue and not Ticketmaster.

Ticketmaster argues that substantial service charges are necessary in part because of the risks of being a first-line ticket provider. Not only do more than 40 percent of event tickets generally go unsold, says Mike McGee, a Ticketmaster executive vice president, but promoters and venues (with some input from Ticketmaster) have to set prices that make economic sense without provoking a public revolt.

The company also has to share proceeds with promoters and others.

McGee acknowledges that "the rise of Internet ticketing and the online reselling of tickets have utterly transformed this business and made it easier for new ticketing companies to crop up - many successfully."

Ticketmaster has responded with such new ventures as Ticketmaster Auction and TicketExchange, a marketplace similar to StubHub.

Carol Stanek, who lives in Cupertino, Calif., and is a newfound fan of StubHub, is typical in her disdain for high service charges.

"Oh, it annoys the hell out of me," she says. "The fact that they're getting \$6 or \$8 a ticket when I'm ordering on the Web is really an annoying thing.

"On StubHub, I'm going to pay my fee. But I feel as though I'm getting a service for it."

Stanek describes how StubHub, which is now owned by eBay, jumped through hoops to have the original seller provide her with freshly printed tickets to an out-of-town sports event, after she left the originals at home.

Ticketmaster will only replace lost tickets in certain situations, and issues refunds for canceled events - less the order processing fee and delivery charges. For example, those who bought tickets to the Oct. 24 show by the Jesus and Mary Chain in San Diego, which was canceled due to the wildfires, were out at least \$3.80.

StubHub refunds all charges for cancellations.

Even Stanek notes that a secondary source such as StubHub isn't always the best choice, though.

When she went to New York, she "thought about using it for theater, but I didn't really need to, because there were still tickets available" through box offices and other standard sources.

But StubHub and similar sites can be useful for getting seats on short notice to highly popular shows in locations like Broadway, she says.

"That's sort of the problem, when you get shows that sell out months and years in advance," says Stanek. "I'm not going to plan a vacation a year or two in advance."

COST OF CONVENIENCE

Of course, customers typically pay for that promise of flexibility. Sellers on StubHub set their own prices, and the law of supply and demand can send those prices skyrocketing.

Also, StubHub's flat 10 percent charge to buyers (delivery charges are extra) can seem low compared with Ticketmaster's fees. But for the top-priced ticket to the Jingle Ball concert - \$525 in late November - that levy would have been a bracing \$50-plus. The question is whether anyone actually would pay \$525 for that seat. The market quickly decides whether tickets are worth such a price.

"Sellers must price tickets at the most attractive possible or they will not sell," says Sean Pate, corporate communications chief for StubHub. "Often you will see exorbitant prices listed by sellers, but the reason you see those is that they are overpriced and have not moved. The fair-market prices go fast, and an event drives what people will pay."

Even so, Pate acknowledges that while consumers can find hard-to-get tickets on StubHub, "the caveat is market pricing."

"But fans have always wanted an alternative," he adds. "In the primary distribution that isn't possible because of Ticketmaster's stranglehold on the market."

Another frustration among consumers is that trying to get tickets to the most popular acts and events the first day of sale can seem almost impossible. That frustration erupted in a recent furor over the scarcity of tickets to see Hannah Montana (aka Miley Cyrus), the Disney Channel favorite and tweener sensation.

The shortage sparked complaints and even legal actions against ticket brokers, who were accused of improperly snapping up the tickets, as well as the performer's fan club, which had promised inside buying access.

But Don Vaccaro, CEO of the site TicketNetwork.com (a marketplace similar to StubHub), says a big part of the problem is that some of the best tickets are diverted from all potential buyers - brokers and consumers alike - before the sale even starts. Those, he says, often end up in the resale market anyway.

"When tickets go on sale in the primary market, a lot of times the event producers - which can include a whole spectrum of people, the managers, the agents, the artist, the promoter - withhold so many good tickets from the general public."

These can go to corporate sponsors or be used for promotional contests and the like.

"The public, on the day of the original on-sale, is only left to get the scraps," Vaccaro says. "Or they're forced to buy a VIP package that they really don't want. All they really want are good tickets."

PEER TO PEER

Maybe the most pure example of the free market in tickets is Craigslist, the bare-bones Web site through which individuals buy and sell all manner of services and merchandise.

There are no service charges for buyers through Craigslist (the site makes money only through job listings). But doing the deal usually means meeting to exchange tickets for cash, something not all buyers are wild

about.

Still, it can be a place for good deals - the site asks that users not sell tickets for more than face value, although that request doesn't always appear to be honored.

The unfettered character of Craigslist makes it wise for buyers to be wary, though. Earlier this year, a dozen local theaters offered free tickets to certain performances as part of a national program to reach out to new theater audiences.

Some of those "free" tickets wound up for sale on Craigslist, says Christopher M. Smith, ticket services manager for ArtsTix, a discount ticket-seller run by the San Diego Performing Arts League. ArtsTix handled the local free-ticket effort.

It was of further concern because the sellers didn't have actual "hard" tickets to offer, just reservation confirmations.

"They really had pretty much nothing," Smith says. "And they were selling them for \$9 or \$10. I was fairly upset about the whole thing. It was our first year doing it, and I want to continue with the program. The theaters are only going to do it if they're comfortable with it."

Ironically, the program had been promoted partly through postings on Craigslist.

Smith says that while he's heard a lot about the advantages of getting tickets on Craigslist, he hasn't used the site himself. But like Worthen, as a ticket-buyer he has learned to sample a lot of different options.

"I've bought tickets any number of different ways," he says. "I'm the type of person who likes to go to the actual venue if at all possible. That way you sometimes miss out on some of the fees.

"Sometimes you can just roll up the night of the show, if it's some small (event) and it's general admission and I'm not worried about what my seat locations are."

It's a reminder that amid all the methods that have sprouted up to trade remittance for admittance, the old-fashioned ticket window still exists. It might even take cash. Seating chart

A look at some prominent sites for scoring arts tickets. It's also worth remembering that many venue box offices sell tickets fee-free in person.

TICKETMASTER, ticketmaster.com

Profile: Biggest game in town. Mostly known for primary ticket sales, but also has auction and resellers' sites.

Pros: Ubiquitous, generally reliable.

Cons: Those service charges!

STUBHUB, stubhub.com

Profile: Upstart ticket marketplace, now with 5 million users.

Pros: Huge inventory, great refund policy, low commission rates (10 percent for buyers, 15 percent for sellers).

Cons: Market can drive prices very high - and fees along with them.

CRAIGSLIST, craigslist.org

Profile: Friendly, democratic, largely user-policed site.

Pros: Ease of use, no fees or commissions.

Cons: Face-to-face transactions generally a must. Limited recourse if something goes awry.

ARTSTIX, sandiegoperforms.com/ARTSTIX

Profile: Locally based agency for music, dance and theater tickets.

Pros: Half-price tickets available for many events; booths in downtown San Diego and Escondido, Calif.

Cons: Half-price deals usually available only the day of show (the evening before for some online sales, which are an additional fee).

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