

CBSO AMBASSADORS – MAKING THE MOST OF YOUR SUPPORTERS' ENTHUSIASM

Melanie Brooker and Jessica Silvester

Melanie Brooker and Jessica Silvester described the CBSO Cultural Ambassadors scheme, which was devised to persuade committed audience members to encourage new attenders who wouldn't otherwise have attended a CBSO concert.

Many CBSO Society members (friends of the orchestra/a priority mailing list) already contribute financially to the CBSO through our individual-giving scheme, CBSO Patrons. But we knew, both from speaking to them at concerts and other member events, and from the positive response we get when asking for volunteers to steward at performances or to stuff envelopes, that many of them would like to get involved in helping the art form and organisation that they support and are passionate about.

We also knew from informal feedback that some Society members, patrons and subscribers already try to 'spread the word' about the CBSO and its work, and they try to encourage people to attend (for example, they sometimes bring people who are visiting the city to a CBSO concert, they organise groups around their birthdays, or occasionally recruit friends and acquaintances as Society members or subscribers).

With this in mind, the CBSO Cultural Ambassadors scheme ran during our last season, with help from the New Audiences fund. The scheme was devised to channel this enthusiasm and commitment, by capitalising on these people's time, energy and experience of concert-going and classical music to encourage new paying audiences who wouldn't otherwise have attended a CBSO concert.

Objectives

To be more specific, the aim of the scheme was 'to attract 500 new audience members to CBSO concerts in Symphony Hall, Birmingham, by using the concepts of pyramid selling, personal contacts and peer-to-peer selling'.

This would be achieved through the creation of 'a network of well-briefed voluntary supporters who would be willing to evangelise about the orchestra and its work, and who have a sufficiently diverse social network to encourage parties from their friends and acquaintances, or from membership of a club or society'. The kind of groups we had in mind included sports clubs, Women's Institute groups, Rotary clubs, Probus clubs, University of the Third Age or Open University groups, local church groups, friends' organisations, local school or youth groups, through to musical societies, choirs, music appreciation groups and gramophone societies.

In trying to recruit Ambassadors we were intending to target recently retired CBSO Society members/patrons who were relatively time-rich. Post retirement, many people are now actively seeking ways to stay involved with their local communities and we hoped that these Society members and patrons would consider this kind of scheme to be doing just that.

We hoped that through the scheme these Ambassadors would persuade their friends, acquaintances, colleagues and neighbours who wouldn't otherwise have attended a CBSO

concert to actually attend. (In the main we were looking for people who were totally new to the CBSO but the targets also included those who had lapsed for three or more years.)

The scheme was to be a relatively hands-off way of bringing in new audiences, by effectively out-sourcing this to the Ambassadors. There would be little to lose in running such a scheme as it would have a minimal impact on ticketing in that the new audiences would be paying audiences and we weren't selling out on the majority of concerts anyway. And even if we had been selling out it wouldn't be difficult to justify to the finance managers as they were paying (whereas with schemes such as 'Test Drive, justifying the initial outlay of free tickets to finance managers would be more difficult). We also hoped that the leap from attending in an Ambassador group to becoming a 'normal' paying customer would not be too great.

The planning and running of the Ambassadors scheme

As we ran the scheme, we realised that a whole range of barriers had to be overcome.

Barriers for our Friends

The first barrier was how to persuade our Friends to take part. We sent an individually addressed letter to all Society members and patrons asking for their support and playing on their loyalty. The letter invited them to attend an introductory evening or to request further information, and we emphasised that there was absolutely no commitment at this stage. However, it was also necessary to make it clear that the scheme would require some considerable effort on their part.

We offered them several incentives for undertaking peer-to-peer selling on our behalf. Each Ambassador was entitled to a free concert ticket for each group of at least ten new people that they brought. The Ambassadors' guests bought their tickets for the concert at 25% discount, greater than the usual group booking rate of 20%. The Ambassador and their guests also received a series of other benefits at the concert, including free concert programmes, the chance to meet musicians and staff and a separate hospitality area.

We launched the scheme with an introductory evening, combining a series of presentations about the scheme, including a step-by-step guide to the scheme and a presentation on how to drum up interest from among colleagues and friends. With the benefit of hindsight, this was probably not the best way to go about launching the scheme, for reasons that are explained in the evaluation at the end.

