

Essential Audiences

When an arts organisation has been successful at attracting audiences, the problems don't stop there. **Heather Maitland** looks at ways of managing success.

Making 'sold out' mean success

A couple of weeks ago I visited a small arts centre mid-morning and couldn't get through the front door. The coffee shop was packed, the queue for the box office snaked right across the entrance and Mini Music Makers had just ended so the place was knee deep in toddlers. So why, when I finally fought my way upstairs to the admin office, was the team looking glum?

"Doing so well is really bad for business", they explained. So many of the events were selling out within days that people who didn't book as soon as they got their brochure were being turned away. A perception was growing that the Arts Centre was "always sold out". But several events had plenty of seats left. The team was worried that these seats were becoming impossible to sell once the initial booking frenzy was over.

And frenzy isn't too strong a word. Regular bookers seem to be panic buying, particularly for the cinema. Single transactions over £150 have become commonplace (and at £4.50 each, that's an awful lot of tickets). The problem is that these loyal customers then discover they aren't free to attend and so return some of their tickets. Now that there are fewer people trying to book nearer the performance, reselling them has become difficult. The Arts Centre has had to suspend its laudable policy of exchanging tickets on demand.

Audience attachment

The other principle that has gone out of the window is access. How can you develop audiences when you don't have any tickets to sell? They have already increased the number of events, to the extent that the full-time staff of four can only just cope. Any further expansion – particularly any more Sunday performances – would mean a significant expansion in staff numbers and a corresponding shift into another league. Can they really operate like a middle-scale organisation when they only have two small-scale auditoria?

The Arts Centre's relationship with existing audiences is also under threat. When I was speaking about this with a colleague, arts consultant Robert Sanderson, he recalled a cartoon of a toff in a top hat standing at a box office window exclaiming "Sold out! That's damn bad management." This has become a reality for this organisation. People are disappointed when they can't get tickets for the Rolling Stones at Sheffield's Don Valley Stadium, but they don't see it as a personal affront. So why do people seem to feel in some way betrayed by the Arts Centre? In her next Essential HR column in ArtsProfessional, Pam Henderson will discuss the psychological contract between employer and employee. She thinks that this contract also exists between venues and their audiences. This involves a set of implicit expectations the customer has of the organisation that derives from its brand promises. People think of the Arts Centre as their friendly neighbourhood venue and many develop a



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strong attachment, even a sense of ownership. The psychological contract is broken when 'their' venue refuses them tickets.

The people on the receiving end of all this emotion are the staff. Dealing with a long queue is stressful, whether it is at the coffee shop or the box office. The knock-on effect is that staff overestimate the problem. Their perception was that Members with priority booking were buying pretty much all the cinema tickets. In fact, last season they bought 41% of the tickets, up from 33% in 2003 – still an issue, but not as bad as they thought. The solution is, of course, more sales points. During busy periods, the Arts Centre can muster five box-office sales points rather than the usual two but this is not enough. But it is not cost effective to buy extra software licences and train more casual staff to use them for just six weeks a year. Improving service at the coffee shop would involve demolishing a sizeable chunk of a listed building. So what price happy customers?

Full house

Customers are happy, though, when they sit in the auditorium. Both audiences and artists get a real buzz from packed out performances. This wouldn't be the case if the Arts Centre was a gallery or museum though – the experience of visiting which

is often described as being a respite from everyday life. A 1992 Arts Council report into visual arts quoted one visitor to this effect: "You come out and you feel completely different. It's very liberating. Your mind is on a different plane... yes I think 'spiritual elevation' is a good term." No one's going to get much spiritual elevation if the gallery is heaving with people (and I think that's why this particular Arts Centre's gallery is its least effective space).

I remember queuing with my mum for three hours to get into the Royal Academy's Tutankhamen exhibition and then not being able to see much. But I still remember it thirty years on – because I felt lucky to be there. Even in this sector, the 'sold out' factor is a powerful source of added value that goes some way towards balancing the resulting poor visitor experience. So the cliché is true: success certainly breeds success. The team at the Arts Centre in question is far from complacent, though. They see the seeds of downfall in their success and are putting time and effort into managing its drawbacks.

Good management

In January, they introduced online sales, which is already channelling three times the volume of sales they expected. They are about to survey audiences to ask if they would prefer a queuing system (which would increase the cost of their call) or an engaged tone when they ring the box office. They are rethinking the membership scheme to ensure it works for the Arts Centre, not against it.

Reducing the period covered by each cinema brochure means that people who don't book early enough this time get another chance within ten weeks. Each cinema season begins with another chance to see sold-out films and they have even resorted to squeezing in 'secret' screenings, only publicised to the waiting list. They are considering ring-fencing some tickets for each event to be sold on the day, although having spent five years persuading their audience to book in advance they are reluctant to do anything that might reverse the trend.

Above all, they are publicly acknowledging the problem, ensuring they apologise for substandard customer care and engaging their audience in finding solutions. It would be easy to give customers the impression that they ought to feel lucky to get into the Arts Centre at all.

This investment of management resources now is designed to prevent a cycle of decline in the future. The key to managing success is to take the long-term view – although it would be nice if they gave themselves a short-term pat on the back, too. ■

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