

Aspirational Arts Partnerships

Communication and audience development

A report highlighting communication and promotional tools taken from Arts Council England's New Audiences Programme

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Communication and audience development

Aspirational Arts Partnerships were commissioned to write this short report to highlight the innovative and successful communication approaches used for audience development projects funded by the New Audiences Programme between 1998 and 2003. This is a small selection of case studies, drawn from the final reports prepared by project managers, the New Audiences website (www.newaudiences.org.uk) and personal knowledge.

Overview

The New Audiences Programme (NAP), launched in 1998, was an ambitious attempt to bring people and artists together, through its guiding principles, structure and the type of projects it supported. NAP was, essentially, an action research programme, allowing organisations to try out new ways of bringing new arts to new people.

A number of strands focused on ways of using promotion and communication to develop audiences, sometimes in combination with other tools. Test Drive, Sample the Arts, and ArtsRide (which included transport schemes) all gave organisations the chance to use tried and tested methods, such as direct mail, with new target audience groups, or to experiment with new and emerging approaches. 'Sampling', new technology and relationship marketing, were all used either to target new groups, or to extend and enhance the relationship with existing audiences.

As well as enabling organisations to explore audience development approaches, the Arts Council has been able to build a body of knowledge about successful and unsuccessful approaches. Publications, such as **Arts Ambassadors: a practical guide to working with arts organisations** by Mel Jennings, join a number of guidelines produced by agencies and organisations to share experiences and successes and to highlight potential problems. The New Audiences website is now a valuable resource for individuals, managers, organisations and agencies to refer to, when planning and running audience development projects. The challenge lies in continuing to share the experience and communicate with practitioners, colleagues and the sector at large, so that we continue to build our knowledge base.

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This report also highlights some of the challenges faced by organisations, including how methods were refined, adapted, and in some cases, abandoned. This risk-taking was essential to NAP - organisations were encouraged not to ‘reinvent the wheel’ - and in some ways restored the right to learn through failure, because the built-in monitoring and evaluation ensured that what *not* to do was equally valued as a learning outcome.

Back to basics

Those projects that focused on traditional (or tried and tested methods) of communication tools with new audiences proved that the basics of marketing and promotion all have to be in place, and used properly, for success. This includes research and knowledge about existing audiences and new communities; accurate mailing lists; effective communication through print and mail; targeted advertising and listings.

Case study: MOVE by mail

The regional audience development agency, Developing Audiences in the North (DAN), used sophisticated direct mail to de-dupe dance audience mailing lists (i.e. by cleaning them to avoid duplicate mailings), in collaboration with five organisations (MOVE). The quality of primary mailing list information is a significant issue throughout the sector, and something that agencies, funders and organisations are trying to address even now. This project was simple in its structure, but effectively took a step back from the usual tactic of generating a mailing list by cleaning and preparing the data in advance, then progressing through to the research.

Supporting seven performances, DAN devised 22 different direct mail letters and sent 76,461 items over seven months. This generated bookings from 577 individuals, and it can be estimated that over the project runtime this generated between 1,558 and 1,731 additional dance bookings. DAN used the additional incentive of an offer - again, a very traditional approach - which was carefully considered for the target groups. Additional research indicated that the MOVE special offers had had an effect on the decision to attend for 15% of interviewed attenders. 18% of respondents had been influenced by special offers to see something new, and 9% had been able to bring more people to performances than they would have if there had been no discount. As a result of the campaign, the five organisations and DAN had a new resource of approximately 700 identified dance attenders in the AC, Northern region (after screening), which goes some way

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to addressing the most common problem in audience development: sustainability or 'legacy'.

The carefully planned and executed approach, taken with detailed analysis and follow-up research, demonstrated that direct mail can be utilised to stimulate cross-over between venues for contemporary dance product - traditionally seen by promoters, marketers and audiences as 'risky'. As with the majority of successful projects, the innovation lay in the way organisations were speaking to completely new communities or participants, or in how traditional tools were combined with research to draw out lessons and build a solid base for future activity. In effect, NAP often enabled organisations to undertake work at a higher or more intensive level because of the money that was available to spend on research and follow-up.

