

Heather Maitland considers the nature of audiences for unfamiliar performances by unfamiliar artists.

Trainspotters and trendsetters

At its annual conference in May, Audiences Central invited speakers and participants to explore the world of trainspotters and trendsetters. We defined trainspotters as 'those consistently interested in a particular type of arts activity that most people aren't', and trendsetters as 'those who consistently take risks with unfamiliar and untested artists and activities in a way that most people don't'. So who are they and what are they like?

Frequent attenders

Trendsetters are likely to have a strong relationship with the organisation they take risks with. I've looked at audiences at seven arts centres and a couple of cultural cinemas. The people who attend unfamiliar performances by unfamiliar artists with 'difficult' subject matter on average buy for three times as many events per year than those attending only the most familiar events. This is even more pronounced among cultural cinema attenders, with ticket buyers for unknown films attending on average five times more often. This means that the best way to create more innovators is to nurture frequency among mainstream audiences.

Trendsetters in the venues I looked at don't always want to take risks. Between a fifth and a quarter of the tickets they buy are for unfamiliar events; the rest are for less challenging events. At least three out of four of them also bought tickets that year for at least one event with mass appeal. So, most trendsetters are choosing from venues' broad menus of events and activities. Only a few of them are innovators for innovation's sake.

The figures for one venue particularly caught my eye. Of the trendsetters buying tickets for the first time, two-thirds attended once and never came back. Consistent programming that focuses on content as well as style is so important if we are to retain new trendsetters. These non-returners did not seem to be motivated by the contemporary style of the event but by very specific content that had not been programmed since. So, these trendsetters are also trainspotters.

Niche audiences

My research into trainspotters has covered dance, cinema and all kinds of music. There seem to be four types of trainspotter. I interviewed attenders of a concert by legendary folk guitarist John Renbourn and then compared their responses to their ticketing history:

Paul fell into the 'Focused Interest' category. He goes to gigs across the UK two or three times a week but has only been to this particular venue four times over the past five years, each time to see John Renbourn. He lives over two hours' drive away. Like him, this group of trainspotters are generally willing to travel long distances to see events that fall within their chosen focus.

David says he is interested in a particular genre,



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'folk, jazz and blues'. He comes to this venue every couple of months, picking particular events out of the folk, jazz and blues programmes. This is typical of the 'Genre Specific' type: they may say they are interested in a particular genre and rarely attend anything else but that doesn't mean they are interested in every event in that genre.

But even these niche audiences are fragmented. John falls into the 'Cross-genre Connection' type. He is interested in anything featuring acoustic guitars, covering folk, blues, gypsy, jazz and classical music. That means he is only interested in a tiny segment of each of those music genres.

Some trainspotters are not necessarily motivated by the event itself. The Faheys are frequent attenders, saying they come to folk, blues and cultural cinema at this venue as a way of seeing friends. These genres are the common ground for their social circle, even though none of its members have a particularly deep interest.

The motivations of dance attenders are equally varied. Just because a ticket buyer has bought for a specialist event, we cannot assume that they have a matching specialist interest. Trainspotters' motivations are just too complicated to predict.

And it gets even more complicated. Trainspotters' ticket purchases aren't consistent: like trendsetters they also attend events with mass appeal. That's because even trainspotters have lives – partner, dad, music enthusiast, work colleague, rockabilly fan, friend – and their arts attendance will reflect all of these identities.

Communication

So, if it's so difficult to spot a trainspotter, how can we get more of them interested in our events?

- Get on their radar by programming enough of a

particular niche activity – so that they'll keep an eye on what you're doing and will generate their own word of mouth

- Get your programmers to share their own enthusiasms with them to build trust
- Take trainspotters on a step-by-step journey into unfamiliar territory
- Talk to them separately from your mainstream audience – they need specialist information
- Look at how, as well as what, trainspotters attend, thinking about their different identities and communicating accordingly. (If they are in trainspotter mode, they are unlikely to respond to your season brochure)
- Offer loads of information to allow them to create their own connections
- If possible offer menus of relevant events, thinking in 'flavours' as well as genres
- Give them lots of notice.

Majority rules

But don't forget that mainstream audiences make up at least three-quarters of the audience for specialist events. Only one in four ticket buyers for Stamford Arts Centre's series of acoustic blues guitar players from the USA had a particular interest in the blues. Only 29 out of 732 ticket buyers for folk bought tickets at the Arts Centre more than once and only bought for folk. Only one in five ticket buyers for contemporary dance said they had a particular interest in dance. The vast majority of attenders at contemporary classical music are frequent music attenders and frequent arts attenders. Over a third of respondents in my research in Oxford had seen another music event less than a week before. Almost half said they attended arts events once every two to four weeks, on average citing six different artforms they had attended in the previous twelve months².

This means that you can grow audiences for specialist events by focusing on mainstream audiences. Use your season brochure to communicate with them. But that means tailoring its content:

- Don't assume a theoretical knowledge
- Talk about emotional responses to the event
- Don't name drop – they won't have heard of them
- Make connections: 'if you like that, you'll like this too'
- Create a welcoming, intimate, informal atmosphere in your venue.

The really good news is that everyone is potentially a trainspotter! ■

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¹ Baker, T. and Maitland, H. (2002) Audiences for Dance in Scotland, Scottish Arts Council

² Maitland, H. (2002) Oxford Contemporary Music Research Project Key Findings

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