

Heather Maitland reflects on what arts marketers can do to introduce new ideas and practice.

More for less

How open are you to new ideas for developing your audiences, visitors or participants? For many of the arts marketers I meet, this is a pointless question. They don't have time even to think about doing anything new. Colleagues involved in training or consultancy tell me that they too often have their carefully thought-through recommendations for getting bigger and broader audiences greeted by something very like panic.

The problem is that there are so many tasks that marketers could be doing, and there are so many events. Marketers feel guilty that they aren't doing every activity for every event. But this approach isn't marketing – it's publicity. Publicity is about a list of tasks. Marketing is about thinking, planning and choosing the tasks from the list that will get the best results from your available resources. Freelance marketer and trainer, Jonathan Goodacre, comments, "I find too many marketers are trying to fling a bit of everything at everyone, both in terms of the message and the mode of delivery. They know that marketing is about prioritisation but they don't live it."

Assessing impact

So why don't marketers apply this knowledge at work? First, many marketers inherit a 'to do' list from their predecessors and never make more than minor changes. Others base their activities on the headings in the budget they have been given – there's a pot of money for newspaper advertising, so they advertise. Why? Because they know from the flurry of bookings at the beginning of each season that some of what they do must be working, but they don't know which elements have the most impact so they carry on doing them all. They are also under pressure from their colleagues and managers to continue doing the things that other arts organisations do.

Professor David Carson from the University of Ulster has suggested that, as they develop, small businesses go through three stages of marketing.¹ At the first stage, staff show a good understanding of marketing theory that is often not carried out in practice. The second stage involves what he calls "industry-specific" marketing – that is, doing whatever the sector thinks is good practice. It is only at the third stage, "situation-specific marketing", that marketing practice becomes fully effective, involving imaginative marketing that responds to the organisation's audiences, its context and its short-, medium- and long-term objectives. So many arts organisations seem stuck at the second stage. They produce a season brochure, advertise in the local newspaper and send out press releases and direct mail because that's what arts organisations do.

Christopher Hodgson from the Green Room in Manchester took the brave step of abandoning his season brochure. Front-line staff were unconcerned but the board of directors, the venue's partner organisations and arts industry insiders were strongly against the move. He got approval because he had solid evidence that only 3% of ticket buyers were motivated by the brochure. He says, "The vast majority of our marketing resources were going on



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the season brochure so we couldn't even distribute it properly and it left very little money for marketing individual events. We have a wide-ranging programme including work in progress by emerging artists so the brochure was often late and presenting the season as a cohesive whole just wasn't working."

The Green Room now produces 10,000 widely distributed postcards each month that list events. These generate a quarter of ticket sales, including a significant proportion from new audiences. Another quarter comes from the email list, which is effective in bringing occasional attenders back, and a quarter from the website, which is targeted at existing attenders. The remainder is a mix of press, community marketing, partner marketing and word of mouth. Christopher and his colleague, Philip Hannaway, have continued to monitor the effectiveness of their marketing activity, so they can feel confident the new strategies are working.

And that is the second issue – most marketers understand market segmentation in theory but do not put it into practice. "They don't really have a grip on who their audiences are and what they are receptive to," suggests Jonathan Goodacre. Maybe they feel they don't need to because they rely on their season brochure to be all things to all people. Consultant, Andrew McIntyre, has provided the most compelling evidence of how bad season brochures are at selling to first time, lapsed and occasional ticket buyers. Marketers really do need to understand their different audiences better, divide them into meaningful target groups and identify the most effective ways of communicating with each group (and for some, it may well be the season brochure).

Looking out

This sounds daunting but there are lots of cheap and

easy ways of doing it. If our organisation uses a box-office computer system, basic reports can tell us how many people responded and who those respondents were. We can assess the feedback from our websites looking at the number of unique users, which pages they visit and how they get to the site. We need to spend time front of house, chatting to visitors, participants and attenders – and not just the ones we recognise because they virtually live at our venue. We can empower box office staff or attendants to ask intelligent questions in an informal way and then feed the responses back to us. We can hold regular customer circles, inviting small groups of attenders to come and tell us about their experiences of our organisation. And we can carry out simple audience research to answer specific questions. All this will allow us to work out the return on our investment of time, energy and money and compare different communication methods to see which get us the best results.

What strikes me most about the Green Room's approach is that they are so keen to have a dialogue with their audiences. Christopher Hodgson calls it "soft feedback research". He invites audiences to give him feedback about the things they think are important, sending them informal, conversational email questionnaires that guide rather than pigeonhole their thoughts.

The third reason why marketers don't focus on the marketing tools that work is that, once the brochure has been posted, they usually think about the season event by event. It would make more sense to take time to think how our activities could contribute cumulatively to the success of the whole season. Packaging several events together to reflect the tastes of particular audience segments gets a better response and halves the workload. Even better, we could work with our colleagues across the organisation to develop longer term approaches that bring together marketing, education and programming to achieve our organisation's goals.

The marketing team at West Yorkshire Playhouse periodically invite everyone in the organisation, including the acting company and creative team, to brainstorm more effective ways of getting bigger and broader audiences. They develop marketing strategies from this and circulate their campaign plans. This has improved their colleagues' understanding of what they do, ensures everyone feels an ownership of how their organisation is marketed, and means they spend much less time responding to helpful suggestions about the performance tomorrow night that hasn't reached its target.

So, throw out that long 'to do' list. The keys to more effective marketing are to better understand our audiences, be clear about what our organisation is trying to achieve and then to do far less much better. ■
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¹ Carson, D. (1990) 'Some exploratory models for assessing small firms' marketing performance: A qualitative approach', *European Journal of Marketing* 24(11): p1–51.

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