

A new view of our audience

Tim Wood involves us at the start of The Place's journey to grow their audience

About a year ago, my colleagues at The Place and I decided to grow our audience. We were selling somewhere in the region of two-thirds of our tickets, and we decided that we'd like to sell three-quarters of them.

We believed it could be possible because the increase we were looking for equates to something like 26 people per performance – and we're located in central London, minutes away from three very large train stations and within easy reach of over nine million potential audience members. Moreover, while we needed to protect our ticket revenue, we were in the lucky position that it was not imperative for us to grow income at the same pace as we grow our audience – we could prioritise people over pounds. And we would give ourselves a realistic timescale: we'd be happy if we got there in three years.

The first potential difficulty relates to the unique and valued position that The Place occupies in the country's dance ecology, supporting the development of virtually every choreographer to have emerged in the past 30 years. To do that, we have a programme that is, for all the right reasons, challenging for audiences: exclusively contemporary dance, most of it brand new, produced by young and developing artists without much profile even among self-acknowledged dance fans, and normally presented for one or two performances only, without the potential to attract significant media attention or build audiences through word of mouth.

A second obstacle was that we were not minded to increase our spend on marketing. Indeed, looking at our diminishing returns from mailings and the negligible sales increases on press advert publication days, I hoped we would find ways to cut our direct promotional spend.

The final reason to give us pause was that this was not, of course, the first time that we had decided to grow our audience. It has been, within pretty much exactly the same framework of opportunities and obstacles, a standing ambition for as long as we have been putting on shows. We have been through any number of audience development

plans, initiatives and projects – some strategic, and some tactical; some clearly successful, others less so. What we were looking for this time was what had eluded us in the past: a plan that would underpin sustained growth in audiences for three years and beyond enduring future changes in the market and our staff. A plan to end all plans, as it were.

Two intuitions informed our approach: that the plan should be about reaching new audiences, and use psychographic segmentation. New audiences were important because, while we'd be glad to increase our existing audience's frequency of attendance too, Audiences London's *Snapshot* research told us they already attended more frequently than those of many other London venues.

Segmentation was essential – we do not have resources for broadcast campaigns that stand out in our crowded market place – but one thing that our specialist programme has long made clear to us is that some mass-market segmentation techniques, based on demographics or buying history, for example, were unlikely to be particularly informative. The fact that a given audience member lives in one part of London or booked for a certain show doesn't make it noticeably more likely that their neighbours or fellow past bookers will attend in similar ways in the future. The motivations and values – what marketing theory terms 'psychographic variables' – of our audience may be more instructive.

These intuitions led us to work with consultants Morris Hargreaves McIntyre on this project. MHM had just launched its *Culture Segments* segmentation system based on the results of *Audience Atlas*, an in-depth psychographic survey of UK cultural audiences. Their thesis is that by engaging with their *Culture Segments*, we can influence audience behaviour, rather than just monitor it. MHM would conduct a market analysis for us, survey and segment our existing audience, and lead a series of workshops for staff to begin our audience development planning.

MHM's market analysis, which included lapsed and potential attenders as well as those who had attended in the past three years, identified that 65% of London's adults – nearly 3.7million people – are in the market for



Affirmation: self-identity, aspirational, quality time, improvement

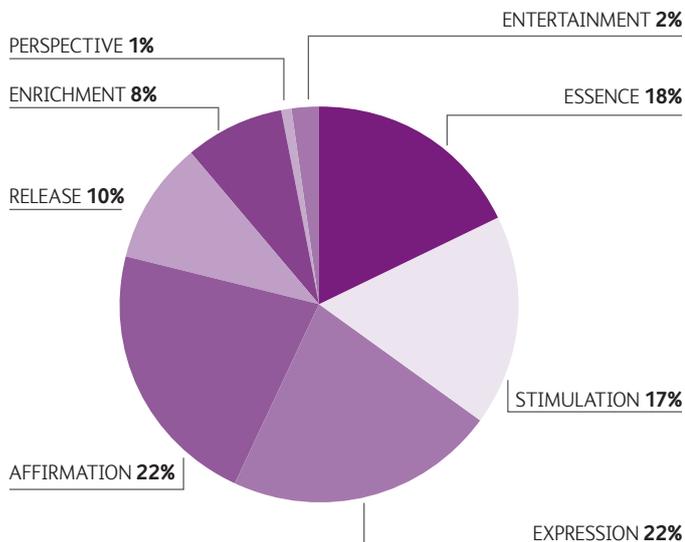


Figure 1: Recent contemporary dance market: London, South East and East of England by Culture Segment (source: Morris Hargreaves McIntyre / Audience Atlas)

