

Fun for all the family?

Caroline Greener takes a co-creational approach to mystery shopping and discussion groups with family audiences

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Audiences North East (ANE) was commissioned by Arts Council England, North East in May 2007 to coordinate a regional family-friendly initiative, with a particular focus on visual arts organisations. We developed a programme of research, training and consultation which took place over twelve months and involved cultural organisations throughout the area.

Each strand of the project had a co-creational perspective, aimed at equipping organisations with the skills and knowledge to build strategies that foster the development of products and services in conjunction with family audiences.

Central to the project was Arts Council England's family-friendly toolkit, which contains case studies, examples of good practice and an audit template that can help an organisation as a mapping and planning tool.

The first phase of the project was dissemination of the toolkit, including training in its use. We conducted internal audits with participating organisations, asking them to look closely at what they offered families in terms of customer care, access/facilities, marketing/communications and programming.

It was important then to 'test' the results of the organisations' internal audits. Mystery shopping, combined with discussion groups, would mean that we would be left with a compelling set of individual reports, as well as a broad overview of what families want and don't want from cultural experiences, which we could disseminate widely as a piece of regional market intelligence. The audit

template within the family-friendly toolkit was adapted into a mystery shopping questionnaire, so that the internal and external perceptions could be easily compared.

Adopting a broad and inclusive definition of 'family', we spread the net wide when it came to recruiting our mystery shoppers, in order to attract a wide socioeconomic and geodemographic variety of people. Using our extensive network of regional community group contacts and our listings website whatsonnortheast.com to advertise the project, we soon had twelve families eager to take part, ranging from single-parent families to extended families including grandparents, aunts and uncles.

The families were initially invited to introductory sessions, which involved training in mystery shopping techniques. They were also provided with opportunities to engage in detailed discussions about what families want and don't want from a cultural experience. Children and young people were placed at the centre of the process and made aware that their opinions were valued. As far as possible, we split the families into age groups and planned introductory sessions with programmes suitable for the age ranges in attendance.

The training strand of the project included practical skills workshops which were themed around creative consultation techniques for children and young people, and we also used these techniques in the introductory sessions for the qualitative research strand. In retrospect, we could have made even more use of creative



Family-friendly activities take centre stage at the National Glass Centre in Sunderland © Colin Davison

consultation techniques such as graffiti walls, giant doodles, creating dream catchers, ideas trees and so on. We found that these methods were more empowering and engaging for our younger co-researchers than more traditional discussion techniques.

Each participating organisation received visits from three mystery shopper families during the summer months of 2007. Most families visited three or more venues, so it was quite a big time commitment to then attend final debriefing sessions about each venue.

Overall, however, the feedback sessions were well attended by our enthusiastic and committed families. A logistically easier alternative would have been to hold feedback sessions on a family-by-family basis but, despite the benefits of this methodology, it would have meant the loss of the cross-familial debates that took place and added so much to the research as a whole.

The depth of the feedback discussions meant it was possible to highlight key findings and areas for consideration, both for individual organisations and the sector as a whole, thereby widening the impact of the work.

‘It was very useful to have the mystery shopper part of the process as this confirmed some items we expected but crucially threw up a number that we had not considered... Most of these items we are already acting on and others, as a result of involvement in the FF initiative, will now add into our projected future programme.’ Peter Sharpe, Curator, Kielder Art and Architecture

In addition, the co-creational approach meant that the families felt more invested in the process, not just as ‘respondents’ but as advisers and advocates for family friendliness. Equally, arts organisations recognised the value of this approach and the deeper insights it provided into customer behaviour.

Although time consuming and logistically challenging, the ANE family-friendly mystery shopper exercise provided a wealth of qualitative intelligence, and has resulted in a dedicated, enthusiastic and knowledgeable ‘bank’ of trained mystery shopper families – a valuable resource for the North East’s cultural sector that’s already being tapped into by venues keen to find out how to attract and retain family audiences. ■

The Family Friendly Toolkit is available to download from the Arts Council England website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publication_detail.php?rid=0&sid=&rowse=recent&id=578

Audiences North East has published a report on the North East Family Friendly initiative and this is available to download from the ANE website:

www.audiencesnortheast.org.uk/audience-development-downloads.html



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