Case study: newcontemporaries

Confirmation of what might have been a 'hunch' as to what works is vital for smaller organisations, where resources are at a premium. *newcontemporaries* (Sample the Arts) also used research and data analysis to research their audiences in Liverpool - building up a good picture of who they were, what had motivated them and how they had heard about the exhibition. This enabled organisations to make strategic management decisions about the range and number of venues to work with, and how to build this experience into their core activity. In London, they were able to assess the effectiveness of different methods, and discovered that for the target audience, print was the common driver to attend, emphasising the need for effective and targeted distribution. By contrast, the free shuttle bus was little used, despite advertising.

It's a beautiful friendship

One striking feature of audience development is that one size does *not* fit all when it comes to the type of audience development organisations could and should undertake. Arts organisations have been doing relationship marketing for years but it has rarely been monitored, evaluated or documented on any consistent basis. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence and individual reports, but no overview of how to use relationship marketing tactically or strategically, or even some scale of the cost and yield for such approaches. Similarly, the Holy Grail of strategically using word-of-mouth to generate ticket sales is discussed widely but still unharnessed. Before NAP, it would have been extremely risky for an organisation, or group of organisations, to invest resources for such an unknown benefit.

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The use of ‘arts ambassadors’ is an approach which has existed for at least twenty years, but has rarely been formalised or collected together to identify common methodologies and models. NAP funded a number of these projects, which aimed to use the approach for both audience development and promotion purposes. These projects explored the approach in different artforms, contexts and target groups, and discovered that one organisation’s ambassador scheme will not work for everyone else. The financial risk for these organisations was greatly reduced by the funding, which enabled them to assess what the real resource requirement was for such approaches, and whether it was sustainable on an individual organisational basis.

Case study: CBSO’s Cultural Ambassadors

NAP gave the opportunity properly to resource and support ambassador schemes, such as the CBSO’s Cultural Ambassadors project, which began in 1999. This used the concepts of pyramid selling, personal contacts and peer-to-peer selling to create a network of voluntary supporters who would evangelise about the orchestra’s work and encourage people from their own social network to attend concerts. Recruiting 20 Ambassadors, they fulfilled their target of 500 attenders over ten concerts, 440 of whom were entirely new to the CBSO, whilst the remainder were mainly lapsed attenders. The scheme attracted new attenders who were similar to their existing audience, which demonstrates that promotion-based audience development can be effective in generating full-price ticket sales, as well as in extending the range of audiences. Using evaluation and ongoing monitoring, the CBSO was able to continue the scheme, with refinements and adjustments, such as a young person’s price and ticket/transport deals.

The CBSO’s experience provides useful pointers which have contributed to the overall knowledge about ambassadors around the challenges inherent in these schemes. Relationship marketing can be time-intensive because of its very nature, requiring ongoing support and involvement, and the CBSO used the pilot and evaluation to ensure that the process was as streamlined as possible, without affecting the relationship with ambassadors, including the management of the scheme. Bringing group sales in-house gave the CBSO more direct control, and a dedicated member of staff ensured continuity and maintained relationships. This also ensures that the scheme continues to support the CBSO’s overall objectives by generating income and attendance, with the potential to develop the idea with other groups.

Case study: Later... at the Laing

NAP focused on particular groups, such as young people, who are often regarded as the most difficult group of people to attract and engage in attendance or participation, and therefore most risky in financial and quantitative terms. The opportunity to address the challenge was taken up by the Laing Gallery in an exemplary attempt to offer bespoke introductions, using a team of organisation-based ambassadors. These ambassadors created networks, provided information, went out to visit young people (who were also socially excluded in some way) and bring them into the gallery on their own terms - a conscious decision to take an audience development approach. Using creative consultancy (interacting with artists and young individuals to create work that generated ideas and suggestions), together with a whole range of information collection methods throughout the project, the Laing was able to respond flexibly to the feedback, identify potential problems and devise strategies to overcome them.

The project originally focused solely on a tailored visit, with 3 ambassadors hosting a total of 360 visits. Initial responses and other factors (like contact with youth workers, who are in effect gatekeepers to youth groups, etc.) meant that by the end of the project, the Laing worked with 1,506 young people over 6 months. Although there had been only 46 tailored visits a host of other events had taken place, including meetings and training with youth workers, *Later* events at the gallery in the evenings, and weekend drop-in activities.

