

## **Hardish Virk, Multi-Arts Nation**

### ***Audience Development Essentials***

Hardish Virk has been an audience development consultant for over 15 years. This has included work on Birmingham Repertory Theatre's production of *The Ramayana*, Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Bombay Dreams* and The Lion's Den production of *Township Stories*. He has also led Birmingham Arts Marketing's Black and Minority Ethnic audience development project and has worked with Arts Council England and the British Council in Denmark, Norway and Sweden. He is currently on the Advisory Board on the Public Service Agreement 3 for the DCMS and speaks widely at seminars, training workshops and events in Europe.

In this session, Hardish Virk talked about three key elements of audience development; research, tools/methodologies and sustainability. It was an opportunity for delegates to learn how best to engage diverse communities and audiences through tailored marketing.

#### **Audience development**

As a result of being involved in audience development over a number of years Hardish has realised how much this is influenced by organisational development, which is especially relevant for today's theme of 'Mission Possible'. This particularly relates to the need for those organisations to have an awareness of their communities (for example regarding their ethnic diversity) in order to do good audience development work.

Much of the subject matter of the session has been built on the experience of developing culturally diverse audiences; however, the principles can be applied to a range of audience development scenarios.

When talking about audiences, this refers to a wide range of people interacting with your art or organisation: 'traditional' audiences, customers of any of your services, and the participants of programmes.

#### **Social marketing / (new) audience development**

Social marketing is an approach which

- Uses 'non-traditional' methods of marketing
- Is based on understanding the community of people you are targeting, taking into account their needs and social and cultural backgrounds
- Involves tailoring a (social) marketing/audience development action plan in relation to that understanding so that those communities can be turned into audiences

Social marketing is necessary because we have a responsibility to make our work accessible and standard or received ways of marketing have frequently not been successful in delivering audience diversity.

There are three key areas which are fundamental:

- Research
- Tools and methodologies: these can be quite straightforward, but it is about making them specific to the people we are trying to reach
- Sustainability: without the right research, tools and methodologies, sustainability is hard to achieve.

The essential components of this approach are

- Adequate human resources and realistic time - which come from integrity and commitment to the overall aim
- Partnerships – necessary to build trust in the community and to enable better returns from your resources

### **The process: research**

The process begins with an audit. Often, organisations are not aware of their existing strengths – what are the available human skills and resources – how can these support the project? What is the commitment of the whole organisation – is everyone involved? What and who are your existing partnerships? Can you build on these or reconnect with groups that have historically but not recently been involved? By utilising existing resources and building on knowledge, it is more likely that you will achieve sustainability.

Following this initial stage, it is then necessary to ask – which audiences and why? Why are you undertaking this specific initiative? There might be a specific cultural connection with the work or maybe there are political/funding reasons or you might have realised that your audience is not representative of your local community.

Then you are ready to do more specific research, beginning with making use of publicly available information (census, local authority etc) to learn more about the communities you are hoping to reach. This helps you to understand and identify the potential market: its size, diversity and location.

To support this process, you can then work with voluntary organisations in the locality to understand more qualitatively, the needs and attitudes of the relevant communities. In the case of The Hawth in Crawley for example, it was discovered that many people hadn't heard of 'The Hawth' even though they had been attending the Mela there each year. There was a job of local recognition, but in practice it was a simple connection to be made. It enables you to move beyond the assumptions we might make about groups and communities.

This needs to be authentic accurate credible information, which is followed up with action. A complaint of ethnic minority groups is that they are often being consulted but that no action is apparent as a result.

[Delegates were split into four groups to look at the ways in which they might put together a research plan for four different case studies]

### **Process: tools and methodologies**

The research described above is fundamental to adopting the best tools and methodologies.

- Print:
  - Design/language. If the object is to engage specific cultural community groups it is important to be aware of what are appropriate and not appropriate images and language. This is not about compromising the artistic vision.
 

HV often spends two months in discussion with artistic teams and designers before anything is started. Print should have full addresses of venues – find the space. Take time to make sure you understand how images are likely to be received, even down to the cultural significance and associations of certain colours.

Tone and terminology within copywriting also needs attention. For example, a much used word - 'exotic' - has negative connotations for some people.
  - Distribution. Not just about distributing print cold, important to use distribution teams to engage with people at the same time. It's about developing advocates, explaining what you are doing and why and enabling good word of mouth to spread. It's also part of the research process – finding out what's happening and what people are thinking.
 

A5 leaflets and A4 posters work especially well.
- Direct mail: sent out predominantly to community organisations that are trusted and well networked. Occasionally, it is worth thinking about producing newsletters in different languages, but be sure you know what you are doing.
- Press and media: build relationships with culturally specific press and don't be drawn into spending a great deal of money on advertising. They are always keen to find good stories.

### **Sustainability**

- Sustaining the community engagement: put the work of your initiative to good use. Develop the relationships and show you are genuine about what you are trying to do.
- Long-term: audiences continuing to engage your services. The most difficult aspect is the development of long term relationships with venues because often you will be able to attract new audiences through a specific product. Get to know your audience, listen to them and continue to broker dialogue.
- Partnerships are an important aspect of sustaining audiences:
  - Community/voluntary groups
  - Sponsors or funders
  - Networkers
  - Artists
  - Ambassadors Scheme

Sustainability is only possible if an organisation as a whole commits to developing and sustaining new audiences. It means directors of the board, front of house staff and everyone. This requires internal partnership work so that there is internal sharing of resources and knowledge.

If people inside the organisation do not take ownership of this area of work you are not going to get anyone outside to do so either.

Audience development needs be an important part of the organisation's business. Marketing and audience development staff need to be equipped with the right information and included in discussions that inform the mission statement.

Audience development can make the mission statement relevant to your most important future stakeholder – your audience.