

Mission possible

Ivan Wadeson gets to the heart of the relationship between mission statements and the people they serve

Preparing for the presentation on this topic I was asked to give at the AMA *Mission Possible* event at Sadler's Wells in London last November, I was reminded that an entire industry has grown up around mission statements. Try putting those two words into any internet search engine and returned will be pages and pages of agencies, consultancies, academics and pundits offering advice and services. This (largely American) industry and the attendant parodies (see the random Mission Statement Generator on Dilbert.com) can get in the way of realising just how crucial the notion of 'mission' can be for cultural organisations or how to apply this practically.

My preferred definition of a mission statement is from Jargonbuster (find it online at www.cafonline.org/default.aspx?Page=7589). This is a glossary written by Kevin Ashby and Colin Nee to help the voluntary and community sector and their funders be more consistent in the way they use technical terms. Jargonbuster describes a mission statement as:

Why an organisation or project exists and the broad effect that it wants to have. A summary of the overall difference it wants to make.

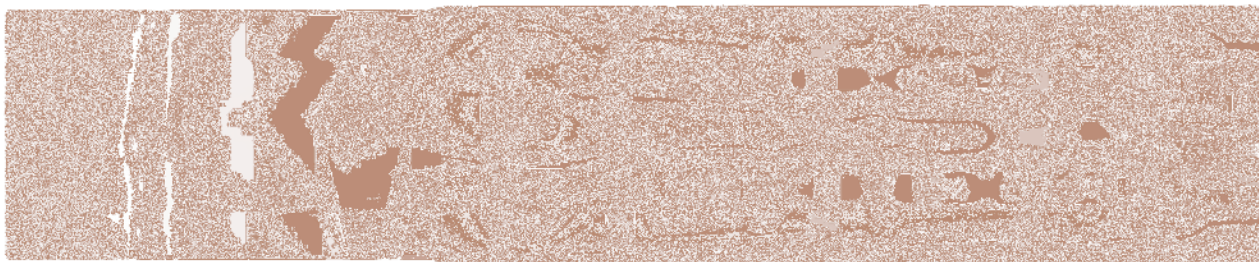
The mission statement or overall aim is also usually just one or two

sentences. It describes the people, situation or problem a project or organisation wants to make a difference to. It also describes the particular difference the project or organisation wants to make. As with a vision, the aim may take a long time, be very general or very specific. It is not what a group will achieve specifically this year, or next year, but the thing they ultimately want to achieve.

What I was asked to consider last November and what I am writing about now is the relationship of that mission statement to audiences, visitors and participants – the public.

To help inform my thinking for the presentation I approached fellow professionals. I sent a link to an online survey to 30 senior practitioners: a mixture of artistic directors, curators and chief executives of a range of venues, companies and festivals of differing scales. I received about thirteen completed surveys and was generally pleased about how those respondents rated the importance of mission statements. I had a sneaking suspicion that some people in the sector regard mission statements as a hurdle to be negotiated, a sop for funders or a good intention to hide behind.

Not only were these respondents positive about their own mission



statements, there were also fairly consistent views about the value a mission statement can provide for an organisation:

'A key sentence that acts as a beacon to navigate by and a filter to put projects and ideas through.'

'Keeps focus, enables us to monitor decisions against it, reassures funders and staff members, provides a "high bar" for us to reach.'

'It sets out what business you are in so very valuable.'

However, there were less consistent views about the relationship of mission statement to the public. I asked: 'What is the relationship of your mission statement to your users / audiences / visitors if at all? Does it reference them in any way? Are they aware of your mission? Should they be?' The following three responses show the spectrum of views:

'None. It's an internal working document only.'

'Our statement is visitor-focused but I expect few visitors are aware of it.'

'Yes it is devised to be inclusive and to address our needs. Yes we include it in print.'

I was drawn to the last comment. I can't recall many organisations that publicise their mission statement in print or on websites, let alone display it at the box office or the gallery entrance like other – public and private sector – organisations do (the BBC studios in Manchester have their corporate vision – *'to be the most creative organisation in the world'* – on a plaque on the wall in reception where all staff and visitors pass it daily). But shouldn't we? Isn't there an argument to say that these

aspirational, powerful statements of what we *'ultimately want to achieve'* should be shared with those who will benefit from us delivering this mission?

Many might not agree – and there is certainly a downside to seeing 'corporate-speak' slogans or empty gesture sound-bites pushed at the public endlessly. But there is another reason that I suspect there isn't such a public display of these statements. Too few reference the public.

Prentice Hall's *E-Business Plan Guide* states that a mission statement should answer four questions: *What business are we in? What do we want to achieve? What inspires us? What is our target market?*

To my mind there are very few cultural examples that cover the last question despite the fact that our audience, visitors and participants are all key stakeholders, along with staff and direct funders. And the latter two groups – generally – get to see the mission statement.

If serious about public engagement, about audience development, then I would suggest your mission statement is the right and proper starting point for this. Getting the public into your mission statement alone isn't going to change anything, but it might be a start, – it might be a powerful statement of intent.

If you are not in a position to directly influence the mission statement, can you help start a dialogue about this internally? Or are there others (board members,

consultants, agencies) who can do this for you? Is there a cycle of review and evaluation, often linked to business planning, of mission and direction?

Plus there are other considerations for public engagement and audience development to be taken seriously within your organisation. It may start with words in a mission statement or sections in a business plan but ultimately it should be a philosophy that helps underpin the organisation. This requires an organisation to recognise and understand how audience development relates to each department and individual role; it requires an organisational culture that promotes a collaborative approach to working with systems in place to facilitate such work; it requires excellent and accurate intelligence on the people you engage with; and it often requires a champion to oversee a holistic approach and drive the agenda forward.

None of it is easy. All of it takes time. But maybe by starting with the words that seek to encapsulate our mission, what *'ultimately [we] want to achieve'* and *'the people... [we] want to make a difference to'*, we are setting the correct course for that journey. ■



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