The Laing Gallery, together with other organisations working with specific groups, has demonstrated how to make these initiatives work, and has provided an insight into working successfully with young people. This includes face -to -face contact or liaison with gatekeepers; actively listening; and acting upon feedback to build confidence and trust. It seems most important to create ways for young people to choose their own level of engagement within a framework that enables the organisation to integrate the work within core activity.

Testing, testing... still testing

Test Drive has been written about and discussed many times, both as a general idea, and with specific reference to large pilots such as Test Drive: North West. This received NAP funding to undertake a collaborative, city-wide campaign and to report on the findings. The guidelines that Arts About Manchester and Anne Roberts produced to help organisations firstly to decide whether to undertake Test Drive and then how to do it were promoted, disseminated and made the subject of seminars, articles and presentations over several years.

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This experience has been gathered on an ongoing basis, with a number of important and useful reports as well as guideline documents. These give clear statistical analyses of the results of individual projects, and cast light on a number of different approaches. All these resources are available on the New Audiences website, as part of the Essential Audiences dissemination project, specifically so that we can read, absorb and adapt information for our own use.

Opinion was (and may still be) divided on a number of aspects including: cost-effectiveness; the real value of those 'new' attenders compared to the cost of generating them; and Test Drive's sustainability on a large scale basis. Nevertheless, there are organisations that have developed Test Drive and are reporting year-on-year success in different ways, using it as both an audience development and promotion tool.

The many pilot schemes mean that we now know that Test Drive is more effective in attracting people who are already well-disposed towards the arts, rather than those who have never experienced the arts before, or who have a negative perception of the arts; one of the main arguments presented against it. Nonetheless, 'intenders' or well-disposed non-attenders are legitimate targets in terms of reaching the widest possible audience for both developmental and business reasons.

The Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society has recently undertaken a Test Drive with two media partners - Classic FM and the Liverpool Echo, promoted online, on air and through the newspaper. The RLPS reports that they attracted 1,200 new attenders to their first concert (with free tickets). 30% of those attenders have returned within three months, encouraged by a special ticket offer, and 15% of these returning attenders have also bought a mini package for 03/04 season.

Sampling

Sample the Arts was another NAP strand that took the commercial ideas of giving potential customers a sample or taster and of using appropriate promotional methods. Sheffield Theatres undertook one of the most significantly funded projects (£300,000) with *How Much?* This aimed to test how the mix of programming, price and promotion influenced young people's attendance at Sheffield Theatres. The results from the pilot demonstrated that a combination of demography, seating capacity and programming opportunities offered the theatre a unique chance to carry out audience development with an emphasis on the impact of pricing policies targeted at young people.

After the *pilot* phase created an audience of 12,000 young people (on low incomes), the theatre naturally enough went on to explore how to build a sustainable pricing

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policy, develop a strand of artistic programming that was accessible for young audiences and continue to find the most effective ways of promoting this. At the same time, staff established solid partnerships with academic partners, ensuring that the monitoring will be continuous, rigorous and valuable. This time-limited project generated 32,000+ ticket sales and increased the proportion of young people in the theatre's audience to 34% in a matter of months. Whilst this project alone could not answer all the questions around building young people's attendances, it has made a valuable contribution to the body of knowledge, not least through its comprehensive and transparent report, whilst giving Sheffield Theatres a solid foundation upon which to continue its activity in this area.

Out with the old, in with the new

In the spirit of innovation, many projects explored how new methods of communication can be utilised and adapted to the arts sector, particularly when talking to new groups. Some of these approaches, like television and cinema advertising, were new inasmuch as most organisations cannot afford to experiment with expensive media when employing the usual mix of promotion methods. Other projects using SMS and e-mail were simply updating the toolkit and employing commercially successful methods to an arts context.

E-mail and SMS may seem to be standard tools in the promotional mix *nowadays*, but at the time of these projects, they *were* innovative. Everyone had access to them in our own lives and saw how the commercial sector was increasing awareness, market share and making profits. However, few organisations had the skills in-house or the capital investment required for new technology. Those funded by NAP joined the pioneers.

