

Art-Led and Audience-Driven

A Keynote Speech by Jodi Myers

Jodi Myers explained the importance of dialogue between the marketing and programming departments in arts organisations, seeing this as the key to developing “the audience for the art, and the art for the audience”.

Last week Chris Smith, the secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, gave a speech at the Royal Society of Arts in which he said that over the next 10 years the 50% of the population who currently participate in the arts by going to concerts, plays and art galleries, should be increased to two thirds. Well, we've got an awful lot to do if we are to interest millions more people in the arts by 2010, so let's get out on those street corners, banging drums, physically hauling people into our venues if necessary.

Get SMART

But hang on a moment; isn't this a macro version of the sort of thing our boards of management or chief executives say regularly? ... “We are planning to increase ticket sales by 10% this year” or “this season we are aiming to attract more young people, old people, people with disabilities” whatever.... Experience tells me that ambitions have to be tempered by realism – it's that classic strategic planning mantra: objectives must be SMART – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and have a Timescale. All we seem to have been given so far is a Timescale.

I suppose we might say an increase of approximately 16% is Specific, but 16% of what - the entire UK population? Those over the age of 3 and under 90? And how are we to Measure it accurately? What counts as engaging with the arts? Buying theatre tickets? How about ice show tickets? Buying novels? Borrowing library books? Doing salsa dance classes? What about identifying all those who attend or take part in free events, participatory work or community arts – how do we measure those?

Whilst it would be terrific if the Secretary of State's ambitions were successful, I am doubtful whether any major increase is Achievable over a decade. Before there can be any substantial increase, the school curriculum needs to prioritise creative activity, and the current situation, in which many arts organisations are reduced to putting on fewer performances and others threatened with closure altogether, needs to be addressed. And it must be borne in mind that while some people may have increased leisure time, others are faced with competing claims on their limited disposable income. Furthermore, while there may be lots of headlines and photo opportunities to be gained from one-off quick-fix schemes, such as those involving putting opera into nightclubs or offering free tickets to school children, to date money found for audience development has been time-limited, and real audience development and retention usually takes years.

I certainly don't think this target is Realistic. We have to bear in mind that many people are very happy pursuing alternative leisure activities – learning a foreign language, playing football, watching TV, going to the pub, doing keep-fit or DIY. Just because we enjoy opera, contemporary art or Shakespeare doesn't mean everyone will. Of course we need to remove as many barriers as possible – lack of opportunity, lack of information, intimidating venues, inconvenient opening hours, etc. But even then, although we may regret it, some people may choose to stay away.

The Right Programme for the Right Audience

Presumably we all want to find more effective ways of encouraging more people to participate in the arts in some way, but we have to know who we are trying to attract, and why. I am not

going to talk about what marketing techniques and strategies we might use to encourage new audiences, but I'd like us to consider the potential that programming has for audience development. I know some marketers are increasingly involved in programme planning, but if we are to make any real inroads into attracting new audiences, then many more marketers are going to have to be involved in programme decision making in the future.

I believe arts marketing is a mixture of giving the audience what they want and making them like what you want to give them. This is a concept I've clung to in my career in general management. When I've forgotten it temporarily, instead of being one step ahead of the audience and leading them gradually, I've attempted to stay three steps ahead of the audience and pull them behind me. It hasn't worked. The audience has refused to move, or worse still, turned tail and run.

One of the keys to unlocking the potential of all arts organisations is dialogue and debate. When I was at Warwick Arts Centre in the early 90s, our management team spent hours discussing our mission statement. Which comes first – art or audiences? Faced with 8 out of 9 senior managers saying audiences, I pushed hard for art. However, when I went to the South Bank in 1996, a similar proportion said art, so I advocated on behalf of audiences. While some organisations are quite rightly art-led, in many others both audiences and art can come first. It is the relationship, or lack of it, between them which makes the difference.

At Warwick we had prioritised increasing audiences from the South Asian communities and amongst people with disabilities, but our programmes didn't reflect this aim. Of course, members of specific groups don't just want to see work that reflects their own experience, but for many it is a way in, and without that opportunity they might never come at all. We shifted the programme emphasis slightly and, coupled with improved access to the building and various marketing initiatives, both audiences and artists, South Asian and disabled, became more interested in what we were trying to do. But we have to avoid empty gestures at all costs – audience development of this kind only works if the entire organisation is committed to developing both the work and the audience.

Programming the South Bank

I now work at the South Bank Centre - a 27-acre estate alongside the Thames, which encompasses the Royal Festival Hall (approximately 3000 seats), Queen Elizabeth Hall (900 seats), Purcell Room (370 seats), Voice Box (77 seats), Poetry Library, Hayward Gallery, Jubilee Gardens, big foyers, concrete terraces and bits of the river walkway. In 1998/9 my department, Performing Arts, was responsible for presenting 942 ticketed performances in the three halls, plus 73 in the Voice Box. We attracted 794,000 ticket purchasers (up 117,000 on the previous year, achieving an overall attendance of 70% in the RFH - our highest in 17 years). We also presented over 300 free foyer and outdoor events and exhibitions, which attracted 680,000. We gave 600 education events, including 122 one-off Gamelan workshops, and served nearly 25,000 visitors to the Poetry Library.

