

Maximising arts marketing ROI

Rachel Escott looks at best budget use to market arts organisations more effectively

The shoestrings we once marketed the arts on are growing ever shorter and there's a renewed evaluation of the role audiences play in the funding model for the arts in Britain today. Hopefully this comes alongside fresh recognition that adequate resources should be given to arts marketers so they can do a professional job. It is therefore our responsibility to ensure every penny is worked hard to get maximum return on that investment.

So, how can we sweat our budgets to market our arts organisations more effectively?

Throw away the rulebook

Or question it closely. Just because 'we've always had four-sheet posters at the bus station' doesn't mean that's the best place to spend the budget. What if the audience you're interested in no longer goes to the bus station? Just because collective wisdom is to move to social media channels doesn't mean your target audience actually uses them for art events. And just because another organisation may excitingly be using a particular communications channel doesn't mean that's right for every organisation or every audience.

Of course, traditional spend – or the newest communications channels – may be the right thing. But too many marketing campaigns consist of inherited practice, without the necessary monitoring to check they are delivering on expectations.

Put the audience at the heart

The audience (existing or desired) should be at the heart of all your decisions. How do they get their information about their preferred arts activities? What (or who) do they pay most attention to? Remember, a person may have different behaviour or influences depending on what they are 'buying'. I'll happily turn up to any new play by an unknown author on the basis of a couple of lines on a poster, but would need personal recommendation – even hand-holding – to attend an opera.

Then there's the message. What aspects of your information most matter to people? What kind of language will motivate them or spark their interest? During 'meet the audience' workshops run earlier this year in the East of England,¹ arts organisations learned direct from members of the public that the information with which they traditionally lead their marketing material (about the company, actors, directors and previous venues) was not of prime importance to all. Families wanted more prominence for show length, target age, parking and refreshment facilities. Non-regular attenders wanted to know first what a show was 'about'.

Do the homework

You can only get inside the heads of your target audience(s) if you do the research. Investing in considered research will always pay off, helping you make those solid decisions about where and how to place your marketing spend.

Start close to home. An analysis of your contacts database, cross-referenced with an Acorn or Mosaic² analysis of postcodes, will reveal the types of people coming, their relative numbers, how often, their average spend and their preferred art forms. This is the basis for understanding different segments within your overall audience. Use already published research³ to flesh out the picture and understand the zeitgeist of your audience. Then make it personal – find out who your audience really are and what they really think. On- or off-line surveys, comments books or walls, informal conversations with front-of-house staff, vox pops or focus groups are some of the tools available. Arts engagement maps⁴ or other tools can help you understand other groups in geographic areas – the ones you'd like to see in your audience, but who don't yet come.

Create segments

We all like to think we're individuals, and certainly the best way to persuade someone to do something is to tailor the information to their individual interests and priorities –

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whether that's flattery that they'll be the first to see a new artist, or the reassurance of a popular name or that they'll be able to squeeze in a bite to eat between work and the show.

Breaking your audience down into smaller groups of 'like-minded individuals' – people who are likely to behave or react to stimuli in a similar way to each other – brings you closer to understanding which messages, communication channels and programme or 'product' is likely to be most appealing to each. Although this means creating different marketing materials or messages for each group, it is also the way to make your activity so much more effective.

Targets and priorities

First, make sure your overall income or attendance target is realistic. Not every show or exhibition can be a blockbuster.

Now you're ready to set targets and to prioritise your segments in order to divvy up your marketing resource. You may decide that just two or three of your audience segments are likely to respond best to a particular show. For example, you might aim to meet 70% of your target from your core, loyal audience. Because you now understand them much better as a segment your communication can be more effective in terms of lead messages, preferred channel, timing of communication and so on. You should aim to use less than 70% of your budget on them.

Perhaps you identified a group very like your 'loyal attenders', but who stopped coming often – you'd like to entice them back. Set a realistic target for conversions from this group and then consider what this group needs to hear to prompt them to respond in the way you want. For example, they may need more incentives (four-person discounts so they can make it a social event with friends; 'back stories' to the production or actors ...) or they may need to read reviews first. Or do they need to plan well in advance to get a babysitter? Allocate a proportion of your budget to work towards your target for this segment.

A third target might be to attract first-timers from (say) the young professionals who work close to your venue. Again, be realistic about the number of people you might attract, and from research understand as much as you can about the competition for their time and attention, what they might want from the whole arts-attending experience, and what kind of language to use. In this case, knowing where they hang out during their working day will help get communications into the workplace itself, along with promotions relevant to them.

Experiment (with safety nets)

Creating different messages, materials and campaign timings for these different segments may feel like unaffordable luxury, so build in monitoring methods to measure response rates. Promotions or discounts used with



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different segments or communications channels can be coded differently so the response rates don't get lumped into one. Send out communications a few days apart so you can spot corresponding peaks in response. Explain to your booking staff how important asking the 'How did you hear?' question is – and that they record the responses accurately. If possible, set up control experiments till you gain confidence: divide a segment into two (at random) and send your newly constructed messages or materials to one half and your traditional, generic style to the other half – and compare the response rates.

Watch closely

Everything you learn about how your target segments respond to your new, more tailored communications campaigns should be fed back in to your 'research' folder, so you can build and refine for next time. Hence the importance of monitoring mechanisms. Some years ago, I worked for a well-known exercise machine company. The team had won awards for their direct marketing and had systems to tell them exactly how much they earned from every advert placed. They could compare different print titles, lead photos or strap lines, even times of day for radio adverts, to maximise the return on investment from their marketing. I still remember the thrill of realising marketing could be a detailed science as well as an art! ●



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1. ACE East-funded audience development research programme, delivered by Audiences London in collaboration with Audiences UK.
2. MOSAIC segmentation by Experian www.experian.co.uk/business-strategies/mosaic-uk-2009.html; ACORN segmentation by CACI – www.caci.co.uk/acorn-classification.aspx.
3. EG ACE's Audience Insights, DCMS's Taking Part survey, reports from ACE-funded joint research projects carried out by the audience development agencies (www.audiencesuk.org), local authority surveys or published findings from consumer or opinion polls.
4. Arts engagement indicator maps for London from www.audienceslondon.org.