

# Repositioning

## Liverpool Arab Arts Festival



Performer and audience member dance at LAAF Family Day, a highlight of Liverpool Arab Arts Festival, which brings up to 3,000 people to see international acts perform at Sefton Park Palm House. Image courtesy of Liverpool Arab Arts Festival © AB Photography

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Nonconform



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“The festival’s identity needed to be reinvigorated to be unreservedly and proudly Arab...”

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# Liverpool Arab Arts Festival

repositioning the UK's longest running and biggest annual celebration of Arab arts and culture

Founded in 1998, Liverpool Arab Arts Festival (LAAF) is a registered charity. It delivers arts and community programmes that bring diverse cultures together, increasing appreciation and awareness of Arab culture and arts at a local, national and international level.

A year-round programme of events and community projects is built around the focal point for the year: LAAF's annual summer festival.

The festival is the UK's longest running and biggest annual celebration of Arab arts and culture. Now in its 16th year, it brings a series of around 35 events to multiple venues over a packed 10-day period. It includes over 140 UK and international artists and performers.



## Background to the project

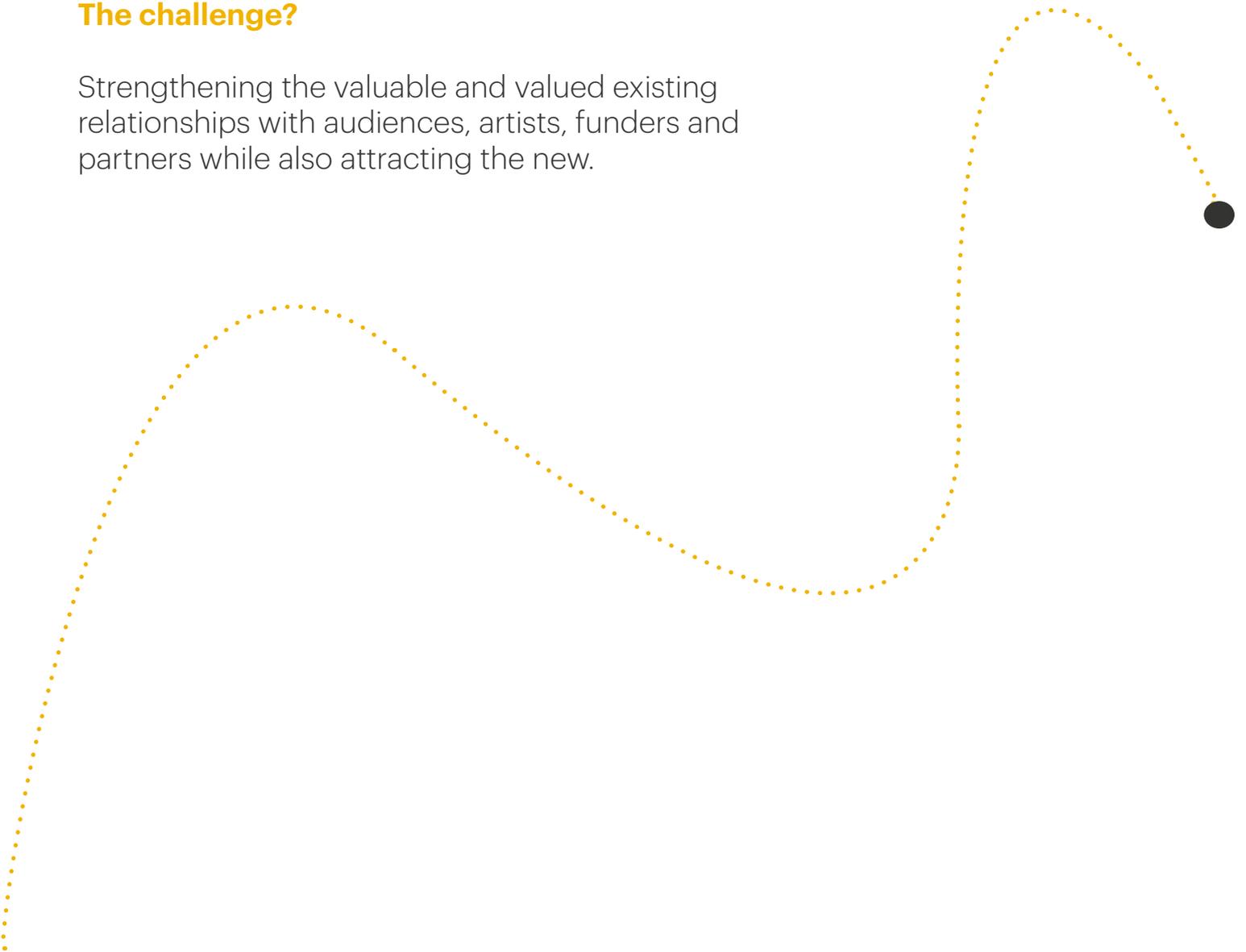
Since the first festival in 2002, LAAF has made it part of its core business to be an inclusive festival and introduce both Arab and non-Arab UK audiences to the rich cultural heritage and expressions from the Arab world and its diaspora.

