Why occasional theatre attendance do not subscribe in France?

Introduction
Marketing research on consumer loyalty has shown that consumers, who maintain long-term relationships with an institution, as subscribers do, present multiple advantages. They repurchase more than occasional buyers, speak more positively about the institution, pay less attention to competition offers, are less influenced by prices, are more tolerant to dissatisfaction and tend to attribute errors to themselves or to contextual reasons rather than to the institution (Dick and Basu, 1994; Keaveney, 1995; Krishnamurthi et Raj, 1991; Reichheld and Teal, 1996). All express a sense of co-operation\(^1\), active and passive, truly profitable for the institution (Bendapudi and Berry, 1997).

In the context of performing arts institutions, two benefits are predominantly evoked when subscribers are described (Ryans and Weinberg, 1978; Schlosser, 1983). On the one hand, they fill the seats of the less popular productions of the season; on the other, they are the principal fund contributors. But these are not the sole qualities of this segment. From a marketing point of view, subscribers have another virtue: they are an “easy-to-market” segment. First, these theatergoers are known and personally identified by the institution. In fact, when they subscribed, they gave numerous data like their age, social level, location, and tastes, all of which allow the manager one-to-one marketing. Second, subscribers have already expressed a cultural demand that can be fulfilled by the institution. Indeed, they have experimented earlier the theater facilities, the repertoire promoted and the customary theater performers because, before becoming subscribers, they were mainly individual ticket buyers (Currim, Weinberg and Wittink, 1981). Consequently, during these experiences of attendance, they have tested and accepted the quality level and attributes of the art institution (repertoire diversity, theater facilities, provocative shows, etc). To sum up their qualities, if their co-operation is needed, they could be contacted easily and, since they are considered more loyal to the institution than occasional ticket-buyers, they are more likely to respond favorably. All that leads some authors to call them the “art institution’s ideal” (Johnson and Garbarino, 2001).
In this context, both the decrease in subscribers generally encountered by performing arts (Auriacombe, Chalamon and Le Loarne, 2004; Kolb, 2001; Johnson and Garbarino, 2001; Garbarino and Johnson, 1999a, 1999b; Scheff, 1999) and their ageing preoccupy most performing arts managers. For example, the decrease reaches 3.5% for the 1200 American theaters listed by the “Theatre Communication Group” (www.tcg.org) from 1998 to 2003 and almost 8% for the French network of “Scène Nationale” between 2001-2003 (Petr, 2005). These are warning signals that call for more investigation. Indeed, is the subscription principle still consistent with the today cultural practices of attendees in an increasingly postmodern world (Cova, 1996)? What transformations of loyalty programs should be suggested to a theater trying to fit theatergoers’ habits and needs? To respond to these interrogations, a survey was undertaken aiming at occasional ticket buyers, attendees of a French establishment. It is a cultural center within the network of the “Scène Nationale”, a label that gathers more than 70 cultural establishments financed by the Ministry of Culture, in charge of promoting performing arts and contemporary creations to local audiences.

The originality of this research is that it focuses on non-subscribers whereas previous research either investigated solely subscribers or compared subscribers and non-subscribers. By focusing on non-subscribers, we seek more detailed information on this segment and on the reasons they prefer not to subscribe. Remembering that individual ticket buyers are generally not dissatisfied customers, and that they may have loyal disposition to the institution (Auriacombe, Chalamon and Le Loarne, 2004; Johnson and Garbarino, 2001), we want here to identify the main reasons for not subscribing in France and to check if they are the same as those identified in North America.

In fact, according to Johnson and Garbarino (2001), there are 3 main reasons: 1) the uncertainty about the use of tickets due to lack of time, and lack of flexibility (not possible to refund unused tickets, want of more flexibility); 2) the difficulty to reach the theater and about its facilities (don’t like theater facilities); 3) the lack of interest for plays. They have noted two items that did not load on these three previous factors: the cost of subscription and the quality of performances. Is it the same in France?
Moreover, according to Scheff (1999) the erosion in frequency attendance of subscribers and single-ticket buyers is due primarily to the fact that many people prefer to select the specific programs they wish to attend and that many people have difficulty scheduling in advance. Is that could also explain the refusal to subscribe?

