Test drive the arts

Steven Hadley takes us for a test drive

How do you get to sit in a vintage sports car with the Lord Mayor of Belfast (in the rain)? Simple. You run a *Test Drive the Arts* project online, encourage nearly 5,000 people to attend the arts for the first time, and then shamelessly use your CEO to promote the event. Our project (www.testdrivetheartsni.org) is the largest collaborative audience development project ever undertaken in Northern Ireland and has been a great success. This article will tell you a little of our journey over the past twelve months ...

Test Drive the Arts introduces people to the arts for the first time by offering guest tickets from unsold capacity. The idea behind *Test Drive the Arts* is that potential patrons have the opportunity to experience attending a performance in a relatively risk-free environment – providing organisations with a new and rich source of 'hot leads' they can convert into regular attendees. For the past year Audiences NI has managed a *Test Drive the Arts* project which focused on Belfast initially before being rolled out across Northern Ireland. The project's primary funder was Belfast City Council with support from Arts Council Northern Ireland.

Why should arts organisations consider *Test Drive*?

- It is an effective and efficient way to develop new audiences.
- It allows you to tap into an additional promotional platform and increase your profile.
- *Test Drive* converts unsold capacity into a marketing asset.
- The programme is scalable (you control the number of tickets released for *Test Drive*).
- The programme is flexible (you determine which performances are available for *Test Drive* and the follow-up offers made to *Test Drive* patrons).

How it works for the new attenders

1. A public campaign creates awareness of the *Test Drive* initiative and directs them to a purpose-built website: www.testdrivetheartsni.org.
2. On the website potential Test Drivers can browse the performances on offer and apply for tickets.
3. The request for tickets is forwarded to the relevant organisation for action. Each *Test Drive* applicant is screened against the organisation's existing database. Successful applicants are coded as 'Test Drive'.
4. Tickets and performance information is posted to the *Test Drive* patron prior to the performance
5. Performance is 'test driven' and 60-second feedback survey completed (emailed automatically to patrons the morning after the event).
6. Audiences NI reports back to the venue on which patrons are 'hot', 'warm' or 'cold' based on the survey. Venues append this information to the *Test Drive* patron records.
7. The *Test Drive* patron receives follow-up offers to encourage repeat attendance. This can take the form of 4-for-2 tickets or value-added incentives such as free drink or post-show talk.
8. Follow-up activity is the responsibility of the organisation. The relationship is between the *Test Drive* patron and the organisation.
9. To enable monitoring and evaluation of the project, participating venues must report back to Audiences NI on uptake of subsequent offers.
10. Test Drivers to be surveyed a year after their first experience.

Marketing and communications

Promotional activity took place at shopping centres, St Patrick's Day Festivals, Christmas Light Switch-Ons, *Culture Night* and more. Staff wore branded *Test Drive the Arts* NI t-shirts, and branded pens were handed out to the public to encourage URL recall. We distributed 35,000 A6 postcards throughout Northern Ireland, in community centres, libraries, leisure centres, arts centres and coffee shops. Targeted Facebook adverts were used to promote the project (7 adverts with 781 click-thrus) – @TestDriveArtsNI now has over 400 followers – and online advertising ran with local radio stations. For outdoor advertising 48-sheets were placed in key locations across NI and 10 bus supersides were used on main arterial routes through Belfast.

Third-party sponsorships included the Friday 'Going Out' Section in the *Belfast Telegraph* and three half-page advertisements. One thousand air fresheners were placed in 500 fonaCAB taxis, and there was an ongoing weekly branded column and regular competitions in the *Sunday Life* newspaper. To facilitate

participation from people without home internet access, we also partnered with KDS Systems who offer free internet kiosks across NI in libraries and civic centres.

The success of our marketing campaign, and the vast amount of media coverage which was generated, was measured by the fact that our top traffic source for the site was direct (33%), suggesting strong URL recall. This was followed by Google (26%) and then, always keen on a bargain, Moneysavingexpert.com (9%).

Some statistics from the first year of the project

- Participating arts organisations: **50**
- Successful applications: **2,293**
- Unsuccessful applications: **490**
- Number of tickets issued: **4,757**
- Total value of tickets issued: **£71,582**
- Number of performances/events attended: **495**

Numbers, as important as they are, only tell half the story. Feedback from the Test Drivers has been very positive and is ultimately the best project endorsement. The survey had a response rate of 51%, with 87% of people having had a positive experience, 89% planning to attend the arts again and 99% having told a friend. A quote sums the feedback up: 'I am always planning a trip to the theatre and never quite get around to it. The *Test Drive* tickets gave me the impetus to go and now I am determined to attend more often. I loved the atmosphere, the anticipation, the general sense of everybody enjoying themselves. Thank you for the opportunity.'

If you'd like to see some people talking about their first experience of attending the arts take a look at www.youtube.com/user/audiencesni?feature=mhum#p/a/u/0/B_WNt0Y72LE

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Audiences NI is the audience development agency for Northern Ireland, working with arts and cultural organisations to increase and diversify audiences for the arts: www.audiencesni.com