By 2015, the award-winning LAAF had established itself as an excellent model of how the celebration of Arab arts and culture challenges prejudice and fosters understanding between people.

The festival's scope and ambition had also grown. In order to build on past successes and to respond to current and future challenges, the LAAF board and executive team recognised that LAAF needed to strengthen and reposition its status in the marketplace.

## The challenge?

Strengthening the valuable and valued existing relationships with audiences, artists, funders and partners while also attracting the new.



## Key drivers for repositioning the LAAF brand

### – tensions emerging within LAAF's identity

There were interesting tensions emerging within LAAF's identity. It is an organisation rooted in the community but with an internationally significant impact. Expressing this dual identity successfully was a key driver for the repositioning of the LAAF brand.

### – the external environment

With news from Arab countries continuing to dominate the media, understanding of the region and its people is invariably framed by images of war and conflict. Yet, it's a region extraordinarily rich in music, dance, literature, film and other cultural expressions.

The festival positively promotes Arab culture and people, while presenting challenging and thought-provoking work by contemporary artists responding to circumstances they experience or observe.

The festival's identity needed to be reinvigorated to be unreservedly and proudly Arab, reflecting both traditional and contemporary Arab culture while being an accessible and engaging brand for all audiences.

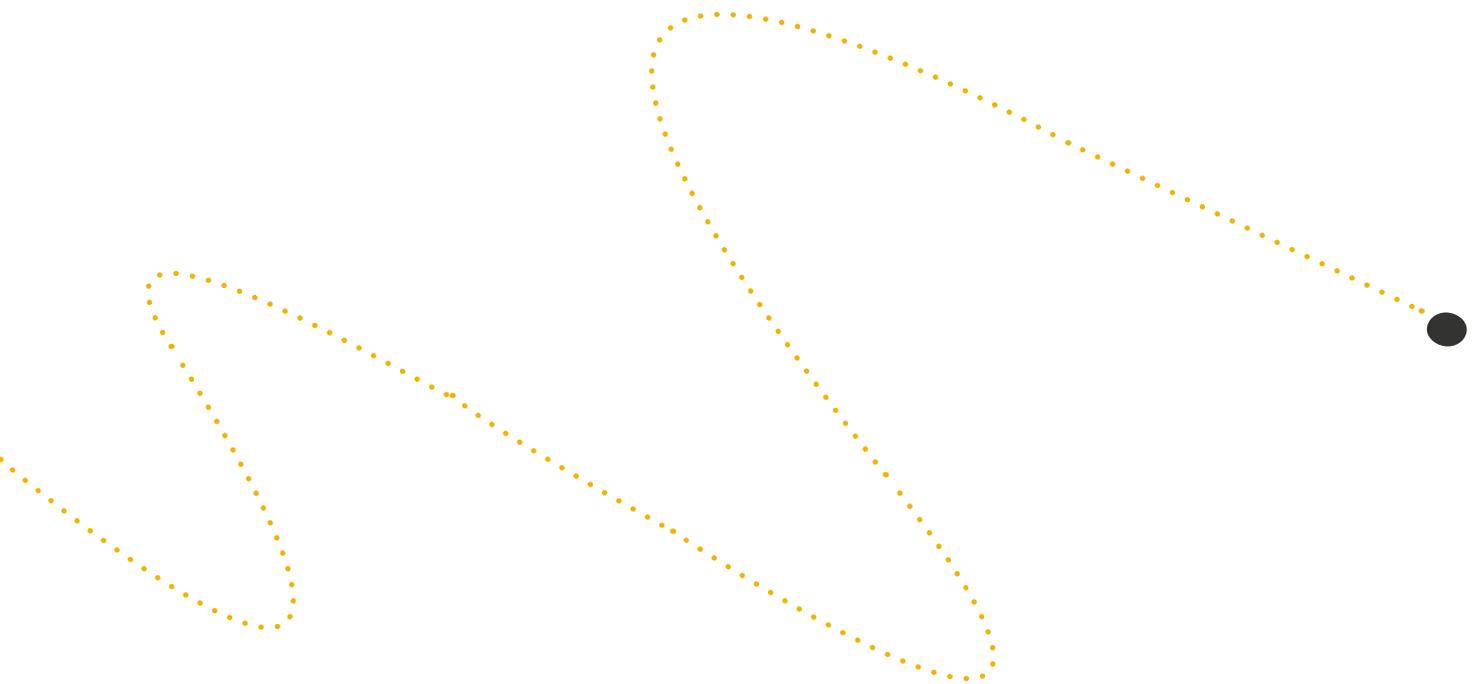
### – audience research and feedback from partners

Research and feedback suggested that previous efforts to move LAAF towards a more overtly contemporary identity had diluted the key message that LAAF is as much about celebrating traditional Arab cultural expressions as it is about showcasing cutting-edge contemporary art.



