Jo Taylor, Head of Marketing and Louise Miles-Crust, Artistic Programme Manager, Wales Millennium Centre
How to be friends with your audience and your artistic director

Jo Taylor is Head of Marketing for Wales Millennium Centre which celebrates its fifth birthday this year. The marketing team sits alongside programming with the arts and audience development portfolio, responsible for programming and delivering audiences for all spaces in the centre. Jo has worked in the field of arts marketing for fifteen years, previously as Head of Marketing at Welsh National Opera as well as for St George's, Bristol, Bath Festivals Trust, The Custard Factory and National Youth Music Theatre. Jo is a member of the board of the Arts Marketing Association and Audiences Wales.

Louise Miles-Crust is the Artistic Programme Manager for Wales Millennium Centre. She is tasked with the artistic programming of the Donald Gordon Theatre, Weston Studio and other spaces within the centre. The role sits in the Arts and Audience Development portfolio and is part of the senior management team. Her artistic programming team also covers learning and participation activities and projects such as *Criw Cymru*, tea dances, family days, *Breakin the Bay* and the Incubator Project. Louise joined the Wales Millennium Centre as a theatre programmer in 2004, prior to which she was the Arts Development Officer at the Cwmparc Arts Project in Treorchy. She is also a board member of Carlson Dance Company.

In this session, Jo and Louise shared their experience of the way that the restructure of the Centre, bringing its arts and progamming elements together, is working. They explored ways of harnessing the synergy between the audiences and the art, creating positive working partnerships and shared responsibilities across these divides.

Being friends

We have already heard so many things at this conference that are in tune with what we want to say that we hope it doesn't feel like a repetition, but a validation of trying different things.

Diane [Ragsdale], Dave [Moutrey] and Sarah [Perks] have all been very inspiring. Dave and Sarah have been on a journey which is different to WMC, but sharing a similar goal. Andy Ryan's point that it is no longer possible to say that 'we just do the marketing' is an excellent point.

The intention of this session is not that you go back to work and say that you want to restructure, but to share some lessons so that you can reach across existing silos of the organisation. This session shares a work in progress, having worked together for nine months it is not perfectly right but by sharing this with you, it will spark a lively debate.

The topics of the session were:
- Introduce Louise and clear the air
- Wales Millennium Centre restructure – the benefits and challenges
- Share some examples in practice
- Attitudes for success
- Explore ways of increased collaboration

[Jo introduced Louise Miles-Crust and introduced delegates to her work]

- Responsible for
    - Programming Donald Gordon Theatre
    - Weston Studio
    - Free foyer performances
    - Festivals
    - Collaborations with Centre's other eight resident organisations,
    - Education programme

- Delivering programmes with appropriate yield
    - Ie. audience ticket income net of overall expenditure

- She talks about audiences
    - She always asks us questions about the market, audience segments, audience development, what we want the audience to do next...
    - When she goes to see a potential show, one of the things she reports back on is what kind of people were in the audience (without being asked!)
    - This is her second AMA Conference – because she takes an active interest in the audience and what we are trying to achieve.
    - Sometimes we go and see shows together, because Louise asks me, sometimes we go on our own.

- BE NICE.
    - She is being very sporting and very brave
    - She knows not all of you are big fans of your artistic programmers and understands you may have frustrations. But don't we all?

She is a great colleague, collaborator and ally.

Previously … On Arts Marketing

These are all comments we might have made ourselves, or heard from others.

> *'My artistic director doesn't understand me.'*
>
> *'If I am going to get people to come to see this out-there/specialist performance, I am going to have to make them think it is more accessible.'*
>
> *'It just doesn't sound very appealing so I am marketing it. I am not dumbing down – I am trying to broaden the appeal to more people.'*
>
> *'I am not doing this to make the artist feel good – it's what the audience needs to hear.'*

> *'I am the marketer and I know what I need to say to make people book tickets.'*

On the other hand, those artistic programmers …

'They don't believe in the work. There must be some people out there intelligent and educated enough to get it.'

'The marketing team is so negative and pessimistic, they would prefer me to book another panto because it's easy to sell.'

'The artist is not going to like not having their photo/name in the brochure.'

'They are mis-selling it and making it sound popularist which it isn't – it's tortured beauty.'

Let's play... Family Fortunes

Before the conference, marketers were asked for the top 10 things that annoyed them about their Artistic Director. This was an anonymous survey. They said:

- possessive
- don't share information
- controlling
- hissy fits

Programmers and Artistic Directors were asked for the top 10 things that annoyed them about marketers. And they said...