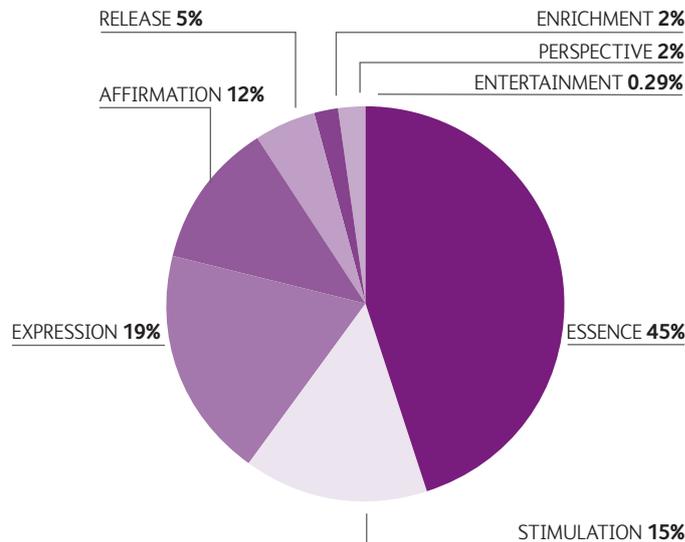


Figure 2: The Place bookers by Culture Segment (source: Morris Hargreaves McIntyre e-survey December 2011)

contemporary dance. That is plenty of new audience to make up our 26 extra people per night. Four of *Culture Segments'* eight classifications make up 79% of this market: the segments named 'Essence', 'Stimulation', 'Expression' and 'Affirmation' in roughly equally measures (see figure 1).

MHM's online customer survey, which garnered 1,262 responses, indicated that our audience is dominated by the same four segments, but in very different proportions (see figure 2). 'Essence' – characterised as discerning, independent-minded cultural omnivores – are 2.5 times more prevalent in The Place's audience than London's contemporary dance market in general. 'Affirmation' – who find self-improvement and peer validation through taking part in culture as part of a broad range of leisure activity – are 22% of the market but just 12% of our audience.

The survey also suggested that those in the Affirmation and Expression segments (the latter defined as looking for creative, spiritual and shared social cultural experiences) were closely aligned to our brand. Essence and Stimulation showed lower propensity for loyalty as they enthusiastically gallivanted around London's cultural offer, whereas Expression and Affirmation, once they had found us, preferred us. They liked that they could belong to part of a 'scene' rather than just show up somewhere for 'events' – a differentiation that made us think about the kinds of experiences we were offering audiences, as well as how we communicated them.

The series of workshops initially focused on getting to know the segments – their needs, wants, attitudes and motivations – and on considering the disparities between our audience and the market as a whole. Crucially, the workshops included not only the marketing team, but everyone involved with programming, administration, box office, front of house, press and education. 14 people came to the first workshop, only two of whose jobs were in what

might be traditionally considered marketing. All recognised, however, that their roles had some influence on how people understood and engaged with our theatre programme.

We segmented ourselves using the same series of four 'golden questions' used in our audience survey. Of 14 of us, 12 were in the Essence segment. It seemed reasonable to infer that one reason for the prevalence of Essence in our audience was that we've been shaping messages that would appeal to people 'like us'. With all parts of the

organisation and all levels of decision making represented at the workshop, we were able to agree that reaching new audiences would involve finding new ways of talking to new people.

Our plan now is to build our audiences within Affirmation and Expression, and our marketing activity is diversifying accordingly. It is too early to point to anything more than anecdotal evidence of success, though spring season attendance was encouraging. Through the autumn, as well as experimenting with different messaging, we are trialling new educational and contextual events to add to the audience experience – all designed to meet the needs of these segments. Things like signage, bar opening times and front-

of-house music are being considered alongside print and advertising in marketing planning. The same, extended group of staff is meeting regularly to monitor the progress of our audience development plans, and to contribute new ideas.

The central idea, and one that feels embedded, that can endure as a fundamental principle of how we think about and act towards our audiences, is that they need not – cannot – be all just 'like us'. ■



Expression: receptive, confident, community, expressive



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