## Objectives

- Increase audience figures, reflecting LAAF's ambition to ensure as many people as possible are engaged with Arab art and culture
- Increase a sustained positive image of Arab arts
- Improve the perception of Arab people and culture within other communities in the UK
- Increase brand awareness at a local, national and international level
- Create a brand that is engaging for multiple audiences, especially young people
- Improve the dialogue between the festival and the different Arabic communities that exist both within Liverpool and further afield



## The target audience

We aim to retain the existing high percentage of audience revisiting the festival annually, while increasing the number of new audience members.

We want to attract a broad range of audiences; we also have some very specific audience development targets.

Data shows the percentage of women made up a higher representation than male audience. However, we know that women of Arab/Muslim ethnicity and faith were significantly lower than the statistics showed, due to skews in response levels.

We aim to increase the number of:

- women from Arab/Muslim ethnicity and faith
- audience members identifying as Disabled — Deaf
- younger audience members



A performer entertains crowds with traditional Yemeni dancing during LAAF Big Sunday at Bluecoat — Liverpool's centre for contemporary arts. Image courtesy of Liverpool Arab Arts Festival © AB Photography.

## Marketing audit, streamlining and removing silos

The LAAF board and executive team recognised the need to reinvigorate and streamline strategic and operational marketing, PR and design activities. In order to do this LAAF commissioned Nonconform — who had previously provided some graphic design services — as a full-service marketing and PR provider.

Nonconform became an extension of the in-house team, acting as an outsourced marketing department. This meant that the small LAAF team were less burdened with the task of managing multiple relationships with various agencies and freelancers, each working within their own silos.

The advantage of this was that the campaign was creative and coherent. It pulled together key messages, strands and themes to tell a high-impact story for LAAF 2015 and beyond.

Nonconform was tasked with performing a full marketing audit, and given the power to question and challenge previous decisions. We wanted to discover where there were opportunities to improve. The idea was that LAAF would not undertake any activities just because 'that is what we've always done'.



