

How to develop a culturally diverse audience

Nothing about cultural diversity is simple. *Heather Maitland* guides us through *Navigating Difference*

The recently published book on cultural diversity and audience development, *Navigating Difference*, lists well over 100 information resources relevant to arts organisations trying to develop culturally diverse audiences. Read them and you'll come away with two clear messages. First, 'culturally diverse' is a confusing term that can be used to mean both 'ethnically diverse' and its opposite, 'culturally specific' so many arts organisations don't really know what they are trying to achieve by developing culturally diverse audiences. Second, every arts organisation needs to take a different approach to developing such audiences because their artistic work, internal culture, existing audiences, community contexts and overall goals are different. These two factors mean there can be no such thing as a simple 'how to ...' guide. Nothing about cultural diversity is simple.

Multiculturalism is often described as 'celebrating difference'. But social commentators suggest that it is no longer a useful concept. Several of the contributors to *Navigating Difference* point out that within multiculturalism, people of ethnic minority origin are always defined by their ethnic origin and art by Black, Asian and Chinese artists is always contrasted with the 'mainstream'. They suggest a new framework for programming and marketing based on transculturalism. This approach sees the arts as a space in which cultures can interact without being either obliterated or fixed and preserved. It means that programming and marketing can focus on the individuality that collective labels all too easily render invisible.

As Gary Young comments, 'Identities describe, they do not define; they are a great place to start and an awful place to end up.' Mel Larsen unpicks how this affects arts marketing and audience development. She argues that classifying people into target groups means better communication, better customer service and more cost-effective marketing. Targeting on the basis of ethnicity or cultural identity, however, doesn't work.

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Cultural choices are not dictated by ethnicity and cultural identities are constantly shifting. Research backs this up. Mary Clarke compared audiences for what Arts Council England and the participating venues defined as 'culturally diverse work' with audiences for other types of work. She found just two differences: they book later and are less likely to re-attend. Larsen recommends targeting on the basis of how customers perceive your organisation, not how you perceive them; studying the marketing strategies of the people who are already reaching the audiences you want and segmenting attendees on the basis of their purchasing behaviour.

Anne Torreggiani describes a series of what she calls 'give and gain' partnerships between national arts institutions and smaller community-focused organisations. Both sides win in an equitable trading of resources in return for relationships. These relationships enable the arts organisations involved to listen to, understand and respond to audiences in a way that reflects those audiences' needs and expectations rather than the organisations' own assumptions about their cultural backgrounds. Torreggiani calls this 'diversity with integrity' and argues that it can only come from a clear, central vision that generates a strategic approach to diversity that pervades the whole organisation.

Contributors to *Navigating Difference* repeatedly stress that this holistic approach is the key to success. As Maddy Morton says, 'Anyone who thinks they can achieve a diverse audience by implementing whizzy schemes while leaving the core of the organisation and its people intact is on a hiding to nothing.'

Caroline Griffin concludes her article by saying that success depends on 'a whole-hearted long-term commitment by the whole organisation'. My contribution to the book, a survey of audience development practice, demonstrates the truth of this. In the absence of an organisation-wide commitment, projects have a limited impact because they tend to be short-term, under-resourced and focus on off-the-shelf schemes that have been successful elsewhere but are not necessarily appropriate to this set of circumstances. Conversely, some organisations that are whole-heartedly committed to diversity do not take a systematic approach to their business planning and marketing and so fail to make effective use of their in-depth knowledge of their communities.

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Heather Maitland
Consultant and author
e hmailand1@aol.com