Case study: Cambridge Drama Centre

E-mail is commonly employed by arts organisations as another marketing tool these days, but in 1999 it was experimental, as was the use of e-flyers. The Cambridge Drama Centre and The Junction (ArtMail) collaborated to see if e-mail might be a suitable alternative to direct mail for informing and attracting students at Cambridge's two universities. This was in response to the awareness that, due to 'seasonality' and mobility, traditional direct mail was not reaching this enormous and significant group of potential attenders, mainly because of the lack of ability to track frequent address changes. E-mail seemed the obvious choice, as both universities offer individual e-mail addresses and good facilities for access to e-mail and the internet. The project fulfilled its objectives of generating 15% of all tickets sold (75 tickets at each venue for each of two seasons) and a list of at least

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300 new e-mail addresses on the project list - over 350 students submitted their addresses.

In November 2003, CDC reported that there are 4,958 names on the e-mailing list, 789 (16%) of whom are students. Research undertaken last year indicates that over 80% of email subscribers have booked tickets for an event as a direct result of receiving an email. CDC does not use e-fliers, after surveying the audience in Autumn 2002 and discovering that less than 9% of subscribers preferred to receive e-flier attachments. They use text-based messages, as 81% of the audience said that this is what they preferred, and hyperlinks within messages to encourage website traffic, something that has increased considerably as a direct result.

Case study: Txtm8

South West Arts Marketing (txtm8) co-ordinated a collaborative project to see if SMS text messaging could be used to attract young people to take up unsold seats. Their key question was: could the instantly promoted special offer be an effective way of competing in a crowded leisure market? After setting up an initial database of 824 people (against a target of 300), SWAM sent 55 SMS messages, promoting 31 events over seven months. 41 promotional messages elicited a response, totalling 287 responses over the seven month period, although the majority of these events were cinema, clubbing, live music and comedy. Although SWAM is confident that they learned how to use this new tool effectively, the key lessons were that the product must be right for the target audience, the timing of messages was crucial, and the language had to be appropriate.

In those respects, new technology tools still have to be used appropriately, and communication is key: it doesn't matter what form it takes, an organisation has to consider the needs of the target audience to have any success.

On the Telly?

NAP also supported some new approaches to presentation, chiefly through using broadcast media - television and cinema adverts - testing whether such coverage has an impact on perceptions about arts activity and whether it prompts a desire to try it out. Organisations often speculate on the potential for selling tickets using these media, but rarely have the funding to undertake it. In order to find out, NAP supported a number of large-scale media projects.

IMPACT (lead organisation Arts Council North West) worked with Granada and a number of organisations to produce six films for broadcasting as part of the regional news programme (potential audience of 7 million) with a monitored

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response (call centre and website). This project tested the assumption that TV coverage generates thousands of new audiences: they achieved 57 responses to 6 broadcasts. Nevertheless, awareness of events was increased (Preston Carnival had 20,000 people attending, against expected attendance of 3,000), although this has been very difficult to measure. The learning outcomes that any organisation can take from this experiment is that expectations and targets need to be realistic for a pilot, and that there is a lot to learn about how to present the message in this medium in order to make it attractive to non-arts attenders.

Operatunity used a partnership between ENO, Diverse Ltd and Channel 4 to show the progress of amateur singers realising their potential to become professional performers. Rather like *Pop Idol* for opera, responses were sought all over the country (NAP paid for this outreach work) and numbers were whittled down from 2,500 tapes to a shortlist of six, with two (joint tie) going on to perform in a broadcast performance. The fifteen-month project was shown in a four-part series on Channel 4 and enjoyed a high profile at the time, but it is similarly difficult to say to what degree public perceptions of opera were changed or how many people watched it.

So, does the television work? It seems too early to say 'no', in the same way that websites were not widely used 6 years ago. However, it is clear that arts organisations need to be able to continue collaborations with media partners to explore this further, and find some tracking mechanism that is appropriate to the sector. Now that NAP is largely completed, how will this happen?

Risky business

Broadly speaking, all the projects were expected to be experimental or innovative in some way; this was one of the underpinning principles of the scheme. Without taking considered chances, organisations are not able to learn from experience, the mistakes and successes alike. In turn, this required organisations to be extremely honest in their reporting; something in itself considered hazardous (many organisations seemed to be concerned that they would lose future funding if they admitted something didn't work).