The discussion about the results will point to some renovations of the current subscription formula in France and to the utilization of the reward principle as a loyalty tool. The reward logic is frequently used in retailing and in cultural industries but quite new in the performing arts field.

Methodology and results

Research field
The survey consists of 480 questionnaire interviews at a French provincial “Scène Nationale”, at Saint-Brieuc, named “La Passerelle” (LP). In this particular performing arts center, the subscription formula requests the purchase of a discount card (13€). This card allows one to buy further performance tickets at the reduced price of 13€. Thanks to the repeated discount of 4€, the card is compensated at the fourth purchase and profitable at the 5th one. To make future subscribers confident about the profitability of the subscription deal, and because it is interesting to know which performances they select (good indicator of the future success of shows), the theater asks them to choose, and purchase, early in the season (in September, that is, one month before the order will be opened) a minimum of five performances. This subscription request of pre-booking and pre-payment is a general habit of the performing arts field in France and in most countries.

The sample was obtained thanks to a random-based selection technique processed during each representation of the 24 plays of the season. Therefore, it is quite representative of the whole season audience. And, as expected, the sample counts a large part of young. In fact, it is composed of 70% of adults (individuals of more than 26 years old) and 30% of young (young and individuals less than 26 years of age). As behaviors and opinions of youngest regarding subscription and theater attendance practices should be different from adults’ ones, results are distinguished according to whether they concerned
student or “adults”. This distinction is especially relevant in the French cultural field where numerous offers (generally called “students offers”) are proposed for audience of less than 26 years old.

Results

The subscription refusal main explanation: the level of practice

The main reason why occasional ticket buyers do not subscribe is the number of shows they have to attend. As shown in Figure 1, 78.5% of the sample reported that they would not attend the minimal number of shows to make the subscription financially profitable and therefore decided not to subscribe. This rate is quite similar for young and adults. Then, a total of 3.5% of the sample are only intermittent audience of the theater because they are already subscribers of other theater (2% for young, 4% for adults). Finally, the remainder (18%), equal for young and adults, corresponds to individual ticket buyers for whom the subscription formula signifies too many constraints.

Figure 1- The rate (%) of the three main reasons for not subscribing

This result suggests a typology of theater occasional audience which distinguishes three groups: the group of factual occasional ticket buyers (“factual”), the group of other theater subscribers (“already subscribers”), and the group of resistant to subscription (“resistant”). The way to convince each of them to commit with the theater should be different and targeted to their particularities.
This suggests then that the level of practice is a key factor of the commitment with theater. In fact, if one is a little attendee of theatre program, the loyalty principle of subscription is absolutely not suitable. It implies an important level of practice as its quality depends, and is determined by, the quantity consumed.

To resume, as subscription is synonymous of the obligation to attend numerous shows during the season, most occasional attendees would never chose this loyalty formula. In order to induce loyalty commitment with these irregular attendees, other loyalty programs (i.e. based on other logics) should be proposed.

*When subscription has “too many constraints”, what does it mean?*

For the respondents who consider the current subscription formula as too constraint-full, a supplementary open-ended question was asked. In fact, «resistant» were requested to give more details on the nature of these constraints. By asking them to identify more clearly what constraints they are thinking of, it is a way to better understand their blocks to the commitment. In addition, it allows us to check to what extent these blocks are real or only assertions. Actually, a previous research has pointed out that little cultural customers explain regularly their lack of practice by reasons that are mostly *a posteriori* rationalizations than actual and tangible blocks or obstacles (Davies and Prentice, 1995).

The results of the post-analysis carried out after encoding are detailed in Table 1. For everybody, the two main reasons for not subscribing are 1) the incapacity of the subscription program to be financially worthwhile and 2) the distance. They are detailed just below and without age distinction. Then, since the remaining reasons are different whether the «resistant» respondent is an adult or a young, they are presented separately: adults followed by young.

**Table 1– What are the “constraints” of this “too constraint full” formula?**
The first reason for not subscribing, the financial aspect corresponds mostly to the idea that spectators can have better prices by diverse channels (invitation, occupational and training rates, student or unemployed prices, etc.). As expected, the existence of cheap offers is evoked more frequently by young (17.6%) than by adults (12.9%) since numerous offers specially dedicated for young are often proposed in the French cultural sector.

