

## **Keynote: emerging opportunities**

### **James McVeigh, head of marketing and innovation, Edinburgh Festivals**

#### Introduction

James McVeigh joined Festivals Edinburgh as its first Head of Marketing and Innovation following senior management roles with a number of organisations including Arts Council England, Salisbury International Festival and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Society. Festivals Edinburgh is the high-level organisation created by the Directors of Edinburgh's 12 major festivals to lead on their joint strategic development and maintain their global competitive edge – which already sees them host over 20,000 international artists, more than 2000 accredited media and audiences of 4m+ while generating £260 million for the Scottish economy.

In this keynote, James looked how they work with audiences, the media, digital developers and other key partners to drive product and audience development. This involves an innovative approach to enriching the experience for audiences while also exploring the future landscape for the organisation.

#### Deepening engagement

I'm going to look at how we've worked up in Edinburgh with people who mediate the relationship between the festivals and the audience. Alex will talk in more detail about his work with the audience itself.

Edinburgh's reputation as a global festival city has deep roots. It was over sixty years ago in the immediate post World War Two era that plans were developed for an arts festival that would become a much-needed 'platform for the flowering of the human spirit' - for Scotland, Britain and wider Europe.

The **Edinburgh International Festival** was founded in 1947. Some of the world's finest artists and companies were invited to perform at the city's theatres in that first year, and the founders had high hopes for the cultural, social and tourism benefits such a festival could bring if successful. It was a pioneering plan and the first festival of its kind in the world. In the same year, eight theatre groups turned up uninvited to perform at the (then newly formed) Festival, but not being in the programme didn't stop these actors. They staged their shows anyway in the periphery of the main event – and so the **Edinburgh Festival Fringe** was born. Now officially the largest – and non-programmed – arts festival in the world the Fringe still operates under its core founding principle, that anyone with a story to tell and a venue willing to host them can take part.

1947 was also the year that saw the inception of the **Edinburgh International Film Festival**. Another first for the city, the Film Festival pioneered the showcase of the

flourishing documentary movement of the day, a genre nowadays so associated with film festivals around the world.

Edinburgh's festivals are Scotland's world-leading cultural brand with an expertise, vision, impact and international recognition unmatched by any other cultural event on the globe. They are distinctively Scottish and yet profoundly international, drawing artists, audiences and media from every continent and over 70 countries each year. They are cultural platforms, forums for national and international debate, economic powerhouses and drivers of ambition and creators of cohesion. They represent Scotland at its most confident, its most open and its most creative. 12 Festivals, 25,000 Artists, 2,000+ accredited media, 3,000+ shows, 4.2m audiences.

The idea behind Festivals Edinburgh came from wondering how they could work collaboratively. The collaborative work tends to happen in four areas, one of which is the marketing area and we have working groups between all the festivals to help us develop that programme of work. The concept is that we, as collaborators, add value to the existing work of individual festivals. I'm going to speak today about the Festivals Edinburgh Innovation Lab, a project we undertook.

The idea behind the Lab was – if each festival is doing its own marketing operation, how can we add value to that operation? We decided we would create a laboratory for experimentation in marketing. The experimentation was built on the idea voiced in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* 'Try again. Fail again. Fail better' because the festivals felt comfortable with creating an arena that was separate to their own businesses where they could try things and potentially fail without risking their own business.

The starting point for the Festivals Lab was to identify those organisations that mediate the relationship between us and the audience. We identified a number of groups and decided to create a set of projects with those partners even though the scale of festivals in Edinburgh is not replicable – in the month of August alone we sell about three million tickets and have twenty thousand artists, making an economic impact in Scotland of about £260 million in the economy - we believe that the process is something you can learn from.

One of the first projects we learned from was **Project Lab**. One of the greatest assets we have is our staff. How could we empower the staff to take forward some of the ideas? It was decided to give small grants to anyone within any part of the organisation who had ideas for collaborative work. There is a panel across the festivals which decides on those projects.

At the moment, our operational teams use paper to mark out changes when they are setting the shows up and making amendments, for example to the running schedule. They came up with the proposal of automating this process into a closed community mobile app. whereby when, if anyone updated a schedule, it automatically updated

the others in that closed community so you wouldn't need to phone the catering team to say that someone was going to be late for their rehearsal.

