

Dangerous liaisons

Caroline Griffin talks about using CRM to support artistic risk

Many arts organisations, especially those driven by artistic rather than social objectives, are unashamedly product-led. Of course, there are exceptions to this approach, not least the great work that goes on in education and outreach departments which is often co-created with the participants. Often, though, marketing departments are concerned with promoting work that has been developed separately from the audience it ultimately aims to attract.

The relationship between arts organisations and audiences is subject to constant debate, especially among arts policy-makers and politicians, who demand that the sector demonstrates a measurable impact in exchange for public subsidy. Most often, this means that the personal, emotional or spiritual impact of the arts is considered a by-product of demonstrable instrumental value. At its worst, this neglect of the personal impact by policy-makers and commentators can be seen as a dismissal of the ability of the audience to want the best, most challenging, most creative work. Sometimes we believe that audiences are the worst possible judges of the work. Sometimes we believe that audiences won't take risks.

This attitude is evident in the recent McMaster Report, a document that is now at the heart of policy development for arts funding. In his report, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts*, Brian McMaster berates organisations for being content with providing superficial arts experiences, but states that the audience, left to

its own devices, has a tendency to be happy with the mediocre. He says: 'I recommend that cultural organisations stop exploiting the tendency of many audiences to accept a superficial experience and foster a relationship founded on innovative, exciting and challenging work.'

This attitude is in stark contrast to the results of the *Public Value* debate which took place in 2007. This research says quite clearly that audiences don't want superficial experiences, they want to be surprised, thrilled and to have an experience beyond their day-to-day.¹ In this context, the quote from the McMaster Report suggests that the disconnection between artistic production and audiences could be addressed through the development of relationships with the notion of artistic risk at their core. Managing the relationships between producer and consumer is the key role of marketing and audience development, although usually undertaken primarily for the purposes of driving business (in the case of marketing) or driving engagement (in the case of audience development). This new debate on how to drive artistic excellence while also maintaining and developing a very real, effective and vibrant relationship with audiences (and potential audiences) provides an opportunity for marketers to complete the loop between programme and audience.

The concept of Customer Relationship Management (CRM) is useful in this context. CRM is a set of techniques that puts the relationship with a customer at the heart of an organisation, and which develops

tools and processes to manage that relationship in the long term. When a CRM approach is integrated into an arts organisation, it can be seen that the benefits go beyond the financial, to the artistic, both in terms of a more appreciative audience, and because the more financially stable an organisation is, the more it can afford to take artistic risks.

An example of this is Welsh National Opera's subscription scheme. Their subscription programme is designed in such a way that subscribers are encouraged to attend the lesser-known pieces, through a series of incentives including pricing, value-added initiatives and insight opportunities. The success of this programme means that in cities where the subscription scheme operates, the lesser-known, more 'risky' works, have sold significant numbers of tickets even before the programme goes on sale to the general public. By developing an audience segment that now looks out for the riskier works, WNO has strengthened its brand as people trust the recommendations. In turn, this means that the organisation can be confident of continuing to have good audiences when it produces this sort of work.

In this way, marketing helps organisations achieve not only their financial aims, but their artistic objectives as well. One other area where this can be the case is in the use of feedback from the audience in developing future programmes. The Fierce Festival, a live art festival that takes place annually in the West Midlands, is one example of an organisation that has used audience

1. 'For members of the public, a quality experience is something that audience members and participants really get something out of – it can be provocative or difficult but it should lift them out of the day-to-day and provide something more than basic entertainment. Thus for members of the public, quality can be judged by understanding the emotional response of the audience to a piece of work and the impact it has in terms of challenging perceptions and broadening horizons.' Catherine Bunting, *Public Value and the Arts in England: Discussions and Conclusions of the Arts Debate*, p. 16. Available at www.artscouncil.org.uk

feedback to spur it on to take greater artistic risks. Speaking at a seminar in 2006, Mark Ball, the director of Fierce Festival, said: *'We conducted extensive research with attenders and non-attenders about perceptions of the festival and work presented. It quickly became clear that the distinctiveness of the festival was its greatest asset, but that programming some of the events to take place in mainstream venues undermined the brand. Audiences wanted distinctive, unusual locations as well as distinctive product – they wanted experiences. It's no accident that around 50% of our work is now site-specific – taking place in swimming pools, strip clubs and shopping malls – and that when we do work with mainstream venues the work is located in unusual parts of the building.'*

In this example, the responses of the audience encouraged the organisation to make a strategic artistic decision, which has influenced its ongoing programming, and effectively reinforced the brand, resulting in a closer relationship with the existing audience as well as attracting new attenders.

Other organisations take the interaction with the audience even further, developing their entire programme in partnership with the audience; in effect, blurring the distinction between producer and viewer. This approach is only possible when an organisation is interested in its audience's experience as part of its artistic vision. At the 2007 AMA conference, John McGrath, Director of Contact, talked about the way that their participatory approach has resulted in a much

more knowledgeable and engaged audience. This audience demands to be continually challenged, and therefore they encourage and support the organisation in taking more risk. He said: *'The journey from being participants to trying out new work with a different range of audiences to seeing work that might be challenging, is a journey that starts to build a more creative and responsive audience. And because of the nature of audiences, it isn't only the individuals who've had that exposure who become that creative audience. As we all know, an audience is a live organic thing. If you have a few people in there who have that history and have those complicated and personal relationships with the work, they start to inform the audience as a whole.'*

This quick survey of relationship development in arts organisations suggests that CRM techniques could be used by organisations to provide a framework for using their relationship with their audience as a way of taking more artistic risks. It also suggests some attitudes that are shared by organisations that are effective in doing this.

First, these organisations take into account what their audiences consider to be risky when planning their artistic programmes. They understand that what can be considered quite safe work might be risky for some audiences, whereas others can be tolerant of work that the arts organisation itself would find challenging. Successful risk-taking occurs where there is synergy between the audience and the organisation's attitude to

risk. Second, these organisations have a genuine curiosity about the audience and an eagerness to enter into dialogue with them. They are open about their artistic processes and decisions and enjoy listening to their audiences' responses. Finally, these organisations all respect their audiences' ability to understand and respond to the work, whether or not they are formally trained or versed in the language and conventions and history of the art form.

Of course, this is an overview of the way audience relationships can underpin risk-taking. However, by using these ideas as a basis, organisations can start to develop strategies and creative mechanisms for using the enthusiasm, expertise and responses of audiences to support them in making challenging new work. ●



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