

**Alix Hearn, Head of Marketing and Sales and Charlotte Handel,  
Head of Open Stage, Theatre Royal Stratford East**

***Developing marketing assets***

After graduating with a degree in drama from Manchester University, Alix Hearn began her career at the Royal Court Theatre, moving to the Tricycle Theatre and Cinema as Marketing Director. From the Tricycle she went to Watford Palace Theatre as Head of Sales and Marketing and then decided to take a leap of faith to work freelance. Whilst freelancing, Alix worked on campaigns with Lift Festival, the Bush Theatre and Southbank Centre. In 2010 she joined Theatre Royal Stratford East as Head of Marketing and Sales at a time of crucial change and regeneration in East London and has an in-depth understanding and knowledge of new writing theatres, producing venues and working in venues of different scales. Alix is co-director of Shadow Artists ([shadowartists.org.uk](http://shadowartists.org.uk)), running workshops which use the arts to help people re-engage with their creativity. Alix is currently training for an MA in Integrative Psychotherapy and is passionate about how the arts can transform lives and be used across individuals, groups and organisations to drive change.

Charlotte Handel has worked in theatre for ten years, beginning at Theatre Royal Stratford East - her local venue - as Marketing and Community Liaison Assistant. She subsequently went on to work at the Drill Hall and Barbican, BITE as Marketing Executive before becoming Marketing Manager at The Lyric Hammersmith. At the Lyric, Charlotte worked on all aspects of marketing and won the TMA Marketing Award for the Spring Awakening campaign. Her work increasingly focused on community engagement and the Creative Learning team, when she delivered marketing workshops for the Lyric and the Mousetrap Foundation's Stage Business programme. Her work on the Lyric's Capital Development consultation led to a change in her career direction – taking her back to the East End of London. Charlotte is responsible for delivering Open Stage – which will see Theatre Royal Stratford East opening up its programming and inviting the public to decide what will be on stage from January to July 2012.

This seminar looked at how a closer dialogue and partnership with audiences has led to the development of a broad range of marketing assets created by and with the public resulting in much deeper public engagement with their work. It looked at how we might be able to capitalise on our existing marketing assets working with our audiences / visitors to create new marketing resources and tools without spending a fortune.

## What have we got?

Theatre Royal Stratford East is a 450 seat producing theatre in the heart of East London. It's in a diverse borough with approx 160 – 180 languages spoken in the local schools. The theatre produces about seven or eight shows per year and has about 100,000 annual visitors. The audience is lively and active and not afraid to get involved with what's happening on stage. The theatre works with 3,000 – 4,000 young people each year and has started to work more with older members of the community too.

Historically, it is most famous for Joan Littlewood who started Theatre Workshop, the ethos of which is that theatre should represent working class voices. They made Theatre Royal their home in the 1950s. The core vision of the theatre is about enabling audiences to reflect on their experiences, their concerns, their desires, to see these stories on stage and then to take those stories back with them to reflect on and to share with others.



Open Stage is a large scale engagement consultation project; the public is being asked to decide what goes on stage for six months before the Olympic Games, from January till July 2012. There is a group of 23 volunteers from the community who meet weekly. As part of this process, they find out how the business works, talk to staff members, see shows and participate in various types of art. This project is an opportunity for TRSE to change the way it works, both internally and externally. The entire focus of the project is the community and its people, as audiences, marketers, programmers and being involved in things happening in the building.

Open Space projects have been running since February 2010. The process began with a research and development phase in which research was conducted into similar projects involving community programming (eg. the Nuffield Theatre, London's Roundhouse and others) and the Theatre Royal's own staff were involved too as they themselves have many and varied marketing skills, part of the organisation's marketing assets.