We realised that once we had recruited the Ambassadors, we then had to conquer the practical, perceptual and psychological barriers presented by their potential guests.

Practical barriers

We felt that there were a number of practical barriers to attendance: the inconvenience of booking tickets, waiting to get through to the box office; the difficulties of getting to and from Symphony Hall at night, particularly from some of the rural areas where public

transport is limited; concerns about personal safety; the crush at the bars on concert nights; and the queues for the cloakrooms.

We tried to resolve all these issues. First, we removed the box office from the equation for the new attenders. They sorted out their ticket requests with their Ambassador, who in turn sorted them out directly through the CBSO. The tickets were then mailed to the Ambassador in advance of the concert. This meant that we had to reserve a series of seats in each of the price areas of the hall for each of the recommended concerts. We only offered the mid-priced seats as we felt these were not too challenging in terms of the financial risk they presented to the guests, but that the cheapest seats did not have a high enough return for us and also were not located in the best areas of the Hall for first-timers. We then asked the Ambassador to gauge interest and to choose a concert. They telephoned to reserve the seats in their preferred price area, before going away to get their group of guests together. The group size had to be at least 11 people, including the Ambassador. The Ambassador distributed the tickets, and was phoned the day before the concert to check that everything was in place.

Secondly, the whole experience of attending a CBSO concert in a group automatically removed many of the guests' concerns about transport and safety. Many of the Ambassadors chose to book minibuses to bring their guests into the centre of Birmingham, solving the problem of lack of public transport from some of the more rural areas.

Finally, we addressed the problems at the concert hall by ensuring that the foyer area reserved for Ambassadors was available from one hour before the concert and that whoever was on duty was ready to welcome them. We provided all the Ambassadors with a drink order form in advance and so the drinks were ready for them on arrival, removing the problems of queuing at the bar. We also provided them with a coat rail and looked after their possessions for them.

Perceptual and psychological barriers

We thought that the Ambassadors would be concerned about any questions that their potential guests might ask them about the CBSO, and that this was likely to be one of the biggest barriers to both persuading our supporters to become Ambassadors in the first place and to the Ambassadors being able to convince their friends or colleagues to give the CBSO a try. We overcame this by briefing the Ambassadors with the answers to some of the most likely questions. For example:

- *Classical music is elitist* – No, it's not. We have mixed audiences of many ages and backgrounds. You don't need to dress up to come along. The reason that the orchestra wear black evening dress is that it is simply a smart uniform and, just like school, a dress code makes life much simpler.
- *But I'm not a musician* – I'm tone deaf. If your ears work OK, then open them. You are allowed not to like a piece of music, but just be prepared to give things a go and you might be pleasantly surprised.
- *But I won't understand what is going on* – You don't need to. It isn't a test. There's a lot to read in your free concert programmes but all you really need to do is listen, relax and watch. Don't worry about trying to 'understand' the music, just enjoy it.

Although Ambassadors were briefed, we realised that the venue and the traditions of attending a concert could still be quite intimidating when new attenders actually arrived, so we decided to welcome all the groups on their arrival at Symphony Hall and answer any questions that they might have. Musicians from the orchestra also joined the Ambassadors groups in the interval, enabling guests to ask questions about life in an orchestra, or the music that they had just heard. It helps if you can find musicians who don't mind being asked what their day job is and whether they play the violin in the first half and percussion in the next! However, it has the great advantage of making the guests feel special and giving them a musician to look out for on the stage after the interval.

Another barrier to first-time attendance is the fear of unknown music being performed. There is a high perceived risk of attending if people do not know what any of the pieces sound like and whether they will enjoy them. The medium of print isn't much help, as sound cannot be conveyed through a brochure.

We therefore selected a series of concerts throughout the CBSO's main season that we thought were suitable for first-timers. They contained music that had a lot to watch as well as to listen to, with big brass and percussion sections. We also tried to choose programmes that included repertoire that the Ambassadors' guests might recognise from other sources and at the approachable end of classical music.

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation

Although we felt that we had solved many of the barriers to first-time attendance, we realised that our biggest source of information about the evening was from the attenders themselves and so the day after the concert, I phoned each of the Ambassadors and talked to them about how they felt the evening had gone, and what was done well and what could be done better.

