Mr and Mrs Parker want to know...

Blogs are personal postings to the Internet, a diary filled with quick posts and links. The term 'blog' is short for weblog. People update their weblogs (or blogs) regularly and they often express the personality, ideas, thoughts and pearls of wisdom of their creator.

When reading a few blogs relating to the arts sector, I found one from a woman who went to *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* at Sadler's Wells Theatre. Her blog is a really open, honest diary entry about her experiences of attending a dance performance for the first time. She starts by talking about how apprehensive she was attending something without words, telling us that she thought she wouldn't understand what was going on. As the blog progresses you see that she is now incredibly enthusiastic about the performance, the language used is so simple and the endorsement so real – no one has asked her to do this, she has chosen to write an honest review of how she felt and what she thought.

Following this blog was another from someone who had managed to get a picture of herself with the gorgeous dancer Adam Cooper after the same performance. She posted the picture along with her thoughts and feelings about the production.

At a minimum, arts organisations could be monitoring blogs to find out what people are saying about them.

Google now offer a blogger search facility so you can find out what people are saying on a particular subject, whether that be a holiday destination you fancy going to, political commentary, your own arts organisation or anything else you want to get other opinions on. Go to: www.blogsearch.google.com.

The challenge for those organisations with more developed e-marketing activities is how we can encourage this level of word of mouth. How can we use it to spread the word to other people? You might feel brave enough to host blogs on your own website (although remember that you may get both positive and negative feedback) or you might find other innovative ways to use tools like blogging to generate valuable word-of-mouth marketing. Let us know how you get on!

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Since 2001, ts.com has conducted annual research into the profile of online consumers. Working in conjunction with its clients, the objective has been to gain a clearer understanding of their purchasing needs in order to provide them with a better service. In 2004, we joined forces to explore in more detail consumers' attitudes to the online buying process, e-commerce and new technology. Eighteen of ts.com's clients participated in the project resulting in 6,931 responses to the e-mail survey and a useful profile of online consumers.

Does online purchasing attract new audiences?

Five per cent of all respondents to the e-mail questionnaire were first-time attendees at the relevant organisation. But, if you have undertaken self-completion questionnaire research in your organisation, you will have noticed that certain types of consumers are more likely to respond: in particular, they tend to be older and more frequent purchasers. The Wycombe Swan Theatre and Newbury Racecourse volunteered to help us test if this was true for e-mail questionnaires. During the two-week research period, all their online customers were asked to respond to a short questionnaire at the end of the ticket buying process. They also asked three core questions of their telephone and counter customers. In both venues, this showed that new and infrequent customers were significantly under-represented among respondents to the e-mail questionnaire.

A third of Wycombe Swan's online respondents were either new customers or had not attended in the past twelve months compared to 13 per cent of telephone/counter customers. Twice as many of Newbury Racecourse's online respondents were new or had not attended in the past twelve months as the telephone/counter customers.

Does buying tickets online appeal to a particular sort of customer?

Online ticketing seems to appeal to people from the whole cross-section of each organisation's customer base – occasional, frequent and very frequent ticket buyers.

The frequency of attendance (that is specifically *attendance*, not purchase) of e-mail respondents who are customers of arts organisations matches within 4 per cent the frequency breakdown of attendees of any performance in a theatre as described in the British Market Research Bureau's Target Group Index (TGI).[1]

Customers of arts and sporting organisations who responded to the e-mail questionnaire are much less likely to be aged under 25 or over 55 than Internet users participating in NOP's Internet User Profile

Profiling online ticket buyers

Here's what *Heather Maitland* and ts.com found when they joined forces to explore consumers' attitudes to online buying and e-commerce

Survey[2] and attendees of any performance in a theatre responding to the TGI research. They are significantly more likely to currently use or own mobile phones and DVD players and are early adopters of digital radio with 83 per cent claiming current ownership.[3]

Do customers stick to using particular methods of buying tickets?

Half switch between different methods of buying tickets with 53 per cent of all respondents to the e-mail questionnaire who had bought more than once purchasing by other methods as well as online and 47 per cent always doing so online. Fifty-three per cent of telephone/counter respondents at the Wycombe Swan and 40 per cent at Newbury Racecourse had purchased tickets via the organisation's website at some time in the previous twelve months.

What do online ticket buyers think of the service?

On the whole, consumers are satisfied by the experience of buying tickets online via ts.com's services. In some venues though, there were aspects that were problematic for consumers. In particular these are navigating the client's website, the limited availability of tickets the venues have put online, the speed of the process and, for some, the lack of options for buying multiples of tickets or particular discounted tickets and the inability to see which seats the online consumer is purchasing until after they have clicked on the 'buy' button.

Do online consumers prefer purchasing online and, if so, why?

Online consumers purchase sports, arts and entertainment tickets using the Internet relatively frequently. They find it quicker and easier than purchasing by telephone. Customers of some organisations appear motivated to use the Internet by the difficulty they face getting through to the sales office on the telephone. Eighty-nine per cent say they would prefer to buy tickets online through the organisation's website than by telephone or in person. More than half say they will buy sports and entertainment tickets online more often in the future.

Are online customers frequent Internet purchasers?

Online consumers were much more likely to have recently bought products or services over the Internet than average Internet users with four out of five purchasing in the past four weeks. They are not, however, buying the same kinds of products or services as average Internet users and it seems that they are purchasing less frequently than the 3.9 times per month identified in the NOP World research.

How do customers want us to communicate with them?

The vast majority of online ticket buyers want updates and information about promotional offers by e-mail. The proportion of ts.com's research respondents preferring to receive promotional offers by post has fallen from 24 per cent in 2003 to 6 per cent in 2004, although in some arts venues the season brochure is still important and so significantly more of their online customers request mailed information. ■

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1 Arts Council England, *Target Group Index 2003/4: summary of results for Great Britain*, January 2005

2 NOP World, *NOP Internet User Profile Survey – Wave 18* (September 2004)

3 Comparative data: Mobile phone and digital TV *eMORI Technology Tracker* (July 2004); DVD player *Screen Digest* (March 2004) p. 65; Digital radio *Digital Radio Development Bureau press release issued October 2004* alradio.com/press/display.asp?id=219

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