

Niche marketing may be commonplace in the arts, but most arts venues offer a range of events. **Heather Maitland** explores the marketing of choice.

Something for everyone?

One consequence of arts organisations' work to broaden their audiences, visitors or participants, is that many end up trying to offer something for everyone. There are very few venues that single-mindedly pursue a particular audience. Contact Theatre in Manchester is one that does, focusing on young adults aged 13 to 30. But even here, director John E McGrath points out that "by breaking down barriers for young people, we also became a popular venue for a range of communities who felt unwelcome in stiff, traditional environments."¹

Brands need a single, strong idea, but most of these organisations focus on variety and I'm not sure this works. What if the customer's response is "I don't want something for everyone, I want something for me"? Marketing materials, such as season brochures, that present the broad sweep of the organisation's work become a challenge. How do we guide potential customers through the packed menu to the event or activity aimed at them?

Selling choice

In the High Street, these arts organisations would be department stores – and what an old-fashioned concept that seems in an age of niche retailers like Accessorize and Past Times. So, is choice in itself a reason to get involved with what we offer? I can't find a retailer that promotes itself simply on choice or range: Shoppers World offers "a great choice" but it's of "quality goods ... at great prices"; Choices UK wants it all ways too, offering "simply entertainment ... at really cheap prices"; bed specialist Dreams promises "largest choice, lowest prices, fastest delivery".

We need to ask ourselves what is the benefit to the customer of having a choice? Offering something for everyone can actively turn audiences off. Almost all of the shoppers and residents surveyed by a recently refurbished arts centre already knew of its existence. They remembered fondly its previous incarnation as a home for wrestling, bingo and dances. Those too young to remember had been told about it by older relatives. Perhaps we should be envious of such effective word of mouth. In fact, all the under 24s believed, at best, that the arts centre was for everyone but not for them and, at worst, that it was full of old people. Although the venue felt unable to exclude this older audience, its local authority funding was conditional on providing services for young people. The two goals seemed incompatible.

Branding matters

The arts centre's solution has been single-minded and brave. The team has developed a different brand for its programming aimed at 16–24 year olds. The Pioneer Club is promoted through YouTube, ads nestled among those for gigs and



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clubs in the local paper's what's on pages, and club-style flyers distributed to pubs, shops and fast-food outlets. They also host the local college's BTEC performing arts classes so that if young people haven't visited yet, they will more than likely know someone who has. The arts centre's challenge now is to ensure that their funders make the link.

So, one way of marketing effectively to a wide range of possibly incompatible audiences is to set up a series of entirely separate brands, each of which expresses a different single, strong idea. There are two other options. The first is to work out what values your activities and audiences have in common and find a single, strong idea that can act as an umbrella for them all. The second is to develop a set of subsidiary brands that can be used in conjunction with the umbrella brand.

I've recently come across a couple of

examples of this last option that have created their own challenges. Some local authorities have become aware that the arts are good news in a way that, for example, parking control is not. They want to borrow some of this positive vibe.

But the arts venues they own and manage have distinctive brands. One has spent five years developing a brand that encompasses quality,

friendliness, energy, enthusiasm and informality. Only the first of these fits the Council's brand values. Will putting the Council logo on every page of the season brochure really be enough? How could you bring the two together without wrecking either? It seems an improbable marriage – like Body Shop getting into bed with L'Oréal or Cadbury Schweppes taking over Green and Black's chocolate. When the news of these two buyouts broke, Ethical Consumer magazine instantly slashed Green and Black's ethical score and Anita Roddick was (again) accused of selling out. But Green and Black's continues to operate as a stand-alone business with an entirely separate brand and Anita Roddick sees herself as a Trojan Horse inside the cosmetics multinational, announcing that by June we will be able to buy L'Oréal products that contain ethically sourced ingredients.²

Value

The multinationals know that the value of their acquisitions is dependent on the integrity of the brands. Maybe Nottingham City Council believe this too. It owns and manages the Theatre Royal and Royal Concert Hall, but there's no sign of that on the theatre's colourful website until you click on Contact Us to find the bald statement 'Proprietors: Nottingham City Council'. It is possible to communicate a single strong idea with a series of sub brands aimed at different markets. Look at Channel 4's offshoots: E4 (Channel 4 without the boring bits) and More4 (Channel 4 without the silly bits). Do you know of an arts organisation that has pulled this off, too? If so, I'd like to hear about it. ■

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¹Maitland, Heather (ed.) (2006) Navigating difference: cultural diversity and audience development, Arts Council England.

²Anna Shepard, 'What Anita did next', The Times, 3/3/2007

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