We also felt that it was important to follow up all the guests. On the booking form we had included a space for the Ambassador to complete the name and address of each of their guests which we checked against our database to ensure that they were truly first-timers. The day after the concert, each of the guests was sent a personalised letter thanking them for attending and enclosing a discount pass. This entitled them to 20% off any tickets for CBSO concerts until the end of December 2000 for them and one other guest.

Results of the scheme

The initial mailing about the scheme and the introductory evening went out to around 2000 Society member and patron households. The response wasn't overwhelming in that 23 households accepted the invitation to the evening, while 28 households replied saying they couldn't come to the evening, but they were interested in receiving more information about the scheme. As a result of the evening, and Jessica's follow-up phone calls to those who had expressed an interest, 20 Ambassadors were recruited in total, i.e. 1% of all those who were mailed. Only six of those 20 had actually come to the introductory evening.

The groups which these Ambassadors brought comprised personal friends, groups of neighbours, groups of work colleagues, church groups, and groups made up from members of societies and clubs. The majority came from outside the centre of Birmingham and many of the groups from further afield arranged their own group transport such as a minibus or coach, suggesting that the public transport infrastructure is a barrier to attendance. Many of the attenders had known about the orchestra and the hall and had been 'meaning to attend' for years, but just hadn't got round to it.

There were ten concerts which were recommended in the Ambassador pack as being particularly suitable for first-timers and for which we had seats on reserve for Ambassador groups. All the concerts attracted Ambassador groups, suggesting that we'd chosen concerts for first-timers reasonably well, and on average there were about three groups in each night. In the main Ambassadors just brought one group, but three brought two groups, one brought three groups and one excelled by bringing four groups. The number of guests we had in on each night ranged from 11 (with just one group) to 117 (several groups).

We had asked Ambassadors to get together a group of at least ten new attenders, as we had wanted to make sure that they had really 'earned' their free ticket! Perhaps had the size of the group been set at a lower level, say six, the interest from the initial mailing might have been higher. However, for those who did become Ambassadors it seems that we could have set the group size at a higher level in that the average party size was 17.9 people.

The aim of the pilot scheme was to bring in 500 new attenders to CBSO concerts, and when we hit the sum button on the spreadsheet of bookings we did a double-take, as the 28 groups which the Ambassadors brought contained exactly 500 guests in total. Unfortunately, there's more to it than that because not all of these people were new attenders. Some Ambassadors had expressed concerns about being able to find groups that were made up entirely of people who had not attended in the past three years. We had allowed them to include more recent attenders but these people only received the normal group booking discount of 20% as opposed to the 25% that was offered under the scheme. When the Ambassadors were making their bookings with us we were told that 32 of the 500 tickets were sold to people who had attended more recently than three years.

When we added the names and addresses of Ambassadors' guests to our database, we found that we already held the names of 30 of the 247 guest groups. As the vast majority of the Ambassadors' guests attended in pairs, this would equate to roughly 60 attenders who already attended CBSO concerts. Either some of the Ambassadors had not told us of their 'not entirely new' attenders, or mistakes were made when Ambassadors were vetting their groups. Or perhaps people couldn't always recall accurately the last time they came to a CBSO concert. In fairness, we know that there is a considerable amount of confusion by the public between the CBSO and Symphony Hall.

Even taking into account these 60 people who were already attending, we can confidently say that the scheme brought 440 totally new attenders to a CBSO concert, and it would also be fair to say that in the main the frequency of attendance of the other 60 people had been increased.

Financially those 500 tickets put us £6,639.50 gross nearer to being in the black (although this doesn't take into account the costs of the scheme), and the ticket yield for those tickets was £13.28 – around £1 less than our overall ticket yield last season, because of the discount they received. The stalls turned out to be by far the most popular area; 251 of the tickets were for stalls seats.

The discount cards, which all the Ambassadors' guests were sent the day after they attended the concert, were valid for performances until Christmas this year. They entitle the user to a 20% discount on up to two tickets per performance. So far the bookings on this card have not been terribly encouraging, either in volume of tickets sold under the cards or in the number of people who have used them. Box office records show that 13 people have used the cards so far. However, only six of these appeared to be Ambassador guests, the implication being that the box office staff have not been strict in comparing the names on the cards with those who are booking. They seem to have been passed onto people who the new attenders knew would make good use of them – including one subscriber and two society members. Also only three of these six who were Ambassador guests were actually among the 440 new attenders, the other three being among the 60 who had come before.