- possessive
- don't share information
- controlling
- marketers get very up and down according to the latest sales
- don't want to take on board that programmers can help them
- part of the problem is that marketers talk about this all the time and have a professionalised industry; they have the language and that makes it difficult to communicate with them

The comments parallel each other in some respects, which seems to mean that if we all sat down to discuss these issues, we may find that we have more in common than we think.

However, it is possible that leading questions had been asked because some people (from both sides) responded that this was not their experience. Whilst it's possible that they are already working collaboratively, it was thought that some programmers might be slightly oblivious to a problem; many more marketers responded to the survey than programmers. Either there isn't a problem, or they may not have started to have the conversations with colleagues to say that they could be improving things. This could also be about location; if departments are at opposite ends of the building, it's very easy not to work together.

Is it possible to work in a different way?

The experience of the Wales Millennium Centre suggests we can at least think about new options. Eighteen months ago a restructure created a new portfolio:

Arts & Audience Development Portfolio

• Artistic Programming & Education
• Commercial Theatre Programming
• Marketing & Communications
• Corporate Affairs

Meaning:

• Marketing and Programming sit in the same team
• We share responsibility for audiences and income
• We share responsibility for the artistic and commercial theatre programmes
• We work in close collaboration

This is still a lot of potential as WMC continues to learn how to exploit the possibilities and understand one another. Everyone has their specialist areas, but the responsibility is on everybody's shoulders, rather than worrying about it individually. For example, the programmers tend to give colleagues a list of shows to go and see in Edinburgh every year, and when they get back they write reports about and share it. However, this takes a while to bed in.

Benefits

• Represents an organisation with art and audiences at its heart
• Marketing team has more exposure to the creative process and deeper understanding of the artistic ambitions
• Collaborative decision making
• Marketing Campaign Planning
• Creativity is central to what we do

There are other benefits to this 100% collaborative process:

• CRM is usually based on a financial argument, but this model allows CRM artistic ambitions
• We can use the audience to influence programming decisions

When I [Jo] arrived nine months a go I discussed the structure because I wanted to understand it. It is a place that puts art and audiences at the heart of the activity and the arts and audience development portfolio represents this change.

It does mean that the marketing team has more exposure to the way the work arrives on stage. This is critical if they are going to help the audience on their creative journey. The WMC is developing an audience that is going in the right direction for the organisation and the artists.

Marketing Campaign Planning

- The process we go through to plan a marketing campaign – starting with what words and images we're going to use to describe the art – involves the programming team.

- We know we are experienced marketers, so should not be defensive or threatened by other people having ideas and making suggestions – instead snap up the good ones!

- They are the ones who have programmed the work – theirs is the passion that we want to convey to the audience.

- Marketing should be the invisible seam between the art and the audience – not the loud door-to-door salesman who takes the art and layers on "marketing speak" in order to push an audience into believing they need it. Speak "the beautiful truth".

- Respect audience / encourage dialogue and curiosity / understand risk in context.

- Telling the right stories to the right people at the right time

If you were to ask your colleagues: out of all the artforms which do you rate the highest, the most moving, the most profound, it is more likely to be at the riskier end of the spectrum.

Why is it that we (marketers) are all comfortable with taking risks. We are not more intelligent than our audiences, but perhaps it is because we have constant access to the creative process. By the I [Jo] have seen a show at the centre, I've usually seen it before, seen the set design, spoken to the designer and the singers who are in it. By the time I get to the performance, I've been on a long journey of discovery.

We seem to expect our audiences to face the performance cold - and enjoy it. If everybody wants to go to easy stuff, it's that they haven't had access to that creativity. Now gaining access can be difficult, because artists can be quite closed; however, as marketers if we want to facilitate that relationship, we have to get on with our programmers. In practical terms, this is about talks, backstage tours, encounters and workshops with artists and company members, etc. Jo doesn't have access to this through marketing, but Louise does through her role and interaction with companies and artists, providing a conduit and channel.

This approach advocates CRM for artistic ambitions. It is considered better to develop existing audiences because they are cheaper to develop. However, CRM is also essential for audience development. If we are constantly seeking new audiences, then we can take fewer artistic risks, because they are not as far along the path as existing audiences. In turn, this enables our audiences to be better risk takers, to get closer to the artist and be more experimental.

We may feel that we don't have enough hours in the day to do this; but how can we sell the work effectively if we don't have an intimate relationship with it? People can't do all of this all the time, but we can take away smaller bits. Any change is better than none.

One thing that we [Jo and Louise] do every month is to have a 'show and tell' session. It could be any of the number of events that the centre manages, so we sit down and talk about what we think before it's pencilled in the diary. It is genuinely a shared decision from the beginning.

A shared decision means that everyone has to take responsibility for the consequences. It wipes out the age-old argument: if this show sells, it's got nothing to do with marketing; if the show doesn't sell it's got everything to do with marketing. We don't set ticket prices in isolation, so we can't argue about that either.

