

Essential Audiences

Heather Maitland sees too many arts organisations squandering opportunities to use their customer databases for effective audience development.

Are you stalking your audience?

Come across too many organisations that are not making effective use of the information they hold about their ticket buyers. Their strategy for using their customer database is to send direct mail about an event to people who have recently been to something similar at the venue. Sounds harmless, doesn't it? But the trouble is that no-one is taking a strategic overview of who gets what. And the more often a customer buys tickets, the more often they get direct mail. Some venues are mailing their core customers at least once a fortnight. That's stalking!

Not only does it mean that response rates to direct mail will be low because it's predominantly the same people getting it, but also that the organisation's most loyal customers will feel that their loyalty is not recognised and valued. They will probably view these letters as irritating junk mail.

Pigeon-holing

This flawed communication strategy is about recency, usually focusing on people who have bought tickets for something similar in the past 12 months. It doesn't take into account a customer's overall frequency of attendance. A huge proportion of those mailed will simply not be ready to return yet because their arts-going habit involves attendance less often than once a month and they've recently had their fix. Neither does it take into account the fact that most arts attenders are motivated by a range of artforms and activities. Four out of five ticket buyers for dance purchase less often than once a year. We'd get a better response rate if we mail all those who did not buy ticket in the past twelve months but bought in the 12 months before that. This seems to apply to all types of event. I was working with a venue last week that had a fortnightly comedy club as well as feature gigs by well-known comedians. Not a single customer had bought tickets at the venue more than once and only attended comedy. Everyone who came back chose from the venue's wide-ranging menu of events and activities.

Ending the siege

The missed opportunity is, of course, the great chunk of the database that never gets sent anything beyond the season brochure. Chris Denton from the South Bank Centre spotted the dangers of this approach a long time ago:

"With a database [as large as ours], it is easy to fill a 5,000 mail shot from within the core audience of frequent attenders. This meant that many records outside of the 'core' audience rapidly became redundant because they were never selected. Many customers were being mailed several times a month – they were effectively under siege from the Royal Festival Hall. When we compared our mailing activity with the sales histories of these customers, it became clear that our mailings had limited impact on the frequency



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of their attendance. We were preaching to the converted.

"This core group of loyal customers are valuable to us because they represent the bulk of our income but they have limited long-term growth potential. The real opportunity lay in the group we had abandoned. Infrequent attenders and new customers were only being given a couple of further chances to attend before our selection process was dumping them. We were making assumptions about their preferences and their loyalty at too early a stage in their relationship with us." So, as Chris, and others, were writing about this six years ago, why is it still an issue?

Piecemeal marketing

At heart, I don't think that organisations are considering how marketing campaigns for individual events relate to their overall strategies. Management are not passing down their strategic thinking to the staff responsible for carrying out campaigns. But more importantly, they seem to think that achieving broad rather than show-related objectives requires special, additional activity rather than seeing individual campaigns as the building blocks of that achievement.

There are other factors involved, though. Many organisations do not have an overview of their audience. The database analysis they do is focused on achieving tactical goals. This is rather like trying to identify an elephant in the dark – your conclusion will be different depending on which bit you get hold of. I'm not convinced that this is about lack of skill. My experience is that there is almost always someone in the organisation who is a dab hand at getting information out of the box office system. The trouble is that they are not the same person who wants (or should want) the

audience overview and the two often need someone to facilitate the teamwork necessary to get results.

Lack of time is more of an issue. Tactical marketing is so often prioritised over strategic thinking. But surely it would be better to do less tactical marketing, focusing only on what works. And that can only come from a good knowledge of the audience and some time spent thinking and planning.

Of course, some organisations don't have any information about the people on their mailing list. But why not ask them for some? The Dana Centre in London, which promotes understanding of contemporary science, technology and culture, asks everyone to book for its free events. The single receptionist collects name, email address and the event attended in a simple Excel spreadsheet. This means they have an overview of how their attenders use the centre. Take a look at their great website (www.danacentre.org.uk). Even collecting information about basic things like interests and offspring when people join the mailing list would help.

Searching questions

So, how can organisations get an overview of their audiences that would help them choose effective communication strategies? Finding out the answers to these questions would be a very good start:

- Who are your frequent attenders – and what counts as frequent for your organisation anyway? Are you stalking them?
- What proportion of your database has never bought a ticket? Why? These people must be on your database for a reason so what are you going to do about it?
- What proportion are lapsed ticket buyers – and what counts as lapsed for your organisation? How are you communicating with them? It's obviously not working so is there something more effective you could do?
- What proportion are new ticket buyers? What are you going to do to keep them?
- Who takes risks with challenging events and activities? Are they only interested in challenging work? Who else on your database is like them?
- Look at different audience types. What proportion respond to your season brochure? Is there something more cost effective you could do instead to communicate with them?
- Who are you ignoring? Why? ■

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¹ Chris Denton (1999) 'Retaining Audiences for Classical Music', *Revolving Doors: increasing audience retention*, Arts Marketing Association

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