These bookings on the discount cards accounted for 45 tickets valued at a total of £716. However, the good news is that we do already know that many groups will be revisiting next season, containing many of the same people next year. Therefore, it seems that the leap from group attender where the concert is chosen for them and the booking sorted out for them to booking off their own back is too large for these cards to be a big enough incentive to be effective immediately after the first attendance.

Evaluation of the Ambassadors scheme

There were aspects of the scheme that did not work as well as we might have hoped and which we have learnt from for the future. Many of the problems with the scheme were due to logistics and administration and detailed below are some of the lessons we have learnt:

Try to predict ticket demand in advance

First, try to predict ticket demand well in advance. Because we did not receive confirmation of the New Audiences funding until after booking for the main season had opened, and because the CBSO has such a strong subscription base, it was difficult to hold off the required seats for Ambassadors in all the selected areas, resulting in some groups being split throughout Symphony Hall.

The introductory evening was not necessary

Second, you may find that the introductory evening is not necessary. It was interesting that most of the people who attended that night did not end up as the Ambassadors, suggesting that we didn't need to launch the scheme with an introductory evening and that the pack of introductory information was sufficient.

We misjudged the type of people who would attend the introductory evening, thinking they were likely to be people with little experience of schemes like this, who would need more information and would be seeking reassurance that this was something that they both wanted, and were able, to do. However, most of the people who attended were committee members of various voluntary organisations who had regular experience of organising events and trips, so they were not interested in our presentations on how to recruit new attenders, as they already had a great deal of experience. They were much more interested in the benefits of the scheme, asking many detailed questions about its future and presenting many different scenarios. In several cases we just had to say that we would discuss their group's requirements on an individual basis.

Furthermore, as they were part of structured organisations, many had regular newsletters, which meant that they required a much greater lead-in time for the concerts to meet the newsletter deadlines. Many of them wanted to organise groups for the following CBSO season, starting in September 2000; but the funding from the Arts Council finished in April.

We also found that because of the structure of their various organisations, the events that they usually organised took very definite formats, and they were all very keen to mould our scheme to that pattern. Despite wanting to be as helpful and flexible as possible, we had developed a scheme with a certain structure and needed to maintain it.

Transport barriers

The Ambassadors mainly organised groups from their work or local community rather than from national organisations such as the Rotary Clubs. The overwhelming reason that the Ambassadors undertook the scheme was a lack of adequate transport from their areas. The majority of their guests were intenders who needed the practical barriers removed before becoming attenders. By presenting the guests with a complete package which removed the inconvenience of choosing a concert, booking tickets and making their way into Birmingham, combined with the safety and social aspects of attending in a group, they were keen to give the CBSO a try.

Although the Ambassadors were prepared to spend a great deal of time organising their groups, some of them were concerned by the financial risk involved in organising transport. They felt that the CBSO should offer marketing assistance where necessary to help them fill remaining coach places. We suggested that they could divide the coach costs between more realistic numbers of guests and that any profit generated by increased numbers could either go to the Ambassador, be donated to the CBSO or spent on local advertising to increase group numbers further.

Difficulties with the hospitality facilities at the venue

We also faced some difficulties on the concert nights themselves. Symphony Hall relies on the catering facilities provided by the NEC group and as the resident orchestra, the CBSO is dependent on the NEC group as well. There are no hospitality rooms available on the ground floor of the Hall, which was a problem as most of the Ambassadors' groups were located in the stalls. We therefore needed to use a roped-off area in the foyer.

On several occasions, the catering staff decided that it was necessary to move the designated Ambassadors area from one foyer to another. Although in all cases we contacted the Ambassador in advance, in some cases some confusion arose as to where they were supposed to meet and some of the guests got lost. We also had to rely on the bar staff to prepare the pre-ordered drinks correctly. They managed this on most occasions until they provided 20 coffees instead of 20 cups of tea one evening!

