

Suits you

Sarah Chambers at the National Theatre takes a look at the challenges of providing a tailored membership approach

The National Theatre runs a tiered membership: the entry point is £15 for Advance Membership; stepping up to Priority Membership which starts at £65; leading up to the more philanthropic levels of Supporting Cast, Patron and all the way to Olivier Circle at £10,000. Benefits differ at all levels, but the common thread (and most commonly quoted benefit by the members) is a period of priority booking for National Theatre seasons. In addition, each level also offers incremental levels of discounts, events, trips, private entertainment spaces and personal services, which increase as you move up the membership ladder.

The National Theatre also operates a free e-membership level, where subscribers receive regular e-bulletins as well as 24 hours of priority booking.

The challenges of running a large membership model

With such an established membership model boasting some over 35 000 members, one of the biggest challenges we face is how to avoid falling into the common trap of talking about members according to their membership level but not taking the time to discover more about their habits. We are constantly trying to create a two-way communication that moves beyond their membership 'label'.

This objective has become especially relevant because:

- recruitment at the Advance Membership (£15) has decreased in the last two years;
- mobility between the levels has been successful (we have built a 33% increase in Priority Membership in the last two years; this growth is largely owing to successful promotions to Advance Members), and care has been taken to send timely tailored messaging around prominent productions;
- as you may expect, there is evidence of resistance to membership schemes among groups such as the under-25s – unless the right offer is researched and presented to them;
- staff resources must be accurately allocated if you are offering a more personal service at higher membership levels, so that a supporter's interests, loyalty and needs can be measured.

Ways in which the NT currently meets those challenges

- *Use of a Customer Relationship Management system*
By investing in the fully integrated CRM and box office system Tessitura, the National Theatre can accurately track, measure and segment customers and their behaviours throughout all levels of the membership ladder, which enables us to target communications appropriately.

Examples of how we currently segment members might be on one or more of the following criteria:

- According to the recipient's level of membership.
- Number of shows attended in last six months.
- Average ticket spend.
- Donors who have given to all previous fundraising campaigns.
- Those who have donated to one previous fundraising campaign.
- Those who have attended more than three shows in the past 18 months.
- Those who have seen a particular show that relates to an upcoming event.

This approach has informed some of our most successful tactical campaigns, including:

- Successful email recruitment for entry-level (Advance) Membership before booking periods open to frequent attendees.
- Identifying contributors to the Annual Fund via personalised direct mail.
- *Inviting feedback to improve service.*
Through surveys, feedback forms and on phones, using all opportunities to obtain feedback from members about what they need or would like more of.
- *Tailoring the approach across all areas of the customer journey.*
Using all ticketing channels as an opportunity to identify target groups at each membership level and personalise messages to them; for example, 'hot prospect' groups are flagged on their constituent ID, so that box office staff can identify them on the phones and promote membership opportunities to them.

- *Creating add-on schemes that help difficult-to-reach segments.*

Started three years ago, and now with over 19 000 members, Entrypass is a membership scheme for 16–25 year olds, aimed at encouraging independent theatre-going among a group that can feel alienated by the more traditional membership schemes. A separate Young Patrons Membership offers 21–45 year olds the opportunity to be even more involved with the National's work and make a philanthropic donation alongside their membership benefits.

- *Adopting a database-wide segmentation.*

By working with the NT's Partner in Innovation, Accenture, we ran a cluster-based segmentation. From this information we were able to reflect on members and their profiles in relation to our entire database. It gave us an insight into their value and loyalty in relation to other customer segments as well as a deeper understanding of their behaviour.

- *Offering a more personal service.*

Especially in the higher levels of membership, effort has been made to offer a more tailored and personal service, allocating resources to provide direct phone lines, personal booking and a programme of unique events managed by the Development Department.

Even with the increased effort to provide a segmented approach to our members, we recognise that old habits die hard – and you will still get the odd occasion where people place 'characteristics' or group behaviours on what in actual fact is a very diverse and wide-ranging group of individuals, whose chosen level – or price – of membership does not define who they are. Recent examples of this include a £15 Advance Member who made a philanthropic gift of more than 100 times their annual membership, or when through audience research we found out that an older Member, who we could have mistaken for being a traditional theatre-goer, had in fact been to every single challenging and left-field piece of work that we had ever produced. These instances serve to remind and reaffirm that we must strive to tailor our membership messages to the numerous groups and sub-groups within our schemes if we are to maintain and grow their trust and support. ●



Sarah Chambers

Deputy Director – Audience Strategy
National Theatre

e schambers@nationaltheatre.org.uk

