

Mel Larsen, Consultant

Customer Creations

Mel Larsen has worked in the arts across the UK and abroad for over 20 years. Her clients have included Arts Council England, The Australian Arts Council, MLA London, The National Trust, English Heritage and The British Council. Previously she worked as Administrator for Black Mime Theatre and as Marketing Officer for Talawa Theatre Company before joining the A.R.T.S. consultancy, prior to becoming an independent consultant in 1999. Mel has worked on the groundbreaking *Not for the Likes of You* project as part of the Morton Smythe Associates team and was a coach on the AMA's Step Up professional coaching scheme. She is author of *A Practical Guide to working with Arts Ambassadors* (Arts Council England 2003). She founded the Streatham Festival and was Artistic Director for five years for which she received a Lambeth Civic Award in 2007.

This workshop was about ways of working with audiences to develop new marketing ideas and solutions. Using examples of arts ambassadors, ideation groups and co-creation, Mel explored how these methods can help marketers think about things in a fresh way and bring the audience on to the team to help enhance audience development activities.

[The responses to the exercise was taken from the first session]

Customer Creations

There are three main topics of the session: **co-creation**, **ideation** and **arts ambassadors**. This was to include a session in which everyone would have an opportunity to have a go at ideation.

Co-creation

Co-creation is the process of creating something with others. It's a trend which is much talked about at the moment. Some of this complements what Dave Moutrey was saying about Cornerhouse and its new way of working [see Report Part 1: Keynotes].

At a conference a couple of years ago I heard someone say that *the future belongs not to the expert but to those who can consult*. Being a consultant this was obviously great! But more than this, it is good because it shows a trend away from us saying we have all the answers.

Co-creation brings the audience on team. Your audience is the expert in what you offer. The key thing is to open up the dialogue in the right way so that they can shape your brand, products, promotion and engagement strategies. Two heads are better than one so why not twenty or a million?

They can also bring a fresh perspective, or take you in a new direction and inspire and challenge you. If you are lucky they can help you innovate or sometimes solve problems.

Over the last eight years I have been working with a couple of market research companies to help them work with brands to co-create and develop new ways of developing products and new ways of talking about products. A group of us talk through creative ideas with the company. It's great fun – often it can involve playing with toys, playing games, brainstorming.

They have a range of creative thinking games which they have developed and I will give you a flavour of later.

Lego is one of the leaders in co-creation. They sell products that have actually been designed by consumers – a range called Mindstorms. It's no longer just about little bricks, but includes computer chips and more sophisticated ways of putting things together. So they have developed programmable robots. Users started hacking into the programmes and then uploading details of how to do it on the web. Normally, a company would sue people who did this but instead Lego decided to work with them to devise a new range of products.

So where are the examples in the arts?

When I set up the Streatham Festival in 2002 I didn't have a blueprint for the way such a festival should be run, so we decided to put out an invitation for people to put on whatever they wanted to. This apparently was quite unusual but it worked well. The festival started with about 50 events which ranged from the fantastic to the terrible but it didn't matter too much because everyone was involved. We didn't have an artistic agenda but we wanted people to connect and to have an authentic connection. Over the years, though chaotic at times, it has been very exciting and has developed a huge number of events.

The National Trust has produced a couple of books: *Caribbean Herbal* and *Sacred Quran*. People from the local Caribbean community of Charlecote Park in the West Midlands were brought together to put together this very beautiful book about the herbs which are growing around the house and gardens.



At Wightwick Manor, the local Muslim community were asked to produce a book based on texts from the Quran. There are lots of stories and ways of enabling people to understand the Quran whilst also being linked to the National Trust property. It's more than a marketing tool.

The Museums Libraries and Archives produced a three year programme in which young people were asked to help develop the museum experience. It began with peer research

about what young people thought of museums and then moving into a process of working with 'young consultants' to develop the offer. They created holiday boxes, plays performed in the space, posters and trails. They were given a fair degree of ownership.

Tate Britain has its 'write your own label' scheme and there are many organisations which are being creative in their education departments, but perhaps it is time for the marketing departments to make better use of these techniques.

There are many ways of gaining this input – you could bring in experts to facilitate it, you could bring in groups of enthusiasts and work with them, you could put out a call asking for people to improve something. An additional by-product of this process is the additional publicity that comes from the blogs and chat rooms talking about. Lego encourages consumers to talk to other consumers as well.

Ideation

This is the process of creating new ideas. It can be used for innovating, designing, problem solving. At its most basic level it could mean bringing together people to play with a few ideas, turning things round and asking people to consider 'what if' scenarios. If you are going to do this, you will need to provide a stimulus – opportunities for dialogue, making it playful and enabling people to explore.

It's helpful if you include people who are willing to break the rules, or who don't mind saying something which is a bit silly. Members of the audience are often good at doing this because they are not inside the organisation and therefore don't think about what is not possible. They're not afraid to contribute ideas which are out of the ordinary. Then perhaps one in ten of these ideas might really be the light bulb idea.

I'm currently working with young people at the Docklands Museum, looking at ways of attracting young people, especially teenagers. We began by looking round the galleries talking about what they like or dislike and how we might develop the promotion of the gallery. Then we used a creative device called 'force fit' in which you put together two seemingly disconnected ideas to stimulate thinking. For example, 'what would happen if you crossed Kylie Minogue with museums?' with all ideas being welcome.

Mel then worked with the delegates to try this out on the spot. Delegates were asked to think of something to connect with museums, the first suggestion being 'Alan Carr'. Delegates were asked to shout out characteristics of Alan Carr: teeth, glasses, camp silly voice, irritating, chubby, funny, 'it's me'. Then delegates were invited to contribute their impressions of museums: quiet, cold, interesting, old, stuffed animals, free, school trips, nostalgic, musty smell.

