A pachyderm project 2008

Sally Goldsmith shows how marketers can lead the herd

As arts marketers we help shape the programme our organisations develop, and then focus on generating audience for it. Sometimes this can be a frustrating existence and we crave the chance to develop activity that we feel will reach or engage people in a different way. With the right approach, persuasion and energy, I have found that, as 'audience champions' within our organisations, we can create products, develop audience engagement and build campaigns that are marketing-led.

In spring 2008, I was approached to see if the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts would take part in a city-wide community art project called *Go Elephants!* The project sought to create a huge trail of large artist-designed fibreglass elephants across the city between June and August. The elephants were then to be auctioned off for charity at the end of the summer. I felt that the Centre, as a leading arts organisation in the city, would be a conspicuous absence if not involved. More importantly, I believed the project offered a fantastic marketing opportunity. All I needed to do was persuade the team, find the time, money and energy, and deliver the project – easier said than done.

Sustaining audiences for the packed programme of special exhibitions and events at the Sainsbury Centre keeps me very busy. Since the Centre re-opened in May 2006, following a major building project, visitor numbers have been fantastic. However, I am always conscious (as we all are) of tackling the challenges highlighted in the murky 'weaknesses' section of my SWOT analysis. Key barriers for me in attracting more regional visitors are the uncertainties people have about whether the Centre is a 'place for them' (a university museum in a stunning yet steely grey building), explaining the permanent collection of world art and the position of the Centre at the back of a large university campus a short bus ride from the shopping centre of Norwich.

My idea was to develop a campaign around having an elephant and to make it more than just an expensive advert. *Go Elephants!* coincided with a major exhibition of the Centre's UEA Collection of Abstract and Constructivist Art, Architecture and Design; so I wanted to use the elephant to raise the profile of the exhibition and raise awareness of this collection generally. I also aspired to use the theme of elephants to engage children with the permanent collection, to present a fun side to the Centre, to encourage families to visit and, importantly, to give the Centre a presence in the city centre. All of this to be achieved for less than £2,000.

Creating an elephant that links to a collection of abstract and constructivist art is not an easy thing to do, especially if you also want it to be fun and be appealing to children. Undaunted, I approached one of the design companies I use for my seasonal print and asked them if they'd get involved. They agreed to develop the design for free and to become a partner, sponsoring 50% of all the costs incurred.

The 'Parallelephant' was built from wood by a skilled local model maker. The cue for the design was a vibrant red, blue and yellow iconic chair in the UEA collection. The elephant was sited in the heart of the city and proved to be a great advert for the show. The unusualness of the design meant that the 'Parallelephant' was featured in the *Go Elephants!* souvenir brochure, and that the story of the build and installation, and of the elephant being vandalised, repaired and returned, achieved good local press coverage. There was excellent profile for the Sainsbury Centre from the project, which included signage, press and print associated with *Go Elephants!* and the opportunity to attend a number of events with other regional stakeholders and businesses.

The 'Parallelephant' was also used as a way to raise the profile of the permanent collection and to engage children with it. A beautiful 'gallery safari' map was developed, which comprised a trail of big animals in the collection, fascinating facts about the animals, colouring and puzzles. These were free for families; children also got an animal mask to wear while following the trail and seeking the vinyl elephant graphics on object cases. Alongside this was a colouring table and bean bags in the café area and a competition to draw an animal in the collection. Entries were scanned and put up on the website to drive more traffic online, and a data capture was included for audience analysis and so people could be added to our mailing list and contacted about future family events. The explorer map format was so popular we are now working on a series of four maps linking to the key education themes.

The 'Parallelephant' campaign was also tied into the annual family fun

The finished Parallelephant. © Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

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day, sponsored by the local press, which is a 'spike' event in the Centre's summer programme designed to encourage new audiences, particularly people from socially excluded postcode areas of Norwich. The theme was 'Carnival of the Animals', again allowing us to really profile the permanent collection with appropriately themed creative activities and games, while the safari map was used to encourage people to venture into the gallery and experience what the Centre has to offer.

The marketing campaign for the fun day was focused on targeting certain postcode areas, working with schools and community organisations to get the message out. The carnival idea worked very well for posters and flyers with a fun and colourful feel and this was carried across into the core print to really profile what we were doing and embed the campaign in the core programme. The local newspaper ran a photography competition for the fun day too, and a good response was achieved with lots of pictures of people's pets.

Critical to the success of this campaign was getting support from the team. By developing a thorough campaign plan with clear aims and identifying the other arts organisations participating, I was able to make a persuasive case to the senior team and get their agreement to be involved. The use of the elephant as a tool for marketing a 'serious art exhibition' could have been problematic, but involving the exhibitions team in the development of the design overcame any possible difficulties. Putting fun vinyl labels on cases throughout the permanent collection could have been a sticking point for our collections team, and attempting to drive the development of an interpretative map to engage audiences could have been tricky with our education team. All of these potential problems were overcome through involving people, focusing on the positive benefits, fostering a sense of energy and teamwork with the 'Parallelephant season', and through offering the money and time to deliver the project.

The 'Parallelephant' project was a great success. It underlines for me the need to always be broadening our own thoughts about the marketing mix, and at the same time, widening the perceptions of others about what we do. Furthermore, we shouldn't always be constrained by the existing product set when driving audience development initiatives. Critical to success is winning the respect and support of your colleagues through good planning and clear aims, together with involving people in what you are doing. Finally, be enthusiastic and passionate (it's infectious!) and remember that, as 'audience champions', we can motivate change in our organisations.

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