Since it opened in 1951, the Royal Festival Hall (RFH) has programmed 'popular' culture, such as Shirley Bassey, big bands, and David Bowie, alongside classical music and ballet. However, over the last decade or so we have developed our programme – and our way of presenting that programme - very substantially, and with excellent results. Last week I was delighted to see The Times refer to the Royal Festival Hall as the "hippest venue in London".

In April this year the Financial Times wrote a preview of 'Meltdown', our summer, music led but multi-artform, festival:

"Meltdown, invented in 1993 by London's South Bank Centre to bring some life to the dog days of summer, has grown into the nicest kind of monster. It is now the biggest and most successful event mounted at the centre, expanding each year in size and notoriety. Every year the South Bank asks a cult figure to programme the festival. This year it is Australia's answer to Renaissance man, Nick Cave, who some years is a rock star touring the world with

his blues band the Bad Seeds, and at other times a playwright and actor...Last year the South Bank hit gold when venerable DJ John Peel attracted an audience of over 11,000 to his programme, 74% of them coming to the centre for the first time. On one evening Peel persuaded Blur's Damon Albarn to share a stage with 1960s psychedelics Silver Apples and a screaming Finnish choir. At such events memories are made. So successful was Peel's involvement that every month since he has programmed a concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, all of which have been sell-outs...It is all part of the South Bank's attempts to widen artistic appeal...This is partly the centre's sensible response to the Arts Council's recent attempts to attract new audiences: the Council gives the centre almost £14m a year in subsidy, and will soon be asked to provide many millions more to fund its redevelopment plans. But it also reflects a change in the market."

Meltdown and the Peel Sessions are excellent examples of audience development and programme development working together. But we're only able to attract big attendances because we've integrated this strand of work into our overall programme. We present this work regularly, throughout the year - not just when we have a couple of spare Monday nights - so people get into the habit of coming here.

Breaking Down Barriers

Programming means changing many aspects of presentation. For many non-classical shows we allow people to take drinks into the auditoria and we allow them to dance. In the QE/PR foyer we turn the 60s florescent tube lighting off, and the coloured, "club" lighting on. We had late licences for gigs that started after World Cup matches had finished, and we showed the matches on large screens in the foyer. The constant smoking of audiences at experimental rock or contemporary dance can be hard to manage alongside the largely non-smoking chamber music or early music audiences, so we need to have front-of-house staff who are relaxed with different audiences, atmospheres and attitudes.

Why do we do this? – not to be politically correct. We support this sort of work because it is interesting in its own right, it creates a "buzz" in the building (not to mention the media), and it enables us to attract an audience and artists that wouldn't otherwise come to our venues – and as a publicly funded organisation we are committed to engaging with as many people as possible - which in turn brings in income from new sources. In the 1950s, 60s and 70s, we had a core audience which came to the South Bank maybe eight or nine times a year. Now we have eight or nine different types of audiences who come once, or hopefully twice, a year. This means economically, as well as artistically, there are more legs to the financial stool as it were.

Informed Programming

We haven't just applied our energies to developing our programme and audience in one particular direction. Two years ago we commissioned some market research amongst our core business, which remains classical music. We found the audience divided broadly into four groups of individuals who behave rather differently:

The Conservative Fanatic is 50+, predominantly male, has a deep reverence for classical music and feels part of an exclusive/elite club. He loves stability, is threatened by change, and is a very frequent attender. He searches for 'peak' musical experiences, likes authenticity and purity of classical music and wants to see RFH restored to its former glory.

The Mainstream Stalwart is found in a broad age range, but is generally 30+. This type of attender forms the 'volume' audience of RFH. Mainstream Stalwarts seek well-known and familiar programmes, are wary of experimenting and don't like 'sandwich' programming. The whole experience is vital to them (including the venue), but well-known work or artist is a primary motivator. They want to escape everyday routine

The New Modernist tends to be younger (25-35), and has an intense involvement with 20th century music. These people see the arts as pioneering new social values. They are open minded, experimental and seek challenging and confrontational work. They are dismissive of 'safe' classical music, like discovering new music and are interested in cross arts work. The intimacy of ensembles or being in the presence of the composer appeals to them.

The Good-Time Novice also comes from a broad age range, and tends to be a first timer to RFH. This group is looking for relaxation, recreation and the opportunity to socialise. A shared social experience is major motivator. For good-time novices, the total experience is important, including drinks, food and 'people watching'. Big names and popular composers are vital, pre-concert talks are important, and guidance on concert protocol is appreciated.

While we have developed a broad range of marketing initiatives to appeal to these very different audiences, we also have to acknowledge that we may offer different programmes too. So while I haven't yet won the battle on the "sandwich" programmes (traditional and contemporary work in one programme), we are developing performances aimed at those who might be or become marginalised. We have also appointed someone with particular responsibility for audience development in classical music. Using her expertise in education and programming, she works to great effect in the very important, and frequently underdeveloped, area between education and marketing.

In Conclusion

I am reminded of those endless light bulb changing jokes. One of my favourites goes "how many psychotherapists does it take to change a light bulb?" Answer: "only one, but the light bulb must really want to be changed". In order to attempt to develop the audience for the art, and the art for the audience, the organisation must really want to change.