The second reason for not subscribing is the distance between home and the theater. Young are slightly more concerned by this problem than adults are (22%, that is 3 points over than adults) surely because they do not have their own cars. For young, this distance implies difficulties to come easily whereas for adults it implies difficulties to come regularly (driving time increases the total “time expenditure”).

For the third and so on reasons, the Figure 2 presents their rates whether the «resistant»are young or adults.

Figure 2 – The constraints of theater subscription: the «resistant» gaze
For adults who represent 74% of the total citations (157 comments), their third reason is 3) the incapacity or uncertainty to see the five shows needed for a valuable subscription. With the same rate, the following reasons are: 4) constraints of time-budget, 5) failure to manage the pre-booking duty, and 6) a lack of information. As shown in some illustrative comments presented in Table 2, the problem of booking is expressed through comments about the refusal or incapacity to choose in advance because of their family or occupational constraints, which make them unable to predict their availability. In fact, what they criticized are the consequences of a limited time to choose during a period when information about the contents of the shows and from external critics is not available. Regarding the lack of information, it concerns more the program than the subscription. What emerges from their answers is, for those who know the theater, the idea that numerous theater shows are hard to appreciate and understand, or, for those who are primo spectators, the belief that it is necessary to have previous contacts and attendances before subscribing.

Table 2- Illustrative comments of adults
### The pre-booking duty: so little time to chose when no available information from media and critics

N°115: “We haven’t enough time to make our decision”
N°120: “I am not sure about the shows”

### The lack of information about the program: especially because plays are difficult and the theater unfamiliar

N°31: “I attend plays at other places; I think that some shows are too highbrow”
N°119: “I didn’t know the place well”
N°198: “I don’t know the theater enough”

### The refusal to feel losing one’s liberty

N°322: “I would be obligated”
N°379: “It makes it compulsory”

### The categorical refusal

N°346: “I don’t want to subscribe... No more comment.”

### The awareness of marketing interest of loyalty programs

N°310: “I’m a very bad consumer, I don’t like formulas. They make the client «captive»”

### The need of companions

N°4: “I need to have friends who want to come with me”
N°320: “It is difficult to find friends who share my tastes”

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Then, at the seventh position, and conversely to young who evoked this reason as the last one, adults reported more often that 7) they lack interest for some of the plays planned or that the program does not suit their tastes totally. Next, 8) the refusal to subscribe represents only 4.3% of adult citations. What is said in fact is that they refuse the principle of having constraints and being forced to do something. With the sole argument of not having the desire to subscribe, they are sometimes quite aware of the marketing side of such loyalty programs. Consequently, the rate of authentic resistant to contractual commitment is weak in the whole theatre audience. In fact, if 18% of the audience explains that they won’t commit with the theatre because of the deficiencies and constraints of current loyalty programs and formulas, most of them are not totally opposed to the principle of being committed. Actually, only a few individual ticket buyers (less than 1%) are against any contractual obligation. This result implies possibilities to convince the present occasional audience to engage with the theatre as soon as theatre managers would propose supplementary loyalty formulas. To end, adults had evoked 9) the difficulty to find companions to go to the theater. This notion was evoked only by adults and never by young.

For young (24% of the total citations), the seven following reasons are by decreasing order of importance: 3) lack of time; 4) bad evaluation of the theater subscription mostly because of small discounts; 5) refusal to be committed with the theater; 6) ignorance of the contents and interest of the shows as well as bad
images about the current audience, described as too old; 7) refusal or, more often, incapacity to see the minimal number of shows necessary for a costly subscription; 8) difficulties linked to early booking; and finally, 9) lack of interest in the program.

The third position of the “lack of time” reason is surprising. Intuitively, one thinks that young have less time constraints than adults, and are freer to do whatever they want. But, at the same time, they do not control their timetable. Indeed, they do not know in September when their exams will be during the year (periodic and final exams). But also they are more attracted by other leisure activities (having a drink with friends, parties, etc) which are not planned in advance. Often, they prefer to remain free for these potential activities which, as they often reported, suit more their “youthful life style”. Consequently, they lack time for theater attendance.