NAP funded several very large projects in its first years that were high profile, had high expectations placed on them and stimulated debate amongst practitioners and organisations. Test Drive: North West was a prime example, as mentioned before. That it is still in use, adapted to individual organisations' and agencies' audience development needs, suggests that the idea itself is sound. The risk for organisations wanting to Test Drive audiences since then, whether using it as promotion or audience development, has been greatly alleviated by the readily

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available information about conducting and developing Test Drive. The *financial* risk for subsequent Test Drive initiatives has also been greatly reduced by the provision of clear guidelines and cost implications.

What have we learned?

We should celebrate the diversity, creativity, ingenuity and commitment contained within 1,500+ projects devised and delivered over the past five years. Something of this scope and range, and the framework around it, had never been attempted before. No-one could have known what realistically to expect in terms of results, even though great efforts were made to provide a structure for mining the information.

Arts workers in the field often complain about the lack of long-term thinking or of opportunities to put ideas into practice from the funding system. NAP tried to address this. Admittedly it was frustrating that organisations could not build year-on-year success beneath the NAP umbrella (one of its main criteria was ‘newness’ or ‘additionality’), but the scheme itself was relatively long term.

What we have really learned from NAP is that the basics matter. Often the key was simple good practice in project planning and management and in using the available tools strategically and effectively. Often it was the execution of the idea that needed improvement - the quality and appropriateness of the product or promotion could wreck a theoretically perfectly good plan. When it’s said this plainly, it seems rather obvious, but maybe we need to keep reminding ourselves of this. A plain reiteration of this apparently obvious point may still be valuable.

We also have to want to develop this or that specific audience sufficiently to make change, whether it’s the way we use our direct mail, using new e-mail lists, programming relevant work, or improving the quality of experience through enhanced and tailored customer care. This is a big question: do we care enough about audience development to continue experimenting? Following on from that, will we make sure that we have the right support structures for our staff who are carrying out the experimentation as well as for our new and existing audiences?

Product and programming, planning and management, research, promotion and communication, and the quality of the experience are what really count, whichever target group you are speaking to. It seems too obvious to say, but the NAP projects underline the basic issue when communicating with or marketing to any group: how can the organisation meet the needs of x, y or z group using the tools available? No matter how ‘new’ or fashionable the idea, basic questions have to be asked at the start of the process. Why should a group attend/participate?

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Do we understand them well enough to meet their needs? Are the assumptions we make about potential attenders actually borne out in practice? Do we have the feedback mechanisms in place?

NAP funding brought with it certain conditions, such as monitoring and evaluation. Though these aspects were not always welcomed by arts organisations, Arts Council England's insistence on good quality reporting resulted in an enormous, publicly available resource - a body of knowledge about audience development, communication and community work. Of equal importance with the successes are the challenges, the difficult experiences and downright failures. These confirm what is required for success and identify what should be avoided, or done differently.

The value of research

Building an element of research into the projects benefited everyone, whether it was designed for an individual organisation's use, or for more general dissemination. The results of many projects confirm the knowledge that the further a target group is from a core audience, the harder an organisation will have to work to reach them. Organisations have generated valuable information about working with specific target groups. For example, we now have a much better idea of what definitely doesn't work with young people, and many examples of what is more likely to succeed. As a result, we read and hear about more successful projects aimed at young people, whether they were about communication, participation or programming.

Organisations, artists and arts workers brought many people into contact with the arts for the first time in myriad ways, as well as taking audiences into new artforms and spaces. The sheer scope and range of the projects is extraordinary. Nevertheless, it is also true to say that many organisations found it a challenging experience and may not wish to undertake audience development in future. Many organisations found that they had to take flexible management approaches, bringing services in-house and integrating new workers' (often voluntary or otherwise unpaid) activities across different areas of operation. Other organisations found that it was necessary to outsource and delegate aspects of the work. Most found that having dedicated staff was most effective in achieving successful delivery. These all brought benefits and disadvantages, but again, the turnover of arts workers and the potentially disruptive impact this could have, was evident in having an effect on momentum and sustainability in the short and medium term.