Creativity is central to what we do

- Programmers are a good influence on marketers

- We are a creative industry – be creative. Creativity is not for the preserve of the performers on the stage.

- Innovation, learning, showing, educating...

- Delivering on our brand promise: Ensuring an accurate match between public expectation and artistic vision – programmers and marketers have to work together to achieve this.

- It encourages the marketing team to see our role as part of supporting the creative mission.

Examples in Practice 1: Contemporary Dance

An example of how programming ambition has inspired marketing to grow audience through accessing the creative process/ packaging.

- Amazing world-class work on offer
- WMC stage perfect for dance
- Dance famously hard to sell
- No current provision in Cardiff
- Need to create a market from scratch
- Would be great to develop strong, confident loyal audience for dance
- National Dance Company Wales

The centre was starting with an audience base of zero. We didn't know where the audience would be or what they would like, so initiatives had to be devised along the way:

- Community ballet - a PR initiative, putting on dance classes in the public area. Real people turned up to join in with the dancers.

- A new series of commuter classes, so that people can drop in and warm up before they go to work

- Dance Deal is a package to encourage more frequent dance attendance across the different genres. This is slowly building up, including a reception open to everybody. Now WMC is stepping it up a gear (commissioned articles, insight events, demos, artform guide, commuter ballet).

Marketing influencing the programming

Seeing the work is essential, it's how we pick up the extra information that can help sell it. For example, through conversations at the bar with the NDT2, we discovered that the

dancers all live in the same house; this could be a story that picks up on Big Brother, and could also make the visiting company stand out.

Traditionally, participation and engagement have been overshadowed by the main stage, so organisations struggle to get their message across. But inspired by The Sage Gateshead programme, audience participation and engagement are planned alongside participation.

Through working together, some aspects of marketing have been revisited. There is now one brochure called *Make It Yours*, listing and featuring all of the participatory activities. It is divided into strands but the activity is dictated by where it belongs and not what it is.

Audiences now only need two brochures to find out all of the things that are happening at the Wales Millennium Centre. The copy has changed so that it no longer describes where but *how* the programme fits the audience. The way in which different strands fit into the programme are influenced by the audience responses and needs.

<u>Three attitudes needed to succeed</u>

RESPECT

Just as the organisation must respect the audience members and their ability to respond to the work.

- Each other's understanding of their and your part of the business

- Each other's common goals and differences of opinion

- That an opinion can be subjective

- Specialist product knowledge (as you wish them to respect your market insight)

- Have you read the creative policy/ programming strategy?

OPENNESS AND WILLINGNESS TO BE CHALLENGED

Just as the organisation should be willing to enter into a dialogue with the audience – demonstrating a real curiosity and creating open channels of communication.

- Demonstrate a genuine willingness to understand and learn from one another

- Be open. Share information, tactics and strategy – don't be protective

- Share responsibility – this is a shared journey

- Do not be defensive – if you are confident in yourself why be threatened?

- They may have great ideas – they may be right

- Take advantage of their strengths, skills, knowledge and expertise

- If you want to influence you must be open to influence

- Start with small collaborations – writing copy together?

EMPATHY

Just as the organisation should have empathy for the audience – understanding artistic risk in context of previous experiences.

• Understand their challenges, know when to give space and support

• Goals can appear to conflict where discussion and exploration can uncover synergy

• Take an interest

• Avoid blame and selfishness

• Celebrate each other's successes and share success (as well as failure)

Imagine a world where...

You don't need to restructure to learn from some of the lessons we've learned and see some of the benefits into practice

• By more collaborative working you can add value mutually

• Think about the dynamic in your organisation

• What influence do programming and marketing decisions have over one another's decisions and approaches?

• You can influence change. Rather than moaning about what someone does or doesn't do, discuss the benefits with them, articulate, educate, prepare to listen and be educated (as we do with audiences)

Discuss....

Delegates commented and gave their reactions the presentation. Points included:

• Artistic directors can sometimes be less brave than marketers. As marketers we often tone it down and don't reason through our arguments

• Having an opportunity to bring in the artist/maker to share thinking definitely breaks down departmental barriers

• Speaking and working with creatives gives insight as well as additional stories to add to the show

• Timewise, this approach is a challenge, but it can be broken down into specific events, artforms or even times of year

• Asking the audience what questions they would ask the artist can be illuminating

Pledge to do something differently

- Organise an internal online questionnaire across your department (anonymous response, so about the role, not the person).

- Create an identity for the season and talk it through (like Jo and Louise) with the Artistic Director

- Write up the WMC experience to share as a case study

- Embed current good practice in policy, job descriptions, etc – succession planning.