**Who are the «resistant» group?**

To describe the «resistant» group, comparisons are made between this group and the remainder of the sample. As «factual» attendees represent 78.5% of the sample, we decided to discriminate the «resistant» attendees from them, and not to take into account the little rate of the «already subscribers». All the results of these comparisons are in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DISCRIMINATIVE VARIABLES</th>
<th>TESTS RESULTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theater attendance practices</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General level of theatre attendance (+)</td>
<td>F = 14.36, p&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of attendance at nearby theaters (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 17.59, p&lt;0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Artistic preferences</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic practices : Theater (+),Music (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 8.59, p&lt;0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic tastes: Classical music (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 3.43, p&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express more their disinterest for a genre (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 3.79, p&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for classical repertoire: Classical music programs (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 2.29, p&lt;0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Theater familiarity</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anteriority of theater awareness (+)</td>
<td>F = 3.99, p&lt;0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition of advertising flyer (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 7.88, p&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the subscription characteristics (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 7.08, p&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: The sign (+) indicates that «Resistant» have greater level on the variable.
The first theme of discriminative variable concerns the level of theater attendance practices. In fact, the most important result theme is the distinction on the level of attendance practice. «Resistant» attend performing arts shows more often than others. As expected, since they didn’t quote the minimal number of shows as the main reason for not subscribing, it is normal to find such a difference of practice level. Furthermore, «resistant» are also more often attendees of other performing arts institutions nearby. This latter result suggests some trails which would depend on the theater manager’s way of thinking. In fact, these other institutions could be considered either as competitors or as supplementary cultural offers. If they are competitors, the theater ought to initiate analyses for carrying out blueprints of differential and competitive advantages. But, if they are complementary, managers should increase partnerships leading to cross-subscriptions and cross-loyalty programs.

The second theme relates to artistic preferences. Regarding the adult group, it seems that «resistant» have a better knowledge of their tastes thanks to their greater experience and practice. Actually, «resistant» explain more frequently than «factual» that they do not attend a genre because they are not keen on this genre. And, these tastes appear more wide-ranging, or at least more open to the classical repertoire, as they are more numerous to attend classical music programs (41% against 29% for «factual»).

The third discriminative theme is about the theater familiarity. «Resistant» have known the institution longer than «factual» have. Consequently, they should know it better. First, they more frequently recognize and identify the advertising flyer distributed in newspapers, especially the adult group. Second, they declare being more aware of the exact subscription characteristics (in the student sample, the difference is particularly noteworthy: 50% of the «resistant» are acquainted with the subscription against 20% for the «factual»). Third, they are more informed and more often attend original and recent offers.

To conclude, a fourth discriminative theme could be their companion of attendance. In fact, the relation is weak (Khi2 = 2.55, p<0.15) but they seem to be more often accompanied by their partner than «factual» are. This could suggest loyalty formulas designed specially for couples.
Tableau 4- What distinguishes specifically the « Young Resistant » group?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ARTISTIC PREFERENCES</th>
<th>TESTS RESULTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time for:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Dance shows (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 2.25, p&lt;0.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Artistic trainings (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 10.14, p&lt;0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DEMOGRAPHICS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban resident (+)</td>
<td>Khi2 = 16.39, p&lt;0.15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Legend: The sign (+) indicates that they have greater level on the variable.

When looking more specifically to young responses (see Table 4), three supplementary discriminative elements appear. First, they more often express a lack of time, either for attending dance shows as for participating in artistic training sessions. This idea of “lack of time” appears to express in some way differences in artistic preferences. Therefore, it is not surprising that the second discriminative element deals with their artistic practices. Although the rate of practicing is equal for the «resistant» and «factual» groups, young «resistant» more often practice theater (37% against 7%) than music (16% against 26%). In the same line, they are less numerous at explaining they are not amateurs of classical music. These results suggest another time that «resistant» and «factual» segments have different artistic tastes. Third, these young «resistant» are often residents of the main town or of close medium towns, i.e. urban residents, whereas the «factual» live in the country or in little towns.

Discussion and managerial implication

Discussion
Results show that the main reason for not subscribing is a low level of practice. This is a very objective reason which suggests diminishing the minimal number of shows. Since subscription is synonymous of a certain amount of consumption for becoming profitable, the amount requested is too high for occasional attendance. Two options are available: 1) proposing less demanding subscriptions or in the duration of the contract; 2) searching for other loyalty programs which yet could reward occasional attendees. The latter option is detailed further in the managerial implication. For the first option, a reduction of shows is sometimes already offered. For example, in the “Scène Nationale Le Parvis”, in the South of France (Tarbes), a special subscription formula of only 3 minimal shows (“discovery subscription”) has been
created this year and is already a success. By such formulas, theatres are trying to convince individual
ticket buyers to become subscribers and, by the way, to increase their level of practice. But, perhaps, they
are not willing, and able, to consume more shows per year. On the contrary and to our knowledge,
extensions of subscription contracts, which could overlap a season, do not exist because it is too complex
to manage.