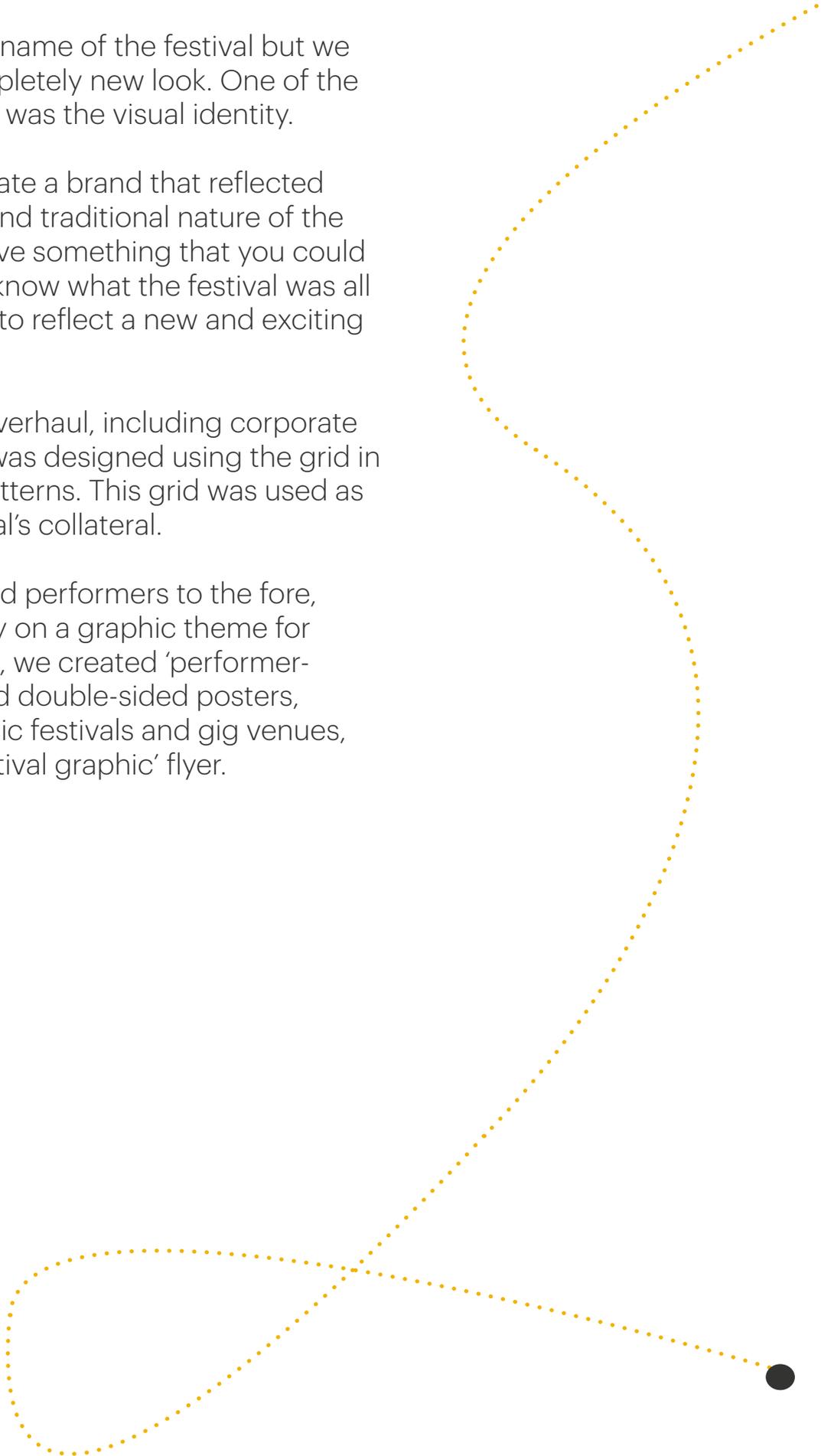
## Brand redevelopment

We decided to retain the name of the festival but we wanted to go with a completely new look. One of the first things we worked on was the visual identity.

The challenge was to create a brand that reflected both the contemporary and traditional nature of the festival. We wanted to have something that you could look at and immediately know what the festival was all about. We also wanted it to reflect a new and exciting era for the festival.

We completed a brand overhaul, including corporate logo redesign. The logo was designed using the grid in Arabesque Geometric patterns. This grid was used as the basis for all the festival's collateral.

We brought the artists and performers to the fore, rather than relying heavily on a graphic theme for all collateral. For example, we created 'performer-led' ladder-style flyers and double-sided posters, traditionally used for music festivals and gig venues, rather than a generic 'festival graphic' flyer.



## Audience-led PR strategy

We developed a completely revamped PR strategy, designed around the Audience Development Plan.

Publications were targeted on the basis of the kinds of audiences they service, as much as for their potential reach, creating opportunities for in-depth artist profiles and interviews with members of the LAAF team. This resulted in unprecedented levels of coverage locally, nationally and internationally.

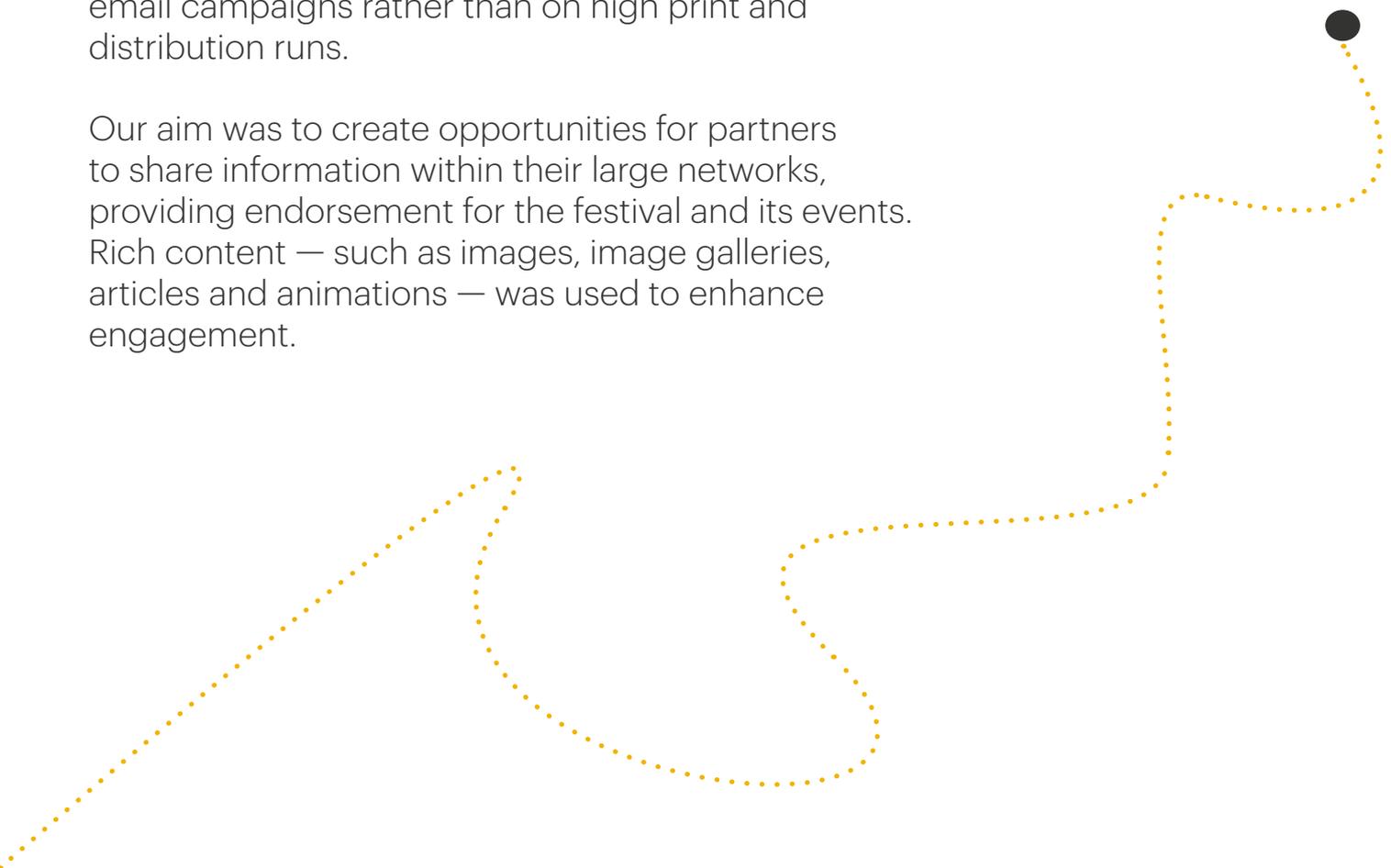
From year one that made a significant difference in terms of how people viewed the status of the festival. Our funders recognised the sea-change in PR impact.

