

# A Short Introduction to Arts Ambassadors

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*This seminar was based on Arts Council England's practical "Guide to Working with Arts Ambassadors", written by Mel Jennings, which will be published later in 2003.*

## **What is an Arts Ambassador?**

An Ambassador is someone who acts as a communication bridge between two parties. The word comes from the world of international relations and is another term for a diplomat. In the Arts Council England Guide, the term Arts Ambassador is used to mean: "A Community Networker with the objective of spreading the word about arts and cultural events and/or representing the views and aspirations of a target community."<sup>1</sup>

## **What's so special about them?**

Usually, an Arts Ambassador is in some way representative of a target audience or is closely connected to a specific community. Their primary goal is to stimulate positive word of mouth. They may also generate ticket sales, promote good PR or even gain information about the audience. These days, word of mouth also includes 'word of mouse' (e-mail) and SMS text messaging. Whatever form the medium takes, the important distinction is that a message is passed on in a *personalised way* and that the Ambassador is motivated out of *genuine personal enthusiasm*, even when paid to do so.

It is this personal endorsement that gives the Ambassador technique its effectiveness, offering an immediate, live and direct form of communication. A skilled Ambassador can address many potential customer concerns on the spot, and is able to overcome some of the key barriers to arts attendance<sup>2</sup>:

- Cultural/representation barriers
- Emotional barriers
- Barriers to participation in decision-making
- Barriers to access to information

## **The power of word of mouth**

As a marketing 'tool' Ambassadors sit along side other "below the line" activities, e.g. promotion, direct selling and PR. In the wider marketing world individuals who act as Ambassadors are known by a variety of names, including: "opinion –formers", "connectors", "champions", "lead users"<sup>3</sup> and "community advocates". Whatever you call them, when the energy of social networkers is managed for marketing purposes, the effect can be powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a definition created by the Arts Ambassador Unit, Manchester

<sup>2</sup> From a list of 9 barriers identified by the UK Arts Councils

### ***Who uses Arts Ambassadors?***

Currently, a variety of different arts organisations work with Ambassadors in the UK, including venues, promoters, touring companies and audience development agencies. In theory an Ambassador can promote any artform. The research for the Guide has found good examples from, amongst others, the visual arts, rural touring theatre, community carnival, contemporary and classical music.

### ***What do they do?***

Arts Ambassadors are employed for a range of activities, for example:

- Increasing attendance through word of mouth promotion
- Selling and distributing tickets
- Raising awareness, interest and support
- Helping attenders to feel comfortable during a first time visit
- Informal consulting with target communities
- Offering advice and input on programming and other aspects of operation
- Following up a visit: gaining feedback from attenders

### ***What are the pros and cons ?***

Ambassadors have been employed by arts organisations in the UK for well over two decades now. As a marketing tool the Ambassador approach can be highly dependent on personalities and relationships. As such, a critical success factor is the ability to manage these elements well. You may find yourself suddenly having to manage an extra team of 30 people who are calling you daily or, caught between an arts organisation resistant to change and a community calling for development action. The Guide offers information on some of the challenges and also advice on how to design a scheme and recruit Ambassadors to help prepare you.

So, it is important to plan ahead but don't be put off. There are many enthusiastic arts marketing managers offering positive testimonials in the Guide, *e.g.*:

- Effective promotion. Arts Ambassadors Unit, Manchester: 43% of respondents to a survey conducted during the project cited the Ambassador as being their primary motivation for attendance.
- Increased attendance. Pioneers in the field of Ambassador work, the Ambassador Theatre Group (ATG) set up a District Sales Assistant (DSA) scheme in Brighton and found group attendance quickly rose from 8% - 15%. Across the seven regional venues, DSA's account for over 25% of all group visits across ATG regional venues and approximately 35,000 visits per regional venue per year are achieved through the DSA network.
- New Programme: New Audiences. In 2000, 23% of attenders to Birmingham Repertory Theatre's presentation of *The Ramayana* were first-time visitors. Of these 55% were of South Asian origin. This presentation was part of the Networking project run by Birmingham Arts Marketing aimed at developing Black and Asian audiences.

### ***What's in it for us?***

Many arts organisations find Ambassadors to be an effective and 'live' promotional tool. Benefits include:

- Direct and 'live' targeting
- Ambassadors speak the language of the target market
- Access to hard to reach communication channels and networks
- Ambassadors bypass customer cynicism about marketing messages
- Ambassadors' communication cuts through a barrage of arts and entertainment choices
- Ambassadors respond at the moment to customer objections or queries
- Support in developing databases
- Last minute sale of otherwise empty seats
- Support in sourcing and engaging with community networks
- Feedback from the target market on service, programming, marketing

"Hairdressers [our arts Ambassadors] are in the talking business. People can be in there from an hour to a whole day so hairdressers often have the time to have proper conversations with them"  
(Frontliners Scheme, Edinburgh)

The Guide also talks in detail about what audiences get out of Ambassador schemes and why Ambassadors choose to become involved.

### ***Choosing an approach***

There are many ways to work with Ambassadors and several models of working with Arts Ambassadors. For simplicity the Guide offers a definition of two of the most common approaches:

- The **Promotion** focused approach where Ambassadors function as a promotional tool. In this model, a team of community promotion and sales workers aim to target new attenders and increase attendance. The Ambassador is primarily a sales representative for the arts organisation.
- The **Audience Development** approach where Ambassadors function as a two-way bridge between arts organisations and audiences, often within a wider arts development programme where their effect may be felt across the whole organisation. In this model, a *partnership* aims to develop arts organisations, audiences and communities through an integrated range of activities including targeted training, programming and commissioning. The Ambassador is an advocate for *both* the arts organisation and the target community.

### ***Which model should I choose?***

In reality the division between the Promotion and Audience Development approach is not a sharp one. Although the promotional tools may be the same for both models, the key difference is that taking more of an Audience Development approach generally requires that your arts organisation forms a much deeper relationship with the target audience and is able to show a greater degree of responsiveness.

It is important to note that one model is not more worthwhile in terms of audience development than the other but they do reflect different objectives and will require a different approach right from the start. Whatever your approach, remember that an Ambassador project sets up a highly personalised and intimate dialogue with your customers. Anyone who has run a Friends Scheme will know this approach can bring with it a number of challenges. Your Ambassadors may have expectations that challenge your way of doing things. In addition you may find you need to learn about things you hadn't even considered.

It is this insight that can make working with Ambassadors a learning experience. To be sure that you really are open to re-assessing your own approach, you may need to revisit your definitions of 'quality' and assumptions around culture for example. While being clear about your organisation's boundaries, don't be too quick to dismiss new ideas. As one venue Manager put it, "Their value is that they are not me".

Whether working with Arts Ambassadors becomes a blessing or a steep learning curve is partly down to preparation. Before recruiting a team of Ambassadors, spend some time thinking about what you are trying to achieve, what the target market might expect from you and whether you will be able to respond.

To support you, the Guide sets out some of the pros and cons of the two approaches and looks in more detail at questions you could ask yourself when planning. Bear in mind that even if you start out with a 'Promotion' approach you may find it evolves into an 'Audience Development' approach in order to respond to the needs of your audience.