Then one from each was selected: chubby and stuffed animals. So we can then think around a particular part of the marketing mix using these two to create a new idea

- Campaign around chubby animals and its relation to obesity – healthy eating habits for your pets.
- Plush toys – connection with the new craft movement

This was a very quick answer. In longer, more relaxed scenarios you would be surprised with the great ideas that emerge. It works because it takes you out of your standard ways of thinking down new pathways – away from our habitual ways of thinking.

At the Docklands Museum they had an exhibition about Jack the Ripper, which also rather interestingly had a stuffed dog. So in the exercise combined the stuffed dog with Dr Who and as a result we came up with celebrity dog computer game solve your own crime. Time and death were then combined to produce a game called Time Stopper in which you could stop time in a video game.

A discussion about the sugar and slavery exhibition turned out to be difficult for the participants, many of whom were Black. They were asked to combine a celebrity with that exhibition and came up with Michael Jackson. They came up with an idea about an animatronic Michael Jackson at the entrance of the museum. Every time he pulled the microphone up to his face it splashed his face with bleach.

Their final ideas had to be presented in a Dragons' Den format in which the participants really came alive – criticising each other and questioning what they are doing.

Another creative technique might include deliberate 'rule breaking'. It involves looking at the obvious things that might be involved in something and deliberately moving away from the conventional established ways of doing things. For example, the Yotel concept in which people more-or-less pay for their hotel on an hourly rather than nightly basis.

Exercise

This was an opportunity to try out the Ideation technique. Delegates were split into groups and asked to consider hairdressing, airlines or hotels and to use the force fit and/or rule-breaking approach. This should consider an element of the marketing mix – for example, a new product and if necessary. Once all the crazy ideas had been considered, each group was asked to present one idea produced as a result of the exercise.



- Dreamworld.com: 'there is a place like home'
 - Online hotel matching service based on personal preference
 - Standard criteria: price, location etc.
 - Options you want control over:
 - décor, virtual windows
 - food (non UHT milk) – nice brands
 - Temperature/air conditioning
 - Mattress quality/pillow menu
 - Party floor/quiet floor
 - Drunk service (kebabs) /hangover cures
 - Free mini bar
 - Email family/pet pictures for the room, movies on demand

- The Owntel: 'the very first catalogue hotel'
 - Personalise your hotel room
 - Neutralised hotel which you make special
 - Disposable – it disappears when you leave – will never be the same again
 - Create your price/star system/preferences based on the romantic room, the business room, the standard room
 - Also, colour of room/décor, music, check in/check out, animal/loving pet
- Hairdresser wishes
 - Stitch and bitch idea – go to the hairdresser as part of a group
 - Silent, gentle, ugly hairdresser
 - Headphones with music of choice – and multi-media entertainment
- Customised, supportive seats on planes: 'the Jordan chair for a comfortable ride'
 - Inflatable sections, certain areas customised eg. massage/heat seats
 - Available to all
- Tell Ryan: 'cheers big ears'
 - An agony aunt system of microphones installed throughout the airport to receive customer feedback – vent your anger.
- Hi-tech Hairdressers
 - Screen at each unit with
 - database of previous haircuts (personalised, 360°)
 - new styles
 - internet access, webcam, social networking, skype
 - music or movies
- Create your own personal space in-flight
 - Personalised menu: indulgent, healthy etc
 - Mood identified at check-in: business, party, relax
 - Treatment kits with personal relaxation and refreshments
 - Option to tailor it to your destination
 - Allowed to move around the plane – sleeping area/party area etc.

AMA host, Helen Bolt was asked to choose the best one and she chose: The Jordan Chair (customised, supportive seats on planes).

Brand Ambassadors

Brand ambassadors spread word-of-mouth about what you are doing, give you feedback and may be involved in a whole range of other activities. It's another way of working with your customer, in this case to create buzz about what you are doing. They could also be the sort of people who you could involve in the exercises discussed above.

It's a good way of encouraging first time attenders to get over their barriers because it can help to reassure people because they are in dialogue with real people. It can also encourage people within a peer group, such as students. They can be paid or unpaid.

Recent projects include INIVA who wanted to attract Latin American audience to one of their exhibitions. I found them eight ambassadors from all sorts of walks of life. They helped out at the private view which they were very excited about. After the Latin American exhibition was over most of them continued to be involved with the organisation because they enjoyed it so much.

How are they typically found? From already existing email networks, arts jobs. It's usually easier to find ambassadors if they are being paid something.

For another project, Africa Beyond, I was given a week to find four ambassadors – they distributed flyers and talked to people as well as undertaking vox pops for the organisation and providing feedback on the marketing plan. They asked to be given badges and a meet and greet table so that they could talk to people as they came in.

One of the great things about ambassadors is because they're not you, they think differently and do things you've not even asked them to do.

At the Gothenburg Orchestra in Sweden we discovered an amazing ambassador called 'Ken' who does an amazing amount of work because he says he is 'in love with the orchestra'. It's not work, it's not promotion he just loves it.

What are you obsessed about? Think about what interests you and that will give you an idea of the sort of mind set that ambassadors are likely to have.

The really important thing though is that you properly value them – treat them as part of your team. It's hard to keep going – requires commitment and needs to be part of a long-term strategy – but it's worth it for the rewards.

Mel is creating an online resource at www.artsambassadorresource.com and she is looking for people to contribute ideas about ambassador schemes to this site so that it can grow and provide a useful resource for people.