Relations with existing attenders

The enclosed area also unfortunately caused problems with some of our regular audience members. We had ended up fencing off an area where they usually stood or sat in the interval and they could see that these groups of people were getting special treatment. Although on all occasions we explained to them what the scheme was about, and most were supportive, we also realised that alienating some of our current supporters is not a good idea.

Because the Ambassadors area was in the public foyer we also had to be very vigilant about looking after the coats, free programmes and refreshments which meant that the concert evenings were quite hard work for the member of staff on duty. It also meant that we were unable to hear the concert, which made it difficult to answer questions about it in the interval.

Exit strategy

Finally, we needed to think about our exit strategy earlier in the scheme. We had initially thought that some of the Ambassadors' guests might become the new Ambassadors of the future. However, we realised very early on that this was too ambitious a goal and decided to encourage the Ambassadors' guests to return to the CBSO with a couple of guests of their own and become regular attenders in that way.

However, as the results have shown, the take-up from the Ambassadors' passes was not high. We didn't foresee it, but what the scheme actually established was that there is a large potential market for group bookings from either groups of work colleagues located near the city centre or from community or village groups from further afield. We therefore adapted the initial exit strategy as we went along. We wanted to encourage the Ambassadors and their guests to move over towards the group booking scheme, and slowly remove the additional benefits until they became self-supporting groups in their own right.

However, Ambassadors felt that the scheme had worked so well because of the whole package offered. When asked which of the benefits they would be prepared to lose, they were not happy to lose any. They also said that as the scheme continued, their groups would consist of a mixture of previous guests and completely new attenders. They were adamant that we should not divide the scheme into previous Ambassadors groups and new ones, but that the benefits should be consistent.

Lessons learnt

Our overall feeling about the scheme is that it works and we will be continuing it next season. We were a little apprehensive about trying to meet our targets when we only had 20 people who had volunteered to become Ambassadors at the outset, but we realised as we ran the scheme that actually it's the quality of the people you recruit rather than the quantity that matters, and all 20 Ambassadors worked hard in bringing in their groups.

Even though we were outsourcing a lot of the work of bringing in new attenders to the Ambassadors themselves, it is still a fairly labour-intensive scheme to run. Once the Ambassadors have been recruited, it doesn't stop there: they still need servicing and support from the office, and making arrangements with the box office over reservations and bookings, and also arranging the concert nights and follow-up after the concerts is quite time consuming. Our motto for future schemes would have to be 'keep it simple'. We would like these new audience members to stand on their own two feet fairly quickly, and offering them so much may not be the answer.

Another lesson that we learnt was how important it was to have a dedicated member of staff looking after the scheme, and this was an aspect that worked very well. It is very important that the Ambassador trusts the contact at your organisation, as by bringing their friends or colleagues to your performance they are taking a risk that their friends might not enjoy themselves, and this is magnified by the fact that their friends are paying for their tickets, albeit at a discounted rate. They need to feel able to discuss the event and the programme with you to establish whether it will suit their party. A good relationship with the Ambassadors also helps in monitoring the scheme and protecting it from abuse. Unfortunately, we did have one Ambassador who took advantage of the scheme to bring people who were not new attenders. It is essential that the list of guests is constantly checked against your box office data to prevent this happening.

Conclusions

Despite some slight hitches, the scheme was a success. To gain 440 completely new paying attenders for CBSO concerts and to encourage another 60 to increase their frequency of attendance is no mean feat. We will obviously have to see how many return in the future, but we intend to build on these foundations, and by recognising these barriers to attendance, will be able to continue to break them down.

It's also important not to view the scheme as an answer to all our audience development needs:

- As we've used our current supporters to recruit new supporters, in the main we have ended up with new attenders who are similar to our current audiences.
- It hasn't addressed issues such as ethnic diversity (although if Ambassadors were recruited specifically to do this, the scheme, with some adaptation, might be capable of addressing that).

However, the scheme does promote access and it has tackled certain social exclusion factors such as isolation due to lack of public transport. The Ambassadors are also keen for us to introduce a further discount under the scheme for young people, and that is something we are intending to implement for our next season.

Perhaps the most surprising outcome of the scheme is that it seems we have (quite undeliberately) developed our group market, more so than the original intention of developing advocates for the CBSO and classical music. Only one Ambassador I have talked to actually seemed to be proactively trying to persuade/convert people who weren't already 'intenders' with regard to classical music concerts.