

# Rekindling the fire

Anne Torregianni of Audiences London asks, ‘do you wonder what all those fair-weather bookers messing up your database are actually doing with themselves these days?’ And ‘why do they fail to respond to your lovingly crafted, heartfelt, and downright expensive invitations to re-engage?’ If you do – or know someone who does – read on ...

## Rekindling the fire

There has been much debate about increasing frequency among rarely engaged arts attenders. Inspirational approaches like *Audience Builder* and *Test Drive* prove that, with a concerted effort, people can be moved up an engagement ladder, but there has been little change in the overall trend.

Around 70% of bookers in London only book once in a two-year period, according to *Snapshot London* (Audiences London’s data-sharing initiative with London’s major performing arts venues, tracking the engagement habits of two million London households). The majority of those bookers never re-surface. A small but consistent increase in retention would make a very significant increase in revenue. When we first began *Snapshot London*, most people were surprised to discover that low retention rates were the norm. Naturally, this led to a debate: was this a situation to accept or to challenge?

This is a chapter in the story of how we find out about questioning standard practice and commonly held beliefs.

## The experiment

The question was one of the original drivers for the London theatre consortium, an initiative supported by Arts Council England’s *Thrive!* programme. For us, the value of *Thrive!* was its experimental nature – a rare and well-supported opportunity to think rigorously and to act differently. What started as a conversation between colleagues at Audiences London and in 12 producing theatres<sup>1</sup>

evolved as an experiment in improving retention rates.

And there is more than one moral to this chapter. As well as learning more about infrequent attenders, we also learned much about the value and process of experimentation.

## Method

The experience made a deep impression on our approach to formative research – the kind that helps you to work out effective new ways of doing things, rather than simply confirming cherished assumptions. It also showed us how we could use the large-scale audience data-sets we hold for the sector as part of this process.

In brief, following a solid phase of desk research, we used *Snapshot London* to look at bookers across venues to quantify opportunities, and roughly sketch out a profile of the infrequent customer base. We then formulated some theories which were tested through a structured programme of 300 depth interviews. Findings were to inform a live, practical experiment in audience engagement.

Important factors in the approach included taking the intuition of practitioners as a starting point. Its end point was action for which resources were ring-fenced. More than 20 marketing managers were involved at each stage, lending their collective brainpower and experience. And there were other benefits of working together in this iterative way. We had a larger, richer data-set to work with, and were able to complete an extensive piece of original research at a low cost to each

individual theatre. Information and knowledge were passed around and layered up, so that we could all absorb information about the wider market place and apply it to our own situation as well as the collective mission.

## Hypotheses

Being fairly rigorous in working to hypotheses (or testable statements) was another important factor. We started to talk about why we might drop off some people’s radar (or vice versa) but not others. What could we do about it? A new hypothesis emerged – that highly targeted digital communication was the key new opportunity. Based on the analysis and a healthy dose of observation and gut instinct, we developed a hypothetical segmentation of the infrequent customer-base, defined by the attitudes and habits we believed might prevent them from repeat engagement. The design of the final stage was to test this segmentation and quantify the significance of different segments. We also wanted to test their susceptibility to digital.

## Results

Four out of our imagined eight segments were shown to exist, while another five useful groupings were identified. Some of the most significant are:

**Lifestyle Lapsers** (The largest group) were once regulars but have lapsed due to change in their situation – starting a family, work patterns, moving house; losing a regular theatre-going companion was also a surprisingly common factor. Importantly, their interest remains