## Digital focus

We wanted a much stronger digital presence. This would expand the reach of the festival in both Arabic and non-Arabic communities around the UK and the globe, enabling us to speak to people the festival hadn't spoken to before.

We focused on integrated press, social media and email campaigns rather than on high print and distribution runs.

Our aim was to create opportunities for partners to share information within their large networks, providing endorsement for the festival and its events. Rich content — such as images, image galleries, articles and animations — was used to enhance engagement.



## Brand alignment and unexpected partnerships

The festival is all about partnerships and collaboration, including with the many venues that host the events.

Over the years, the festival has built up a huge network of community groups, third sector organisations and statutory bodies who support the organisation.

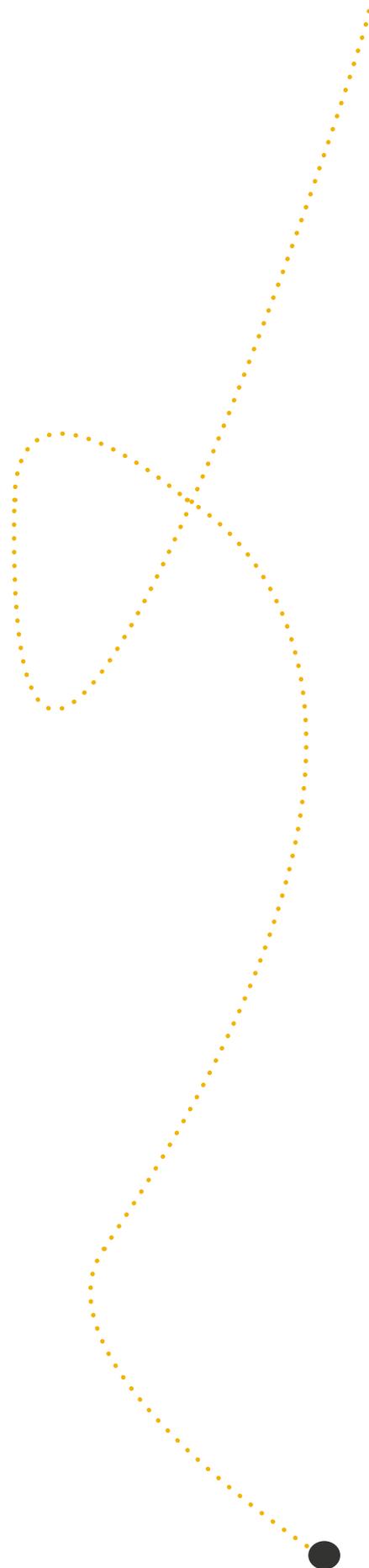
Part of the repositioning of the brand was about expanding collaborations with key partners and making bold collaborative programming decisions.

In 2016 we partnered with Liverpool International Music Festival — one of Europe's biggest free music festivals, attended by over 30,000 people during 1 weekend — and programmed our finale event on the same date and in the same venue, Liverpool's iconic Sefton Park. The aim was for both festivals to engage with each other's audiences and to create cross-over brand opportunities.

## Community

We are lucky to have strong relationships with active groups of supporters within the Arab communities in Liverpool. They will always give us feedback on how changes will be received.

