

Valuable Friends

Jennifer Faure Francis gives an insight into the Royal Academy of Arts Friends Scheme

The Royal Academy of Arts was founded by George III in 1768. Governed by artists to 'promote the arts of design', the Royal Academy was the first institution in Great Britain devoted solely to the promotion of the visual arts and enjoys an unrivalled reputation as a venue for exhibitions of international importance.

The RA is a charity and receives no public funding. It is completely independent. One of the founding principles of the RA was to 'mount an annual exhibition open to all artists of distinguished merit' to finance the training of young artists in the RA Schools. Now known as the Summer Exhibition and held every year without interruption since 1769, exhibition sales are now in excess of £3m a year.

The 80 governing artists, Royal Academicians, are all practising painters, sculptors, engravers, print-makers, draughtsmen and architects. The RA's strength and special character is because 'it is still at heart what its eighteenth-century founders intended – a place for the training of artists, for the exhibition of art, and for the community of artists to interact with one another and with the public'. The RA has the oldest art school in the country and perhaps the finest exhibition galleries in the world with nearly a million visitors annually.

As one of the nation's treasures, it is a complex institution that raises funds through ticketing, publications, and the Academy Shop and Restaurant. It is also supported by private sponsorship, corporate support, individual donations, bequests, patrons and a very successful friends scheme. The RA is a flourishing commercial enterprise with a turnover of over £25m.

Background

Arts funding is currently at the forefront of the industry's mind. Jeremy Hunt's £80m match-funding for arts philanthropy and the expected government review means that after 15 prosperous years in the world of arts funding, there is increased competition for limited monies and organisations are reviewing their business models. Arts organisations are increasingly seeking alternative sources of revenue to supplement grants as well as developing marketing strategies to attract resources.

Friends or membership schemes in the arts are common; they are a vital and a very successful income stream for the Royal Academy contributing approximately 30% of the annual turnover. Arts and Business identifies similar schemes as accounting for the majority of individual giving in

the sector and a greater source of potential income. One of the reasons for the growing popularity is that this tends to be an easier way to tap into potential supporters while actively engaging and cementing existing relationships between organisations and their audiences. Surprisingly, a Market Trends survey during 2010 identified over 68% of arts organisations in the UK as currently without a friends/members scheme.

RA Friends

The Friends of the Royal Academy was founded by former President of the Royal Academy of Arts Sir Hugh Casson in 1977. They are a separate charity run by a Council of Management and remain the largest such group in Europe. The *raison d'être* was that this offered a way of providing valuable financial support for the Royal Academy while allowing supporters unlimited access to the internationally acclaimed exhibition programme. Over the years the Friends have grown in size and importance.

Benefits are a crucial feature of any successful friends scheme. Adopting a tailored approach is advisable. Many arts organisations offer different tiers and packages in an attempt to personalise and segment members.

Membership of an arts organisation can also be seen as a badge of identities. The sense of belonging is echoed in the Big Society concept. A recent study suggests that another £300 million could be brought into the sector if the whole arts sector had active friends schemes.

The Royal Academy of Arts package includes:

- free unlimited entry to exhibitions
- free entry for an additional guest and up to four family children
- quarterly RA magazine
- exhibition previews before the public opening
- access to a private Friends Room and separate restaurant



They also have the opportunity to book for around 100 Friends Events a year. The Friends Events team form part of the RA's Education Department, adding depth to the types of events that are planned.

Friends are able to pledge Gift Aid. This is an important revenue stream and currently 74% have pledged, which provides an annual income of £1m. The exhibition programme continues to be a tremendous driver for Friends retention, currently over about 86%.

The profiles of RA Friends are:

- 67% female
33% male
- 14% = under 45 years old
41% = 45–64 years old
42% = 65+ years old
- Resident in:
London 37%
South East 40%
Rest of the UK 17%
Overseas 6%

The Friends scheme has grown consistently over the years with over 17,000 recruited in the last financial year, demonstrating its consistent appeal. The marketing and recruitment strategy for Friends is via a regular campaign of face-to-face

conversations. Advertising in the national press and various magazines tends to be focused around Christmas, Mother's Day and other similar gift-buying periods. Online advertising is an area that we are in the process of activating. Flourishing schemes are those that are adaptive, welcome innovation and embrace relationship marketing by identifying their publics and developing meaningful and lasting relationships with them.

The future

The Friends scheme is run by the Development team and has dedicated staffs that include 58 loyal Friends volunteers.

In a bid to continue to attract Friends, increase the numbers and achieve high retention rates, plans are afoot to upgrade the facilities on offer. We have detailed schemes for creating new facilities for the Friends of the Royal Academy. To underpin this approach we have recently embarked upon research to allow us to understand the key motivating factors behind membership. The findings have allowed us a unique insight into understanding this valuable group of supporters.

The Royal Academy is held in very high regard by both current

Friends and visitors; it is a national institution which is unique due to the governance by Royal Academicians which makes it a 'living' organisation. Motivations for becoming a Friend are very programme-driven; patronage is seen as a secondary benefit. Flexibility and exclusivity are also significant factors for membership.

Membership of an arts organisation can also be seen as a badge of identities. The sense of belonging is echoed in the Big Society concept. A recent study suggests that another £300 million could be brought into the sector if the whole arts sector had active friends schemes. Given that friends admit that belonging to an arts organisation in this way encourages them to give more, the spill-over effects could positively contribute and generate additional investment for your organisation. ●



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