If the minimal number of shows is the main obstacle to subscription behaviors in France, it was not
underlined by previous literature in the North American context. In our case study, this minimal was not
high compared to the French theater field habits (6 shows per year is a very current minimal number). For
future research, it would be interesting to know the number of shows attended by the theatre attendees. In
fact, are there “psychological” thresholds in the theatre attendance level? And, if so, are they different
from one nation to another?

For the following reasons for not subscribing, our results are quite in accordance with previous
The lack of time, the lack of flexibility with the constraint of pre-booking very early in the season\(^{3}\), the
lack of interest, and the difficulty to reach the theater because of the distance, are reasons already evoked
by these researchers. Conversely, four themes appear quite new. First, it is the idea that current
subscription is not financially worthwhile. Much more than simply price weaknesses, what is actually
evoked is that theater subscription constraints are greater than benefits. Following this idea, various adults
said there are not enough advantages to make subscription profitable. This result advocates that attendees
belong to reasoning and economical perspective. They evaluate costs and benefits of the proposed formula
even though it is culture. They are not in an affective relationship to the theater. Second, there are some
arguments about the negative images of the institution (for specific audience) and about the lack of
experience with the theater. The negative images of theatre practice and subscribers are perhaps a French
specificity. However, campaigns trying to modify these bad images should be initiated. Third, some
people expressed a categorical refusal to subscribe because of the contract. As they only represent about
1% of the whole audience, focused actions are perhaps not a priority. However, it would be interesting to
understand why they are blocked, and if their number will increase facing the current and growing contractual loyalty programs of firms in our society. Fourth, the impossibility of being accompanied is a hindrance to going to the theatre. This latter result is not surprising as Debenedetti (2002) has already insisted on the importance of companionship for cultural practices.

Managerial implications
Based on those results and remarks, we suggest four recommendations for French performing arts managers. Nowadays, the first one is really original in the French theatre sector. In fact, it consists in the importation of the reward logic, already well-used in other consumption sector. Instead of proposing only the pre-commitment logic, the idea is to create supplementary formulas based on the reward principle. To our knowledge, this reward-based loyalty program is not yet proposed in French theatre. If it is, it must be a very confidential practice.

The three next recommendations are less original. They are: 2) to make good the whole pricing strategy; 3) to apply more systematically direct marketing and geomarketing techniques; and 4) to plan several loyalty programs specifically directed to occasional attendance, but different according to the reasons why this occasional attendance currently prefer not to subscribe.

Overhaul of the subscription principle: from pre-commitment to post-reward programs
Occasional buyers are hindered by the problem of pre-booking and by the minimal number of shows of the subscription practice. For adults that have family or occupational responsibilities and potential timetable constraints, these elements of the contract explain why they prefer not to subscribe. In fact, what is criticized is the lack of flexibility of the subscription principle. Although being a subscriber is normally a way to obtain advantages and privileges, consumers explain they would endure more constraints with the subscription than they have by remaining non-subscribers. Indeed, seating priority, traditionally considered a priority advantage of subscription, is not a major benefit for theaters where there is little risk of scarcity.

To conclude, what consumers express when they speak of increased constraints instead of increased privileges and gratitude is their desire to be rewarded if they are loyal. A rewarding system, inspired by
the loyalty cards of some service-shops (hair-dresser, dry cleaners…) as well as those of the retailing sector or of cultural industries (movie centers, music listeners clubs…), might be generated and tested further in order to check if it could stimulate loyalty relationships among irregular audience of the theater.

*Renewal of the pricing strategy to make the discount attractive*

As we saw, in most French theaters, there are many possibilities to buy cheap tickets, or even to obtain free entrances. Therefore, numerous occasional buyers explained that they could have better prices than the subscription formula. Consequently, the cost of the subscription and the discount are seen as not valuable for them.