This phase was followed in September and October with a pilot phase: volunteers were recruited using community and internal networks. There was a very intensive weekend spent conducting field research, asking people if they would like to get involved in and around Stratford. Speaking with people in this way revealed warm feeling towards the venue – not just what goes on stage but the atmosphere before and after in the bar etc. The Borough of Newham, where the Theatre Royal is based,

has one of the lowest levels of arts participation in the country, around 27%. Voting participation figures are also low and it's a very transient community. About half the people we spoke to had no idea there was a theatre five minutes away.

Theatre Royal Stratford East's Marketing Assets include

- The building and the people who work for TRSE
- An audience
- Research and consultation findings
- A website
- A team of volunteers
- Campaign planners
- Video content
- Tours
- Events
- Open Stage Champions (key internal advocates)
- Critical Friends



These can be broken down into three *types* of asset; **physical, intellectual** and **human**.

As well as the theatre's main web site [www.stratfordeast.com](http://www.stratfordeast.com), Open Stage has its own dedicated web site [www.openstage2012.com](http://www.openstage2012.com)

Open Stage is changing the way TRSE works. Until now, there had been no formal volunteer scheme in place. Lots of local people are passionate about what the theatre does and now the theatre can make the most of what they can contribute. And internally, Champions have made a huge difference. The Head of Electrics is passionate about the idea and has already recruited three technical volunteers through the Open Stage project. Stage manager Sarah Buick used to be a teacher and can run and facilitate workshops, but no one knew this until someone spoke to her. This was a big learning for the organisation, as part of an internal skills audit.

The Champions are leading the way in terms of the way the project is developing. The theatre has also increased its level of digital engagement. The borough of Newham has low levels of digital engagement but this project is helping to address this. As a building, TRSE is not as digitally engaged as it could be. Internally, staff were trained in how to use the web site and other aspects of digital engagement. This training is available to anyone involved in TRSE – volunteers, full time staff, interns et al.

At the Southbank Charlotte worked on a destination campaign for the summer, aimed at driving people to the site. They came up with the idea of an interactive beach hut,

which eventually became an interactive photo booth. The Southbank built a shed with a camera installed and asked participants to scribble on a white board how they were feeling or how their day had been, then photos were taken of them with their white board comments. The results were uploaded onto Flickr. It was extremely popular. See: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/southbankcentre/collections/72157621827173119/>

Alix's aunt and uncle live in sheltered housing in Australia. They are in their mid-late 60s and they've recently embraced the Internet. They took part in a short film to help market Dorritos: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd5qvinUJ\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd5qvinUJ_g)

This is an example of the sort of user generated content which is becoming so popular. Although Dorritos obviously have large marketing budgets, there is nothing to stop you putting an invitation on your arts organisation's web site for people to record their own content and to offer people incentives.

The National Theatre of Wales recently had a show called *Passion*. They are a non-building based organisation and engage with the community across the country. This is a radically different way of working with people. What was most striking about *Passion* was people's involvement and sense of engagement with it. See: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd5qvinUJ\\_g](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dd5qvinUJ_g) and <http://nationaltheatrewales.org/whatson/performance/ntwteam>

In these times of austerity, it's a good idea to conduct an internal audit, looking at what your organisation's **physical, intellectual** and **human** assets are.

*Delegates were then invited to form groups of 4 or 5 people and to brainstorm what their own organisation's marketing assets are.*

Feedback:

- It's important not to allow the process to alienate the core audience
- Possibility of using the space, including your organisation's location (eg. Mac in the middle of a park in Birmingham) to reach out to people in the community
- Web casts allow you to connect with people across the globe
- Widespread fascination audiences have for what goes on backstage
- Old Vic's *New Voices* and the new work done in Old Vic tunnels both offer great ways of engaging new people
- 'Ideas tap' is a web community for young people who are interested in theatre, performing arts, creative industries and they can exchange ideas and network. Several organisations came together to create that asset
- Partnerships (e.g. with local schools, students as blogger/reviewers aimed at their peers, growing press interest in the story)

### Suggested ways of developing your physical, intellectual and human assets:

List your assets – existing, potential, new

How do the aims of your department fit with the wider aims of your organisation?