The festival was born out of the Arab community here in Liverpool and that is the aspect of the festival we always try and retain. They are embedded within all of our decision-making processes, meaning LAAF remains authentic to its roots while growing and branching out further each year.



## Audiences

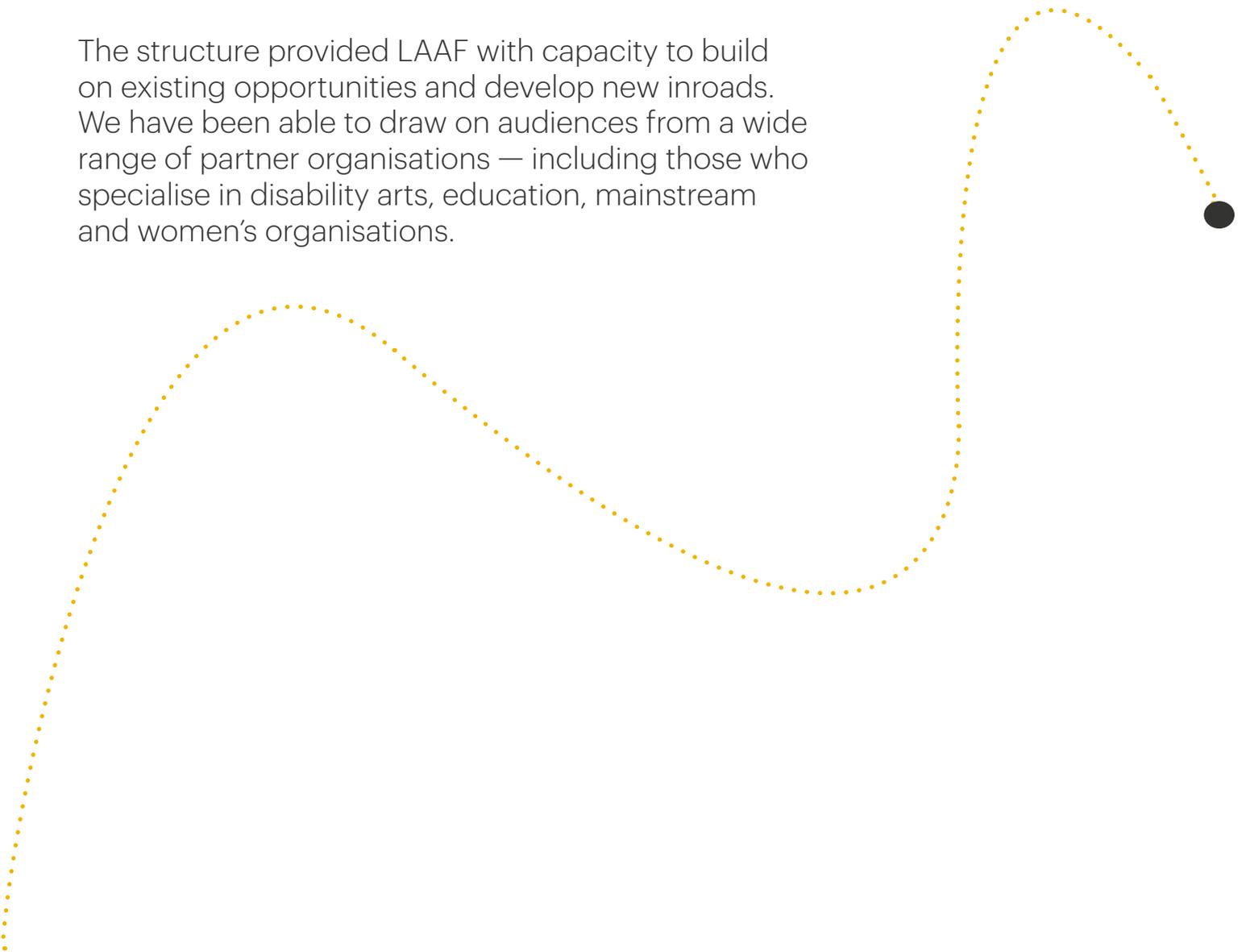
Our research in developing LAAF's new brand brought us into direct contact with partner organisations, arts and creative industries, existing audience and people from Liverpool's Arab communities including community organisations.

Taking this approach created awareness and interest. Within the community, it generated a greater sense of ownership of the festival.

In turn, the relationships lead to multi-agency promotion. Local community groups set up WhatsApp and other social media platforms to update on LAAF events and attract interest.

Partners at local, national and international level shared updates, e-news and events across their vast networks. This process was repeated leading up to and throughout the festivals.

The structure provided LAAF with capacity to build on existing opportunities and develop new inroads. We have been able to draw on audiences from a wide range of partner organisations — including those who specialise in disability arts, education, mainstream and women's organisations.