Sometimes, external factors conspired against the best efforts of a project team and had a bruising effect. The sector (with everyone taking responsibility) needs

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to draw out some of these issues, then discuss and resolve them, uncomfortable though this process might be.

The issues

Many projects faced similar challenges, which highlight some significant issues for audience development and funding. The sector also needs to recognise the impact of external factors. Even if they remain outside our control, they should be acknowledged, so that we can find ways to work around them.

Time

Time available to undertake the work and to build new audiences remained a significant issue throughout NAP's life for participating organisations. It is safe to say that meaningful communication and audience development cannot usually take place with new groups and communities within a period of nine months or even a year: 18 months may be a more realistic minimum.

We have seen that time-limited funding tends to create artificial timescales for projects which often do not match up with real time, and limits the potential for developing sustainable models. The sense of having insufficient time filtered down to most levels of activity: print or direct mail campaigns simply did not (in some situations) have an adequate lead-in time to allow staff to research, design and distribute material and to monitor the desired effect. As soon as the work started to take off, a major source of funding dried up, or the project became ineligible for NAP funding, leading many to feel exposed in a new area of activity, with a new audience's expectations to deal with. Of course, it is legitimate to point out that organisations should have the commitment and skills to find ways of continuing audience development within their core activity, but it would seem that this needs to be supported in practical ways, not least by some kind of follow-up funding or scheme that takes NAP to the next stage and incentivises organisations to continue to take risks and innovate.

The additionality could also cause problems, as it usually followed that an organisation would have to expand their operations, enhance staffing or increase workloads, whilst still doing their day-to-day business. The extra input and resources required to undertake a NAP project within a limited timeframe put a severe strain on many organisations, large and small, even though the funding provided extra resources.

The authors have found that the time crisis is endemic in most areas of work; as marketers have more options to choose from, time is squeezed to carry them all

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out . This can result in a perception that the commitment to audience development is superficial.

Sustainability

Another common criticism of the scheme was a lack of sustainability. It is reasonable that a time-limited fund could never seek to address this fundamental issue and was never intended to, but the effect was clearly seen when the authors followed up on a number of case studies, only to find that follow-up had not taken place, often for valid reasons. However, the collected information does contribute to our understanding of building and integrating sustainability, as it enables us to draw out common issues that can be addressed as a sector, individually, organisationally and strategically.

People

This business (the ‘arts’) is all about the interface between people and art, including those of us who work to support that interface. Time and again, projects reported that personal contacts of all kinds were extremely successful when engaging with audiences, but do we remember this interface within and between organisations, agencies and funding offices? Arts workers tend to be extremely mobile - it is usual for them to change jobs every two years, in order to progress up the career ladder.

This creates inherent problems in terms of internal continuity, affecting chances of follow-up or sustainability for any scheme or project. Very often the original team for a project has changed just 18 months after completion. The funding system was undergoing significant change not once, but twice during the lifetime of NAP. Whilst this didn’t directly affect organisations, the uncertainty during the protracted process and during the changes (e.g. different lead contacts, officers, departments to deal with) does impact on client organisations and individuals working with the funding system.

These factors result in the wheel being continuously reinvented, and very often, the same mistakes being made. As we don’t have and wouldn’t want a stationary workforce, we should be using our collective experience to improve what we are already doing, and avoid repeating the same mistakes.

Summary

When NAP began in 1998, the scheme was not perfect; over five years it has honed and refined its programme strands, building on each previous year to support experiments in communicating and engaging with a huge range of people of all ages, across all the artforms and the whole country. Organisations have been able to reach into their communities by using new and traditional promotional tools, often stimulating debate and further investigation.

Test Drive is a prime example of this; it is easy to forget that at the time it was one response in the '5% debate'. This was the idea that using 5% of capacity to deliberately cultivate new and different audiences would be one coherent strategy for all venues and organisations to utilise according to their individual needs. Whilst the 5% idea seems to have fallen by the wayside in the subsequent flurry of activity to fulfil new and changing agendas (political, social and financial), the principles behind it have moved forward exponentially through the opportunity to experiment, use existing and available tools and consolidate practice and ideas.

The New Audiences Programme may have completed its scheme of work, but its impact and the lessons learned as a result are just now beginning to be appreciated, as organisations and funders build on this foundation.