

Guide

Audience data for touring companies – a practical guide

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Published 2013

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Audience data includes anonymised data such as postcodes and, more contentiously, names and addresses of audience members for direct marketing. For touring companies, audience data – and who has access to it – is the issue guaranteed to start arguments, set pulses racing and see marketing managers throwing (metaphorical) plates against the wall.

This needn't be the case. Many myths have sprung up around the implications of the Data Protection Acts for arts marketers. But the one universal rule is that the implications change dependent on the situation. There are ways for touring companies to get hold of audience data without breaking the law. Equally, we have to accept there isn't an easy solution applicable across the board for every venue-touring company relationship.

This guide is primarily for touring companies, but venue staff might find it interesting to see the arguments from a touring company's perspective. Let's look at five key questions: Why would I want audience data? Why might a venue be reluctant to give it to me? What does the law say? Could I actually manage all this data? And what can I do if a venue won't give it to me?

Why would I want audience data?

The first and most obvious reason a touring company wants audience data is to conduct its own direct marketing. It wants names, addresses and patterns of attendance, so that it can send letters or emails about future performances.

Secondly, the UK's funding bodies are demanding increasingly thorough data from touring companies in funding reports. When it comes to reporting back, the demands for data on where the audience lives, how old they are and so on are just as rigorous for touring companies as they are for venues. It's frightening for touring companies if they aren't getting the data from venues to meet their funders' demands.

Effective strategic planning is informed by audience data. But how can a touring company make informed decisions if it doesn't know who its audiences are?

Unfortunately, venues sometimes close down, or the management changes and a relationship with a touring company may end. In that event, a touring company wants audience data so that it doesn't have to start from scratch if it finds another nearby venue.

Finally, shared audience data can help with effective campaigns. All touring companies have experienced the beleaguered venue marketing manager who has to market 50 one-nighters

over the course of a season. By sharing audience contact details, touring companies can alleviate some of the strain by ensuring crucial mailings or emails don't get delayed to a point where they are less effective.

Why might a venue be reluctant to give me data?

Unfortunately, moralistic arguments such as, “we put on the show, so it’s our data”, are unlikely to cut much slack with venues. Nor, as we shall see, does it make any difference in the context of the law.

Venues have several quite reasonable fears about sharing data, which need to be managed.

Any venue worth its salt has well-planned customer relationship management, ensuring its communications with audiences are infrequent and targeted enough to remain effective. Venues fear touring companies will undermine this by communicating too often and with a different message.

It's perfectly legal to pass data on to a touring company, so long as the customer has been told what will happen to their data and been given the opportunity to opt-out. This, to say the least, is not a view commonly shared by venue managers. This is because the Data Protection Acts are complex and it's not easy (perhaps impossible) to establish a definitive interpretation. Therefore, venue managers often err, very understandably, on the side of caution. After all, if a venue passes data to you and you mishandle it, the venue can also face sanctions, including fines.

Even if a venue decides it wants to share data with a touring company, it may need to change what staff say to customers and the way it organises data on its box office system to ensure it complies with the Data Protection Acts. This may be costly and time consuming and therefore not a priority for the venue.

What does the law say?

In reality, the legality of passing on customer data to touring companies depends on the specific situation and what the audience members is told at the time of booking.

In [a series of case studies](#), Henderson and Maitland explain that, “the Data Protection Acts don't rule on who owns the data. They see everything from the general public's point of

view so the 'owner' is whoever the ticket buyer might reasonably assume they are doing business with. That could include the venue, company and promoter, if there is one. Ownership is not the issue here. Ticket buyers must give their specific informed consent to be contact by the company or the venue or both.”

'Specific informed consent' is the key phrase here. If an audience member is asked whether their contact details can be passed on to a touring company and they say no, those contact details cannot be passed on. Equally, a venue employing best data protection practice also needs to ask whether an audience member wants to join its own mailing list.

It's quite rare for a venue to ask an audience member booking a ticket whether they consent to data being passed to a specific touring company, with most referring to non-specific 'third parties' or 'other arts organisations'. If more venues could be persuaded to do this, it would be a breakthrough for touring companies. Indeed, marketing managers at touring companies sometimes fall asleep and dream of a funders' dictate forcing venues to do exactly that. However, this would have no effect on council-run or commercial venues.

Can I manage all this data?

This is an important question. There's no point wasting time and emotional energy on collecting data if you don't have the time or resources to do anything with it.

Firstly, you need password-protected database on which to store audience data - you can't just keep it in a spreadsheet on your desktop.

Secondly, it needs to be dynamic. If you are getting names and addresses from a venue, it's tempting to put them all together in a big list, segmented by geography and not much else. Unless your data is regularly updated, it's easy to end up with a list of names from years ago, with no indication of whether they are still attending, or even at the same address.

If you don't have access to a mailing house, franking machine or e-marketing system, communicating with large numbers of people becomes very expensive, particularly with the rapid increase in mailing costs.

Each touring company needs to evaluate what its resources can realistically achieve, and choose its data collection goals accordingly. There's no shame in accepting that in many cases, a venue may be able to do it more effectively and cost-efficiently.

Also make sure that you are not over-estimating how much the audience relates to you as a touring company. Numerous pieces of research suggest that the majority of audience members identify primarily with the venue, rather than the visiting company.

In a perfect scenario, work with the venue to identify the significant minority – probably repeat attenders who have come to identify more with the touring company - to develop a relationship that is beneficial for all concerned. Also use your company's specialist knowledge of your product to strengthen any campaign. In opera, a venue might naturally lump all opera and classical music attendees together. But if you want to persuade someone to attend a 20th century opera by Benjamin Britten, you'll want to send them a different message depending on whether they've a history of seeing Britten operas, or just classic titles such as *The Barber of Seville*.

What can I do if a venue won't give me any data?

The first thing to do is insert a data clause or data rider into your contract. Try to get this agreed early on, as contracts are often finalised late on, at which point the clause probably won't apply retrospectively.

Make sure the clause is realistic. There's no point writing 'Venue A agrees to pass all customer names and contact details to Touring Company B', as this would clearly contravene the Data Protection Acts. Do a bit of research into what questions the venue asks an audience member at the time of booking. If it doesn't currently ask permission to pass audience contact details on to the touring company, it is best to discuss this directly with the venue manager, rather than inserting it in the contract and hoping for the best. In the meantime, make sure you do get what you want in terms of anonymised audience data, particularly for funding reports.

Keep an open dialogue with the venue, and explain why sharing data would be mutually beneficial to your relationship by building audience loyalty.

You can also attempt manual collection of audience data by handing out mailing list cards at performances. Getting the contact details of your entire audience this way is near enough impossible, but it can be a useful way of getting to know those people who identify with the company and are happy for a deeper relationship.

Venues that want to be co-operative, but don't currently have the means to change their box office systems, can also be encouraged to send out one-off communications, asking

audience members to join the touring company's mailing list or complete a survey. An incentive, such as a competition, usually helps encourage audience members to sign up.

Conclusion

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to the problem of audience data for touring companies. There's no doubt touring companies need – and to date, have been hindered in obtaining – audience data for key marketing, reporting and planning objectives.

If you need to re-assess your approach, first analyse your capacity for handling data and read more case studies from the CultureHive archive. Then start talking to your venues, reassure them of the legal situation and encourage them to change their practices. And, if you receive public funding, don't forget to tell your funders about any difficulties you might be having.