## Results

- We have exceeded our targets for audience growth
  - We have increased the amount and quality of press coverage on a local, national and international basis
  - The feedback from the rebrand has been very positive
  - The rebrand has reinvigorated those parties closely involved in the festival and reignited external interest in LAAF
  - We have created a much stronger platform that should allow for year on year growth in the future
  - We have attracted record audiences at the Family Day at Sefton Park Palm House, which really showcases what the festival is about
  - Because of the strength of LAAF's brand position, the team is now approached by other groups who want to set up similar events in different parts of the country
  - High quality artists are continuously making approaches to be part of LAAF
  - We are developing an increasing number of highly effective partnerships each year
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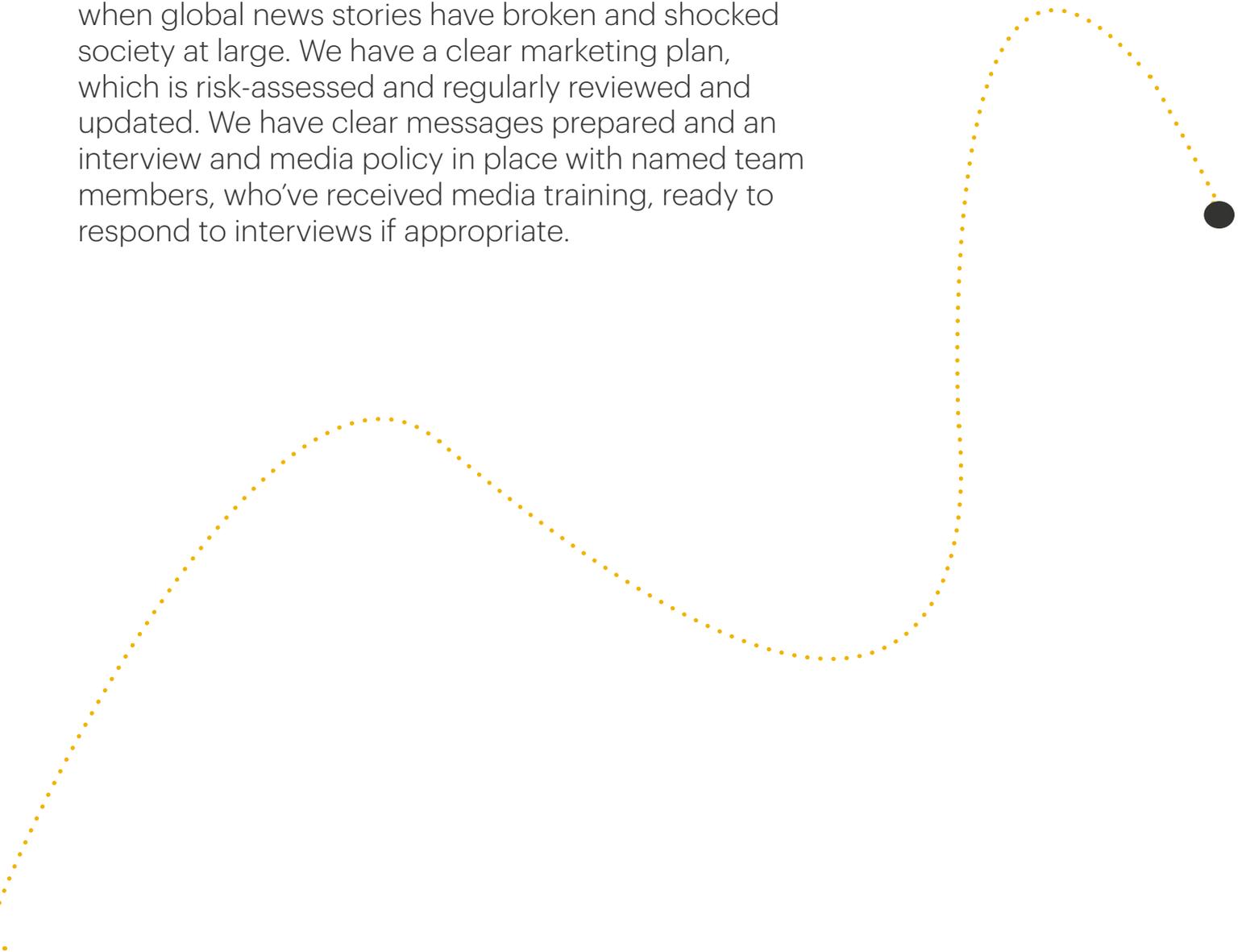
## Overcoming challenges

We've had many challenges along the way, particularly around perceptions of Arab culture. That just makes the festival more important; it is both a challenge and an opportunity to make a genuine change.

