

On the trail of the absent hordes

Heather Maitland looks at the study on walk-ups, advance bookers and non-bookers

My first reaction to this recently published research commissioned from Cultural Intelligence by the arts councils of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland was to congratulate the box office staff at the 23 venues that took part. On average, they capture the names and addresses of 80 per cent of their ticket buyers. And that includes 58 per cent of walk-up bookers (that's defined as people who buy tickets less than an hour before the performance). What an achievement! On behalf of marketers everywhere: we're very, very sorry for ever having doubted you.

These data capture rates are important because many marketers have been worrying that when they analyse their box office data they get a misleading picture of their audiences. After all, this data can only tell us about the people who buy the tickets. It can't tell us about the people who come to the event with them. And what about the ticket buyers whose names and addresses we don't manage to collect? What if all these missing people are really different? This research is full of good news to reassure us.

Our fears about the missing hordes are unfounded. First, there are fewer walk-up customers than we might have expected. They made up 5 per cent of ticket buyers for the 211 events the researchers looked at and less than 3 per cent of the ticket income. Just over a third of the events had no walk-up transactions at all. Scale made a difference, though. All the events with more than 25 per cent walk-up were in small-scale

venues (10 per cent of all events analysed). But walk-ups still only represented 10 per cent of their customers. Second, because our colleagues in the box office capture more data than we expected, walk-up customers with missing data only made up 2 per cent of the 23,185 transactions analysed.

Just a few walk-up ticket buyers only ever buy on the door – about three in twenty of the sample interviewed by phone. A quarter said they bought in advance most of the time. This was also true of the interviewees who had not bought their own tickets, with only one in five saying they never bought them. A quarter said they bought their own tickets most of the time. If a venue's data capture rate is good, they are likely to have got these people's details on a previous visit or will get them on a future one.

So, how different are walk-up customers from those that buy their tickets in advance? And how different are the ticket buyers from the people who tag along with them?

I thought that walk-up ticket buyers would be more likely to live closer to the venue. Not true. Drivetime analysis of the 58 per cent with names and postcodes gave an average of 36 minutes compared to 33 minutes for advance ticket buyers. They are more likely to be first-time ticket buyers, though: 40 per cent of walk-up customers had not bought tickets before compared to 33 per cent of advance ticket buyers.

Mosaic analysis, which gives each customer a geo-demographic classification based on their postcode, showed remarkably similar profiles for advance ticket buyers and walk-up

customers. The only significant difference was that slightly more of the walk-up customers were from younger and more ethnically diverse classifications. This was supported by the telephone research which identified that advance ticket buyers were more likely to be over 45 years-old than walk-up customers (57 per cent compared to 37 per cent).

There are few significant differences between ticket buyers and the people who attend with them. Those that didn't book their tickets are a bit more likely to be female, a bit more likely to be attending with friends, and a bit more likely to be first-time attenders.

All of this means that our data about audiences is giving us a sufficiently accurate picture of who they are because most of our non-bookers and walk-up customers are on our databases somewhere. All we need to remember is that the ticketing histories of a significant proportion don't include every event they have actually attended because from time to time they turned up on the night or someone else bought their ticket. ■



Heather Maitland
Consultant and author
e hmaitland1@aol.com