Culture segments:
the quest for the holy grail

Andrew McIntyre of Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (MHM) on the development of a new, universal segmentation system for the cultural sector

Us marketing types are optimists by nature. It’s what makes us go back into work each day. We honestly think we can make a difference. But even the most cheerful among us can’t ignore the creeping crisis. Our box office databases are clogged up with so-called ‘bookers’ that don’t seem to book. Our mailings are forensically targeted yet often produce frankly underwhelming response rates. And our campaigns and media buying can sometimes be a tad predictable.

From best practice to common practice

The best practice of 1999 that produced stellar results has become the merely common practice of 2009, producing run-of-the-mill results. For most of us, it has become more and more difficult to sell tickets, attract attenders and engage audiences. And if we’re being really honest, the cost of marketing has, in many cases, grown faster than our audiences. This is an uncomfortable truth and is enough to test most optimists’ resolve.

So, what can rescue us from this malaise? What can help us to better target, reach, attract, meet the needs of and develop relationships with our audiences? The prescription calls for large doses of audience insight, swallowed in handy segment form. Segments are the perfect compromise between the audience as a great big homogeneous mass and the audience as a million individuals. Segments group people together in ways that make sense of the market.

Different objectives, different solutions

Segmentation should, in theory, give us a shared understanding of our audiences and a common language to describe them. But nothing’s ever as easy as that, is it? In practice, marketers and programmers have different objectives and, inevitably, have adopted different and completely incompatible segmentation systems.

Marketers started with the simple question, ‘how can we find more audiences?’ To answer this they turned to external, UK-wide industry standard systems like Mosaic, ACORN and TGI. These segment the whole population into broad types and, crucially, are used in the media planning and advertising industry to target, reach and attract new customers.

Programmers and educators, on the other hand, started with a very different question: ‘how can we engage existing audiences more deeply?’ To answer this they asked agencies like MHM to create bespoke segments based on audiences’ needs, attitudes and behaviours. The resulting segments have helped the organisation to meet those needs and to build strong relationships.

Each approach can be phenomenally successful at addressing its own objective. But each is pretty useless at addressing the other objective. So using one of the various external marketing segmentation systems on offer from Target Group Index (TGI), Ark Leisure or even the Arts Council can certainly help you plan your next media campaign, but can’t really help you to develop your next exhibition. Many have tried, and failed, to take these external systems and use them in their internal planning. Invariably, they are too generic and lack essential detail.

As Penny Hamilton, Head of Public
and Regional Marketing at The British Library, says, ‘this sort of generic information is completely irrelevant to our programme planners who need to gain a better understanding of the visitor experience on the ground – i.e. what are the motivations and needs of the people who come to our venues and how we might be able to develop programmes and services that would appeal’.

Conversely, the bespoke internal engagement segmentation systems that Morris Hargreaves McIntyre has developed for Tate, British Museum, Southbank Centre and others help them to meet visitors’ every need but can’t tell them where to advertise. When briefing media planning agencies, there is no easy or obvious bridge between the subtleties of sector-specific, internal visitor segments and the generic nature of commercial systems like TGI.

Claire Eva, Head of Marketing at Tate, explains the dilemma: ‘The MHM segmentation revolutionised the way we understand our audiences at Tate, and has had a huge impact on how we plan our visitor services, interpretation and marketing creative. Although it works well for visitors who are already at Tate, we’ve had trouble identifying future visitors, or targeting specific markets using the original model as all our media planning is based on TGI.’

**Incompatible**
The reality is that these different systems were designed to do fundamentally different jobs. They can’t be cut-and-shut together into strange Franken-segments. They can’t easily be bridged, overlaid or grafted onto each other. They don’t align and it’s not even that easy to compare them.

But, when we use these incompatible segmentation systems in different departments to pursue different objectives, it does nothing for shared audience focus across the organisation. In fact, in practice, it often serves to further alienate marketing from other departments and means we don’t even have a shared language.

**A shared language**
What we all need is a shared segmentation system that gives the whole organisation, and indeed the whole sector, a shared language for its audiences. Instead of external marketing segments and internal engagement segments, we need universal culture segments.

We need segments that cover the audience we’ve got and also the audience we’d like to get – segments that are defined by our sector-specific audience needs but still link to industry-standard profiles like TGI. We need segments that keep the faithful coming but that swell their ranks with new converts – segments that maximise brand loyalty inside while raising brand awareness outside. We need segments that tell us the why and how as well as the who and what.

Our sector needs its own segmentation system instead of borrowing the one used to sell fridges. But we need to bridge the gap between our insightful but incompatible segments and their standardised but often irrelevant segments. Achieving this will require us to go back to the drawing board and design a whole new system from the ground up.

This is the elusive Holy Grail of segmentation in our sector and a hugely ambitious objective.
Join the quest
But cometh the hour, cometh the ambitious organisations. In the autumn of 2009, we began to put together a partnership of over 30 of the UK’s leading organisations from the arts, culture and heritage sectors – from the British Museum to the British Library and from the Wales Millennium Centre to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust.

Led by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, the partnership will undertake a major, fully representative UK Population Survey combining nuanced questions about cultural behaviour and motivations with TGI-style questions about attitudes, lifestyle and media consumption and underpinned by full demographics.

It will go way beyond the basic questions asked in previous surveys like the DCMS’s ‘Taking Part’ and be far more sector-specific than basic TGI. It will, for the first time, explore and map the public’s motivations and propensity for engagement across the cultural sector and map the best ways of targeting and reaching them. To ensure TGI compatibility, we are working with arts media planning partners, Total Media and Telmar, using multi-basing and super-weighted profiles to map our internal segments to external TGI.

Culture segments
The resulting Culture Segments system will be a national sector-specific segmentation, backed by a national primary data set. It will be compatible with the proprietary systems widely used in media planning like TGI and Touchpoints while being unequivocally sector-specific.

It will take account of the differences between museums, galleries, theatres, orchestras and heritage sites while providing a common base. It will be further modifiable to become even more bespoke for individual organisations.

This will allow organisations to measure, identify and target market potential, to calculate penetration and to benchmark against peers and the wider sector while having segments that make sense across departments within their own organisation.

In short, the Culture Segments system will answer both of the fundamental segmentation questions: How can we find more audiences? And how can we engage existing audiences more deeply? The grail may be within our grasp.

Find out more about Culture Segments at www.lateralthinkers.com

Andrew McIntyre
Director, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre
e andrew.mcintyre@lateralthinkers.com