Find the areas where your assets can help achieve those aims

Think about where you can:

- Match aims and assets
- Share
- Involve
- Empower
- Hand over the power

For many marketers, the idea of handing over the power is terrifying, but it's vital if human assets are going to be used as effectively as possible. Ask yourself whether that person at the hairdressers is talking about a show at your theatre, an exhibition at your gallery and how you can harness their interest and passion.

### Some approaches to developing your assets:

- Tea and cake - find your internal advocates
- When is your next campaign planning session?
- Someone in your audience loves your organisation – find them and invite them in for a chat

West Yorkshire Playhouse, for example, works with the staff and the creative teams to create the campaign plans for the season.

At TRSE, the audience voted that the Christmas show should be *Cinderella*. This was difficult because there are two other productions of *Cinderella* taking place nearby at the same time this year, but TRSE listened to the audience and went with the idea. The volunteers are helping with the campaign planning and the marketing of the show.

It's also important that people feel they can tell you when certain campaign ideas have not worked. It's important to be open and transparent, and to listen to what hasn't worked too.

Questions from the audience:

- Q. How did you persuade the theatre to programme Cinderella with two other productions nearby?*

A. We made it clear that we would have to honour what the audience said. Not everyone in the organisation is as comfortable with the process as everyone else. Some people feel nervous about how it might impact on their job. We are lucky because it's got artistic buy-in

Q. *What exactly does the audience chose?*

A. Audiences have an input into everything – from the titles, the genres, the timings, ticket pricing. It would be unfair to expect them to take on full responsibility for programming – they talk to their networks and they talk to our staff, so we all share information. In the 1980s and 90s we did lots of variety nights – East End knees-ups with pianos, fire-eaters etc and conversations about events like this are very different from conversations about musicals or plays.

Q. *Did you place any limitations on what people could ask for?*

A. We have asked them what they want, but if they want for example variety nights every night then we simply wouldn't be able to afford to do that. After every session, we blog and post notes of what we've talked about in an attempt to be as transparent as possible. We realise that we can't please everyone but the important thing is to be as open as possible. The process has also led to lots of cross-departmental dialogue, which is a healthy thing. Open Stage also provides a forum for artists to become more open about their ideas – not keeping them to themselves.

Q. *How did you go about recruiting your volunteers?*

A. Via our channels, networks we already work with, our local volunteer centre, going out to lots of community events. Newham has lots of community events in each ward of the Borough so there have been lots of opportunities.

Q. *Did you do anything to ensure the profile of your volunteers matched the profile you wanted to achieve?*

A. Our volunteers range in age from 16 to about 70. We still have a gap in the 35 – 45 age range and we still have more women than men. We started to think of ways to recruit more men. We discovered that many of them are interested in the technical side of theatre – it might sound a bit stereotypical, but that's what they are mostly interested in. We made it clear that it would be important to us to know if people had second languages as this would help having someone meeting audiences at the door who could make audiences feel more at home if they can greet them in their language. Sometimes, shows being in English can be a barrier for some people in our neighbourhood.

Q. *How has the local press reacted?*

A. There was initial press interest, now there's a lot of Olympic press coming out. BBC London has been very supportive. Working with volunteers helps with press too because they are going out and talking about it with all sorts of people.

Q. *How will you manage people's expectations, for example about the legacy of the project?*

A. The legacy is already being shaped as it's changed the organisation internally. It's funded until 2012 and we are already looking at ways to help people if they want to continue to be involved. It's a pilot project, so if elements don't work, then we won't do them again. But we're already seeing hard evidence of how useful it's being to the organisation – for example, the average Newham hourly rate of pay is £13.95 so all those volunteer hours would cost the organisation a lot if all that work was being done by paid employees.

Here are our contact details. If anyone has any comments or ideas about our presentation, we'd love to hear from you:

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