

Customer experience

Heather Maitland warns about making assumptions when researching your customer's experience

Researching how satisfied people are with the experience your organisation offers is not straightforward. It is all too easy to research the things that your colleagues think are important rather than what really matters to your customers.

Ellen Garbarino and Mark Thompson analysed the experiences of audiences at an off-Broadway repertory theatre to try to identify the factors that create customer satisfaction and loyalty.¹ They concluded that, for frequent attenders, satisfaction with the quality of the acting was the main factor driving trust and the preference for familiar actors drove commitment. The quality of the physical facilities affected their satisfaction but not their levels of trust, commitment or their future intention to return.

This will have pleased the theatre's management team as its artistic policy is centred on a resident company of actors, some of whom have been with the theatre for many years. But that is why this piece of research is problematic.

The questionnaire asked 33 questions. Seventeen measured just four aspects: actor satisfaction, preference for familiar actors, the plays on offer and the physical facilities. The rest of the questions were designed to assess the impact of this satisfaction on trust and commitment. The four aspects of satisfaction were chosen because they fitted the management team's vision of what is important about going to the theatre. But is this the same as their audiences' vision? The

researchers say they concentrated on satisfaction with the actors because contact with other theatre staff is 'limited and peripheral to the theatre experience'. How do they know? They certainly didn't ask.

In their research into museum visitors, Paul Harrison and Robin Shaw point out that previous work on customer experience has shown that customer service, especially interactions with staff, has an influence on loyalty.² They therefore chose to ask visitors about their satisfaction with facilities, staff service and the exhibition experience in order to explore links between satisfaction and the visitors' intentions to return and to recommend the museum to others. Again, though, these aspects were chosen because they fitted the researchers' hypotheses about the visitor experience, rather than because they were important to the visitors themselves.

So what should we ask customers about their experience of our organisations?

Our visitors, attenders or participants are satisfied when their expectations are met. Jerry Yoshitomi describes how these expectations are driven by personal beliefs and social norms.³ This means that what people expect to get out of an arts experience varies widely and may be based on myth, not fact. As Jerry Yoshitomi writes in *Engage Now!*:

The 'experience' is not limited to the art. It is the sum of all the benefits and costs – artistic, practical, and environmental. It is, as well, the interaction of the art with the

participant's identity, sense of self, personality, social groups, and so on.

To research customer satisfaction, we must therefore understand our customers' expectations and the personal meanings that influence their actual experience. *Engage Now!* includes a useful summary of what these could consist of. Lots of useful research is available that has not been framed by the assumptions of arts managers or researchers. And then, of course, we need to check our own assumptions. This could be as simple as listening to a handful of our customers talk about their experience.

We could also use research methods that allow us to see the experience we offer from the customers' point of view. Gillian Savage and Jane James have written a practical guide to using observation techniques in the heritage sector that would be equally applicable to assessing how audiences engage with the performing arts.⁴

We need a constant reality check because we make so many assumptions. Research into audiences for contemporary dance showed that, contrary to at least my expectations, pre-performance talks had no impact on whether attenders could make sense of contemporary dance works. What seemed to make the difference was giving them time for calm reflection after seeing the performance.⁵

See page 23 for reports referred to above.



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Research round-up reports

1 Ellen Garbarino and Mark S. Johnson, 'The Different Roles of Satisfaction, Trust, and Commitment in Customer Relationships', *Journal of Marketing*, 63, 1999, pp 70–87 consulted at [www.fuel4arts.com/files/attach/Garbarino%20&%20Johnson%20\(1999\)%20-%20Satisfaction,%20Trust.pdf](http://www.fuel4arts.com/files/attach/Garbarino%20&%20Johnson%20(1999)%20-%20Satisfaction,%20Trust.pdf)

2 Paul Harrison and Robin Shaw, 'Consumer Satisfaction and Post-Purchase Intentions: An Exploratory Study of Museum Visitors', *International Journal of Arts Management*, 6, 2, 2004

3 Gerald D. (Jerry) Yoshitomi, Engage Now! consulted at www.artsmarketing.org/marketingresources/files/JYNotes-Apr022003.pdf
Andrew Taylor, 'Pandora's Bottle: Cultural Content in a Digital World' consulted at

www.bolzcenter.org/taylor/pub/pandoras_bottle.pdf#search=%22Heinz%20Zaltman%22 describes some useful ways of looking at personal meaning, including a summary of Gerard Zaltman's 'Understanding Thoughts and Feelings about the Arts'

4 Gillian Savage and Jane James, 'A Practical Guide to Evaluating Natural and Cultural Heritage Interpretation'
www.maq.org.au/programs/conf03/workshopBG.pdf

5 Renee Glass and Catherine Stevens, 'Making Sense of Contemporary Dance: An Australian Investigation into Audience Interpretation and Enjoyment Levels'
www.fuel4arts.com/files/attach/DanceAudiences.pdf



Rules of engagement – power to the people

15 November 2006, Sadler's Wells, London

Sponsored by London Calling

Over time, consumers have moved from purchasing raw materials, to purchasing goods, then services, and now the emphasis is shifting to purchasing 'experiences'. As audiences move from being passive receptacles into active, engaged participants, what does this mean for the way we interact and communicate with them? How will our marketing need to change?

This day event (incorporating the AMA AGM) will explore the changing expectations of audiences and the emerging priorities from funders, which are

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combining to focus our attention on 'developing participation' in the arts.

Attend this day event to gain:

- understanding of the opportunities these changes might present for the sector
- insights into how other sectors are tackling similar challenges
- creative ideas on how to develop participation within your organisation.

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£180 + VAT non AMA member