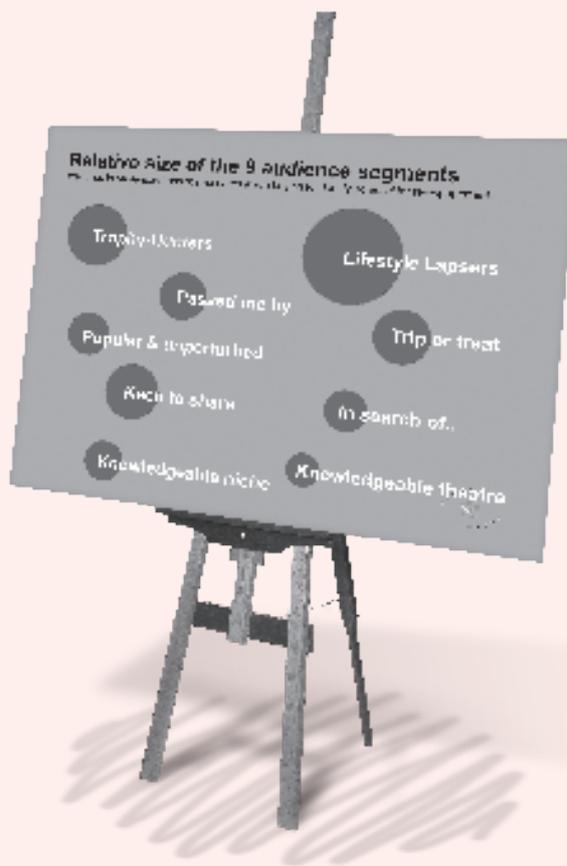
and this is a large group, so working to overcome the more common barriers may be worthwhile. Signposting better fitting opportunities at other theatres – or ‘audience-sharing’ – should be fruitful.

**Trophy Hunters** (the second largest group, about 25% of infrequent attenders) are in search of familiar hooks and low-risk programming. They follow star casting or well-known plays and need guarantees of the entertainment value for their time and effort. Added endorsement, clear communication of alternative benefits, and navigation around the different theatre offers in London at any given time are key. Again, a good case for audience-sharing.

**Passed-Me-Bys** are again a relatively large group (about 17%), and one completely unanticipated. These people feel they never find out about things with sufficient time to organise themselves, or carry out the research they prefer to undertake. They feel out of the communication loop, dislike acting on the spur of the moment and therefore find shows are over by the time they heard about them. Tailored and timely communications with easy access to background information could be key, while revivals are a gift.

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### Conclusions

Most arts organisations only need to increase retention rates among a small percentage of their customers for considerable financial benefit, so choosing to concentrate on the needs of just one or two segments will bring good returns on any investment in change. What we discovered about less committed audiences went beyond our assumptions, sometimes confirming them, sometimes challenging them. It proposes a wealth of practical responses which could rekindle, if not the flames of passion, then of mutually satisfying relationships with

infrequent attenders.

Findings have also been important to us at Audiences London, working with other consortia, and using the segmentation to spot potential. Conclusions had a unifying effect on the consortium, creating a sense of purpose. The theatres are now using them to reach beyond their collective core audience; Taste Theatre ([www.tastetheatre.com](http://www.tastetheatre.com)) soft launched in April and is another chapter in this story. Collaborative working is particularly good news for less committed audiences. By working together to ‘share audiences’, we provide a more comprehensive service – helping people navigate our collective offering, curating opportunities, signposting those that most closely fit needs.

This experiment is helping us to respond to the paradox that those one-night-stand audiences need more information than our committed friends, and yet have less opportunity or inclination to seek it out. We learned not only that what they need is easy access to different kinds of information, but also what those might be, and how multi-channel communications can personalise the experience.

If you would like to know more, you can download all or one of a suite of reports summarising methodology, findings and conclusions: [www.audienceslondon.org](http://www.audienceslondon.org). You can also find out more about *Snapshot London* and Audience London’s other marketing research and analysis resources. ●



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1. Theatres: Almeida Theatre, BAC, Bush Theatre, Donmar Warehouse, Greenwich Theatre, Hampstead Theatre, Lyric Hammersmith, Royal Court, Soho Theatre, Tricycle Theatre, Theatre Royal Stratford East, Young Vic.