Facing these numerous channels that allow paying less than the full price, a subscription formula whose principal benefit is monetary is not profitable. So, two alternative, or supplementary, trails are at the disposal of the institution. The first one is a rearrangement of all the exonerating and reducing rates. An effective pricing strategy should be shaped with subscription discounts built as a differential and attractive marketing tool. In this perspective, an analysis of the psychological prices should be interesting to optimize this pricing strategy if the prices sought are not too low.

The second trail requires matching the subscription discount to the average level of discount obtained through other channels. At the same time, it would be important to increase supplementary services and advantages (gifts, special welcome, supplementary mediation…).

*Direct marketing and geomarketing instead of mass-media techniques*

The results concerning the location and the problem of distance for subscribing prove again that theaters operate in a bound area. So, it would be of interest to concentrate advertising and promotion on this restricted area. To carry out a successful and costless promotion, the direct marketing media should be preferred to the mass media (for advice on direct marketing techniques in performing arts, see chapter 14, Kotler and Scheff, 1997). In fact, as attendees take into account the distance between the theater and their homes, an adapted way to encounter the potential consumer is to send adverts into mailboxes in this targeted area. Such prospecting action should be more powerful than encounters at occupational locations.
Actually, the diffusion of flyers at the firm entrance when people start work or at the canteen during lunchtime allows theaters to contact many persons but probably not to have them subscribe.

This first conclusion, and the location and size-of-town differences between the «resistant» and the «factual», argues in favor of introducing geomarketing in the management of theater audiences. To begin slowly, managers can carry out quick questionnaire surveys at the cash desk to identify where the audience lives. Then, they can selectively diffuse information on these particular towns (geomarketing techniques). A more general recommendation would be to increase the relocation of the French performing arts offer, as is the case for museums (Gombault and Harribey, 2004).

Another type of result campaigns for the utilization of direct marketing. In fact, the various comments about the difficulty to commit with the theater when persons are primo-attendees advocate and give us details about the subscription entry pattern portrayed by Michaelis (1978). What consumers seek is not really to be well aware and experienced of the theater facilities, but rather a first encounter. The importance of theater first experience asks managers to do their best to create this initial contact. Therefore, what is essential is to make the individual enter the place. A major mission is to generate behavior (conation). Now, direct marketing techniques reply perfectly to this “conative” mission of promotion, which justifies using them further.

**Differentiated loyalty programs for the occasional audience**

The typology drawn up according to the 3 main reasons for not subscribing suggests that differentiated loyalty programs should be proposed for the occasional audience. For the «resistant» patrons (18%), who are frequent attendees but sensitive to commitment constraints, the loyalty program should stand on a reward principle. The format of the loyalty program targeting them could be as follows: a free of charge card and rewards according to the number of shows attended. It could be refined, and optimized for the subscriber, in view of the length of loyalty (after a certain amount of loyalty, a special discount or VIP services). When they subscribe to the program, the «resistant» can give all information necessary to personalize future relationships. And, remembering the difficulties expressed by some interviewees about
the choice and the comprehension of the shows, perhaps some mediating services should be proposed in priority.

For the “factual” occasional buyers (78.5%), those who have a weak level of attendance, the length of validity of the current subscription formula appears too small. To allow them to take advantage of the subscription and to adapt to their level of practice, a compromise would be to expand the duration of the commitment. The minima could be a two-season period or, better, twelve months in order to avoid the summertime caesura. In this situation, consumers relate to the theater via a classic subscription formula, so they give information about themselves and their mailing and emailing addresses, all contact possibilities for the arts managers to stimulate the desire to see theater plays and other shows. Remembering that interest in a specific production or repertoire is the most common reason people cite for buying ticket to a performance (Scheff, 1999), the message sent must insist that the show should suit people’s interests and tastes.

For the last segment, the «already subscribers» (3.5%), the main approach to make them commit to the theater is to negotiate co-subscriptions with these other establishments. A partnership philosophy between the diverse actors of the local cultural offer is the foundation of such a strategy.

**Limits and prospects**

To end, the limits of this research must be recalled. The questionnaires were proposed only during the weekdays and not during the weekend. Consequently, the sample presents an over-representation of young (30%). Although the manager of the theater argues that the proportion represented by the weekend audience is too little to be taken into account, and as their profiles and tastes have been denied although differences exist (Colbert, Beauregard and Vallée, 1998), the sample does not perfectly represent the whole audience of the theater.