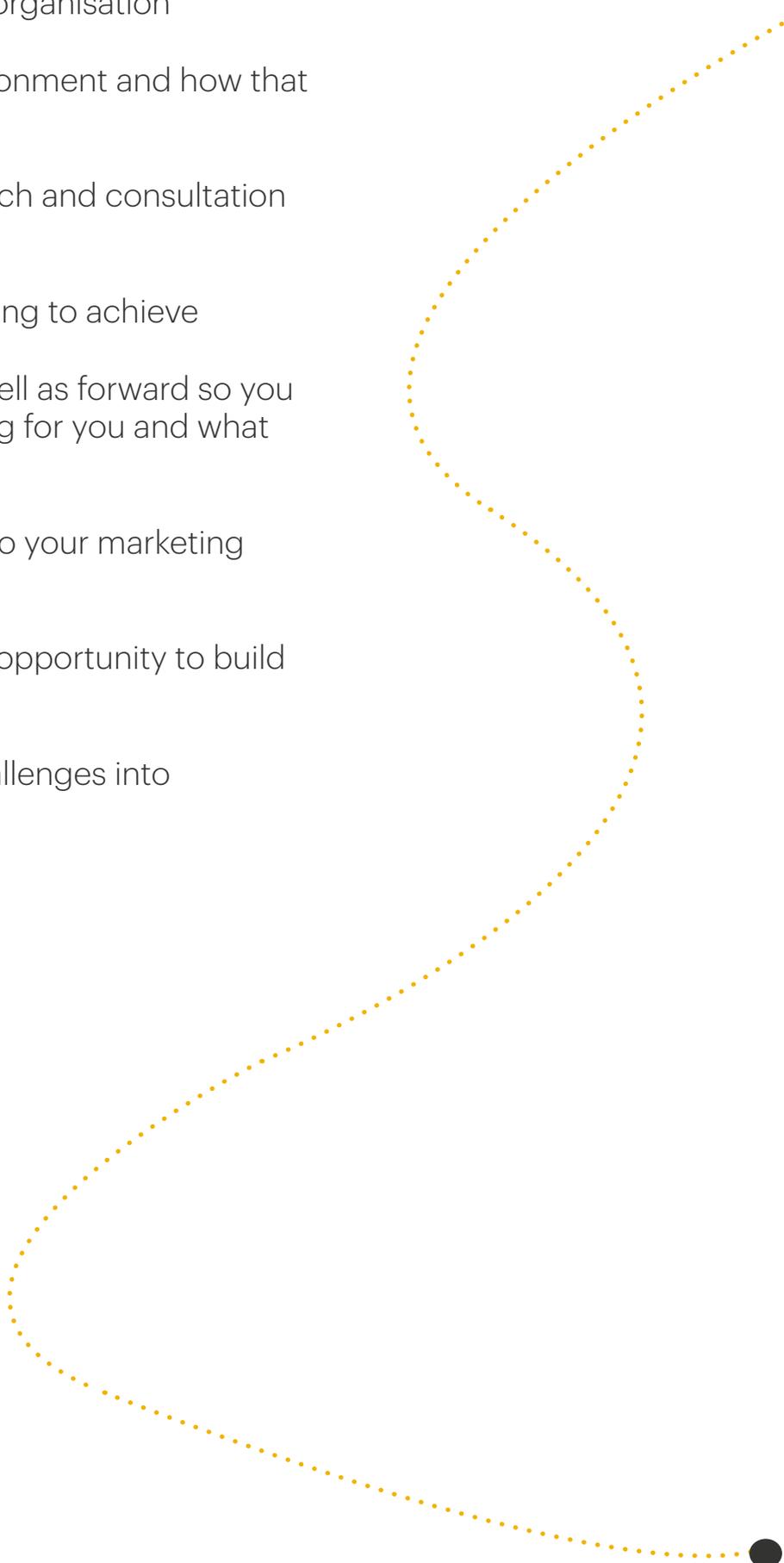
LAAF is well-informed and aware of how performing arts is perceived by people whose culture and faith is described as 'conservative'. Working closely with LAAF staff and board, we have been able to risk-assess and be prepared for negative responses from individuals and groups who are opposed to the festival.

Rigorous monitoring of social media platforms and having a senior management team ready to respond and advise ensures we can manage the unexpected.

LAAF has gained expertise in dealing with situations when global news stories have broken and shocked society at large. We have a clear marketing plan, which is risk-assessed and regularly reviewed and updated. We have clear messages prepared and an interview and media policy in place with named team members, who've received media training, ready to respond to interviews if appropriate.



## Tips

- Understand the roots of your organisation
  - Think about the external environment and how that may impact your brand
  - Invest time in thorough research and consultation with audiences and partners
  - Be clear about what you're trying to achieve
  - Spend time looking back as well as forward so you can understand what's working for you and what needs more attention
  - Take an integrated approach to your marketing campaigns
  - Use the research phase as an opportunity to build relationships and awareness
  - Use your strengths to turn challenges into opportunities
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