

Word gets around

Mel Larsen looks at the role of arts ambassadors in word-of-mouth marketing

Recommendations are part of our everyday conversations. Most of us regularly offer endorsements on the best plumbers, films, books, marketing techniques, employees and countless other subjects. We may not stop to think where our words will end up or even where our opinions really originated.

Even before the internet became an everyday phenomenon, social network analysts made a science of tracing the threads of social exchange to make them visible and ultimately manageable in the name of empowerment or control. The world of networks is a fascinating matrix of agents such as connectors and gatekeepers who open or close access to communication and where trust is the most valuable currency.

Trafficked within these networks is the information that gets passed around. Author Richard Dawkins coined the term 'memes' to refer to the 'units of cultural imitation' that get disseminated through social interaction: habits, ideas, tunes, fashions and the like, in a way similar to the propagation of genes. Replicated as word gets around, memes eventually die out (anyone remember the catchphrase "Whaasssup!!?"), evolve or become accepted and embedded

in society as if they had always been there.

Before the advent of online social networks, it was said that we each knew around 300 people ranging from close friends to those on vaguely nodding terms and via that set had access to the 300 people they each knew, making our immediate circle of influence number around 90,000. Online, the potential number of people we can spread our recommendation memes to is of course far greater.

Word-of-mouth marketing has itself become a hot topic. Anyone who works in marketing ought to be highly interested in spreading positive memes about their product. Some people recommend more than others but even satisfied customers are more likely to do so when reminded. Referral marketing, where happy customers are supported in referring their contacts, is one strategic way of maximising the social habit of recommending. Brand ambassadors are another.

Arts ambassadors

The term 'brand ambassador' is often used to describe a high profile celebrity sporting the latest must-have product, but it can also refer to an ordinary person who happens to be enthusiastic about an experience such as arts attending. When these

'arts ambassadors' are managed and supported strategically, they can be very effective in spreading the word about arts opportunities and events to their peers.

Arts organisations have been resourceful in the way they engage ambassadors, from a taxi driver scheme in Adelaide, Australia where drivers tell their (captive) passengers about a local festival, to the team of ambassadors for Africa Beyond who personally greeted the new audiences they had invited to the British Museum and conducted vox-pops with them to find out what they thought.

Ambassador work goes beyond handing out a few flyers. They also feed information back to an arts organisation and help build relationships that are of value to both arts provider and audience. They are often recruited to be representative of a target audience (e.g. students inviting other students or parents inspiring other families to visit a new venue). They can be paid or voluntary, work alone or in a team; they may represent a collective of venues across a city, or just one organisation. Increasingly they are being engaged as a sounding board or as advisers, contributing to the development of front of house, box office and even the board or programming.

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The rewards

Arts ambassadors provide a range of services. They have time to listen, explain, address concerns and build relationships with audiences. They can therefore:

- encourage first-time attenders and new types of audiences
- address the needs of micro-segments: small but important groups of people that broadcast campaigns don't reach
- support differentiation of your brand through dialogue with potential attenders, exploring why they could choose your venue over others
- understand communities of interest from the inside and help you understand how your organisation is perceived from the outside
- surprise you with new ideas for promotion and programming and sometimes create and deliver those new programmes themselves
- help you spread information via online social networks.

There are also many benefits available to the ambassadors such as connection with other like-minded ambassadors, free tickets, work references, and sometimes

payment. However, for the very best ambassadors, the job of telling others about their favourite arts provider occurs as a pleasure rather than a duty. The commitment that ambassadors are prepared to give is frequently astonishing and should never be taken for granted.

A shift towards co-creation

Common approaches used in engaging ambassadors include the simple promotion model focused on short-term sales or the audience development model, which acknowledges the extensive relationship-building and internal change that is required to attract, satisfy and sustain new or non-traditional audiences. Those who start off with promotion can find they eventually need to consider changing aspects of their service and programme. People who are passionate about your venue and programme (or about their community) can be very good at helping you become better at serving them. The audience development model also often leads naturally to a third approach: co-creation – empowering ambassadors in the design and delivery of the artistic work itself, which Audiences London has termed the artistic development model.

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Things to watch out for

Anyone who has worked on outreach projects, friends schemes, referral marketing or community engagement will already have a good grounding in the type of relationship-building required to make an ambassador programme successful. There are several points worth considering at the start:

- Finding suitable ambassadors – online volunteer and job networks, friends of staff, current audiences and mini targeted advertising campaigns can be a good starting point.
- Management time – the biggest challenge and cost for most. Even for a handful of ambassadors, think of it as managing a new team or department and allow plenty of time for training, briefing, calls and evaluation.



- Setting boundaries – be clear at the start about whether you are open to changing the way your organisation works or not.
- Ineffective ambassadors – some will just be better than others, but don't just count new audience numbers: value the new connections, opportunities and ideas ambassadors bring too.
- Online ambassador work is important but don't forget that face-to-face and telephone conversations are very effective in prompting actual attendance.
- Arts ambassadors are trusted by their personal and social contacts and are generous in giving access to their networks. For this reason it is vital that they authentically believe in the product and that their time and efforts are respected.

Recommended

If marketing is about creating, keeping and satisfying customers, arts ambassadors have a great deal to offer. If new marketing is about facilitating dialogue, ambassadors are right at the centre of refining and evolving the way we communicate with our customers.

If you're keen to get started, the following resources are recommended:

www.artsambassadorresource.com for a free checklist, case studies and video clips on arts ambassadors, co-creation and other helpful resources

www.audienceslondon.org for a handy brief report on 'Working with arts ambassadors'

www.womma.org for all things word of mouth. ●



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Mel Larsen, arts marketing consultant, is the author of *A Practical Guide to Working with Arts Ambassadors* published by Arts Council England.

e mellarsen@me.com

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