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AMEX AND YAHOO BUILD ONLINE BROADWAY PUBLICATION

Will Compete Head-to-head With NYTimes.com Theater Section

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By [Lisa Sanders and Kris Oser](#)

NEW YORK -- In an effort to build an online Broadway theater news and feature service to rival that of *The New York Times'* Web site, Yahoo and American Express are readying the launch of American Express Presents



American Express and Yahoo are building a major online publication focused on the Broadway theater business.

Broadway Live on Yahoo. The branded entertainment project appears to have all the components of a mainstream editorial site but is being funded by American Express and built by Yahoo. The construction cost is estimated at \$2.5 million, according to one executive familiar with the project. American Express would not comment on the cost. Its ad agency roster shops are creating the site's content and promotional campaigns.

Major theater publication

Meant to function as a long-term marketing vehicle for American Express, the site also aspires to be a major online publication for the theater-related business community, greatly expanding its reach in terms of theater promotions

and seat sales. It will feature streaming video clips and written descriptions of current shows, Broadway-related news stories, direct-link ticket sales and special promotional offers for site visitors and American Express cardholders. Ticket sales will not require the use of an American Express card. The success of American Express' online Broadway project will depend on the depth of the site's editorial content, said Greg Sterling, an analyst for market research firm the Kelsey Group, which specializes in local advertising online and offline. "If AmEx builds something very big and very rich, then it could give *The New York Times* a run for its money," Mr. Sterling said. "If it's rather thin, it won't make much difference." At the *New York Times* site, visitors can read reviews, see slide shows, find listings of Broadway, off-Broadway and London shows and purchase tickets. NYTimes.com does not offer video clips of current plays as the Amex/Yahoo site intends to do.

Challenge to the 'Times'?

Could the Amex site challenge the *Times'* status as the main purveyor of theater advertising? If Yahoo promotes the site on its home page with the same prominence with which it promotes Yahoo Movies, it will get a lot of visibility and usage, Mr. Sterling said. "If you attract a sizable audience, then you will attract advertisers that want to be in front of that audience," he said. Yahoo receives 372 million unique visitors a day. Ultimately, adding to the rivalry online puts more pressure on offline newspapers. "The only game in

town for box office sales used to be newspapers," Mr. Sterling said. "And now, traditional media vehicles, like newspapers, are under attack by the Internet." An American Express spokeswoman, Judy Tenzer, said, "We've long been involved with Broadway, but this brings our programs to the next level." The charge card company's involvement with Broadway date back decades, ranging from show sponsorships, advertising in ubiquitous theatre magazine *Playbill* or helping to initiate electronic ticket purchasing, as it did years ago with Telecharge.

Launch set for May 27

The new site will launch on May 27, nine days prior to the June 5 Tony Awards, one of Broadway's most celebrated events honoring actors, producers, playwrights and others involved in theater. Other partners in the project include *Playbill*, whose online unit, Playbillonline, through a no-fee swap, is providing stories about Broadway shows in exchange for having the publication's logo on Yahoo pages where its content appears. The site will not carry any outside advertising. While a number of Broadway-oriented Web sites such as Theatremania.com and Broadway.com already exist, the financial, creative and technological backing of the Amex/Yahoo site makes it potentially more far-reaching. American Express Presents Broadway Live on Yahoo is the brainchild of Amy Willstatter, president of Bridge to Hollywood/Broadway, a firm that matches marketers to entertainment venues for product-placement deals, and Jim Moloshok, senior vice president for media and entertainment at Yahoo. Ms. Willstatter heard Mr. Moloshok speak several years ago about how Yahoo paired with the movie industry to build its entertainment section. Ms. Willstatter, a former Saatchi & Saatchi ad executive who now focuses on Broadway-focused branded entertainment deals, pitched him on the idea of creating a similar online venue for the Great White Way. Mr. Moloshok liked it, got Yahoo on board, and from there the project gained steam.

Avenue Q, the puppet sex show

Drew Hodges, CEO and founder of SpotCo, an advertising agency specializing in theater clients that retains Ms. Willstatter, brought *Avenue Q* into the talks. *Avenue Q* is a Tony Award-winning comedy featuring a cast of puppets engaging in adult sex acts. "We were struggling to get people to understand what *Avenue Q* was," Mr. Hodges said. "We felt that if people could see it, they'd understand it. With Yahoo, people could see our show or our ad as if it was living and breathing." For Broadway, the Web's ubiquity, combined with the coffers of big companies, offers reach that most shows just cannot afford. "Corporate entities like Yahoo and AmEx have more technology, more power and more money than Broadway," said Ken Davenport, a show producer and manager of various Broadway shows such as *Gypsy* and *Thoroughly Modern Millie*.



Drew Hodges, CEO of SpotCo, brought 'Avenue Q' into the deal.

Show promotion logistics

Most shows advertise using direct-mail campaigns directed at long-standing customers, print ads in general-interest publications such as *The New York Times* and *Time Out*, and by using e-mail blasts to prospective buyers from list sellers. For some shows, public relations efforts such as reviews and interviews of the shows' stars on talk shows are part of a program. "This site will be significantly stronger in multimedia than anything out there online now," said *Playbill*'s publisher and president, Philip Birsh. Each show will have its own page, which might include art, clips from B roll or specially created video. Viewers will click through a link to buy tickets, and are not obligated to use an American Express charge card, although there will be offers available only to AmEx cardholders. American Express will promote the site, which will include more than 30 shows at launch. The spokeswoman would not discuss the amount of money earmarked for advertising. "We will market the site to make sure consumers know about it," she said.