Although we have obtained details about the occasional audience and about the characteristics of the «resistant» segment, bear in mind that the statistical tests reveal weak relationships most of the time. This weakness of demographics (gender, age, social status, marital status…) to identify differences between segments suggests psychological variables should be used to investigate the subscription phenomenon. It
also argues in favor of qualitative inquiries to obtain supplementary useful information about what an ideal subscription should be in the cultural context. Indeed, as a continuation of this research, a priority should be the description of the images of subscription concept. When we better understand what that means in the consumers’ minds and what are the general benefits sought, it will be interesting to evaluate how well the subscription practice fits them. The appraisal of gaps should give useful information for managers. As a replication of this research, it would also be interesting to obtain information in other theater contexts, in France and in other countries, to neutralize the monographic importance of the availability of cheap entrance offers in the context of this particular research. Moreover, the comparison of the reasons evoked for justifying the non-subscription behavior and of the characteristics of the «resistant» segment should give cues about the constant variables of this behavior. Therefore, according to defensive marketing, managers will know how to prevent the theater from this “non cooperative” behavior typical of a post-modern world, or at least, how to adapt and take advantage of this occasional audience.
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Appendix 1 – The questionnaire survey

480 spectators were selected during the 24 shows of the 2004-2005 season (from October 2004, the 12th, to March 2005, the 16th). The people sampled have attended diverse types of shows: theater and comedy (53%), jazz (24%), dance or ballet (15%), modern music (5%), classical music and plays for young audience (2%).

The pollsters trained in marketing research methods used a random-based selection (“You ask each third person entering into the theater”) and had to fill out 6 questionnaires per evening show (4 before the show, and 2 after so as not to miss the spectators who arrive in a hurry).

The number of persons interviewed per show depends on the provisional seat-capacity of each show (weak capacity: 2 interviewers, high: 4, very high: 6). The person responsible for the survey in the theater carried out the study only during the weekdays (the audience size is small during the weekend according to the conclusions of the annual report on attendance).

As respondents were selected thanks to a random-based technique, the sample is representative of the whole occasional audience of the theatre during this season (a comparison with the data collected on previous years on the ration between young and adults concludes to a representative sample).

The questionnaire deals with 7 main themes: their actual attending behavior, the tastes, the availability of information, the schedules, the prices and the subscription formula, the cultural activities, and an individual description.

General characteristics of the total sample:
- 59% were women, 41% were men;
- They all suggested a later timetable (8:30pm, 9, even 10) than is generally proposed by the LP;
- Nearly half of them (45%) practiced a cultural activity like theater, dance or music;
- 22% never went to another performing arts institution;
- 4 persons among 10 were residents of the theater town;
- They were aware of the program/content of the shows thanks to, decreasingly, word of mouth (about 40%), the annual brochure (21%, slightly fewer for the young), diverse prescribers (14%) and the poster campaign (9%).
- They were acquainted with the theater longer than young (39% more than 15 years, 27% from 6 to 15 years, 22% from 1 to 5 years, and 11% last year);
- 25% were employees, 24.4% were senior executives and managers, 12.7% were retired, 9% had intermediary occupations, 6.3% were unemployed, 6% were independent workers, and 1.5% were blue-collar worker.

Passive co-operation is expressed by their approbation of firm’s activity and proposals and allows the enrichment of the relationship (i.e. purchases of complementary services). Active co-operation is observed as they are trying to work together with the firm (e.g. giving information about their request and needs) and ready to invest their resources without considering it as a cost. In the service sector, this co-operation is valuable as it increases the customer’s ability to learn and participate in the production of the service (Bové and Johnson, 2000).
Regularly, national audience surveys about French cultural practices count a large part of young people in audiences (a French originality?, an originality of other European countries?). The reason mainly evoked is the absence of family or job constraints and the existence of young-directed formulas. In fact, the French Ministry of Culture advocates for the creation of special subscription offers for students and people less than 26 years old (and such practices do exist also in the private sector).

Regarding the booking constraints, Colbert, Beauregard and Vallée (1998) suggested to improve the subscription product by introducing more flexibility (i.e. with possibility to refund unused tickets and to switch shows, instead in the evening of the performance if seats are available).