Many of the projects from the **Project Lab** are about encouraging the staff to come up with ideas, empowering them to help us with the engagement process. Connected to this, we ran an **Ideas Challenge** with the audiences.

This was run through Challenge Post, the New York based organisation which has been involved in the Obama administration and which runs crowd-surfing idea challenges. We challenged the festivals' audiences last year and were inundated with ideas on various ways to improve different aspects of the festivals. It covered everything from audience engagement to ticketless systems, which is something we definitely want to move towards.

The winning idea – as voted for by our panel of judges, which included Lyn Gardner, Will Gompertz and others – was around access needs for people with disabilities. This summer, we will be prototyping a new technological development around access which you will probably read about in the papers.

A third area we looked at was connected with the fact that people always think that innovation is about technology but that's not the case. We were interested in talking to the service designers about how to improve the audience experience from the very moment they first hear about the festivals right through to going home after the festivals. We developed a set of methodologies that are on the Festivals Lab website and free for anybody to use through creative commons licences. If you are interested in the whole aspect of service design, taking people on a journey and engaging with the arts, I suggest you visit the site and lift it to see whether it can be adapted to your needs.

A fourth area we worked on came about because we know that in the arts we don't have many resources so we are always interested in finding out who has the resources and how we can tap into them. We knew that the Higher Education sector had quite a lot of resources and so we contacted the computer science departments across the universities and discovered that they have an HE funded project under development called Smart Tourism so we offered to be a laboratory for their developments in smart tourism.

This summer, they will be prototyping an idea which is about capturing people's social memories through their social media interactions in the past, putting them into an app. which creates a timeline which captures their past experiences but which alludes to future suggestions as to what the audience might do if they were attending those kind of shows in the future: where they might eat; where is a good bar; what the venue is like, and so on. The project links up the social media memory into future recommendations.

Another area, and one which has been expanding a great deal, is the whole concept of open data. This involves making any of your datasets freely available to any groups that want to use them.

Our key dataset is our programme listings. We have 20,000 artists and a huge number of shows and traditionally, the festivals had supplied spreadsheets to the media for them to use the information in the way they wanted. It was labour intensive and had to be adapted for each media source so we created a piece of software called an application programming interface (API) that joins up all the different box offices and puts all the listings into a format that anybody can have access to. Changes to the programme are automatically updated on the feed that goes through the API to the media.

But it wasn't just about the media, because when we had the theatre set we realised that anybody else could be interested in it so we ran a programme called Culture Hack Scotland. 50 developers came together for 24 hours, looking at the dataset, and created apps, mobile games, lots of ways in which they thought it could enrich the audience's experience. One of the developers came up with Face to Friend, a dating app. It enabled you to find people who were queuing for the same show as you and maybe go out for a drink with them. There were a lot of people who were going to shows on their own but didn't like the idea of going to shows on their own.

Another idea that came out of the Culture Hack project came about as follows: one of the developers had been at a party and had been chatting to a guy who turned out to be Ian Rankin, the famous crime novelist. The developer didn't know Ian Rankin but afterwards had the idea of creating a mobile enhanced site for the Edinburgh Book Festival, containing biographies for Ian Rankin and others. The Book Festival loved the idea, commissioned the developer to do their mobile site and for a fraction of the usual cost because he was so passionate about it. And it is running again this year.



It's not just about marketing; there is a programming element to this too. [James McVeigh ran a video showing geo-located tweets superimposed on a map of Edinburgh during the festivals]. Intense colours show intense areas of tweeting.

A few years ago, Fraser Island in Australia advertised for a custodian of the island. The campaign went viral and was great for Australian tourism. We created a similar idea; a geek in residence at the festivals. This was a technologist who was on hand to support all of the festivals. It was affordable because it was a partnership project.

So what is the learning from all this? Innovation is born either from need or opportunity. Ask yourself: what is the need you are trying to address or what is the opportunity that you see? If the innovation is based on need, it is probably going to be quite functional and won't do the job. If it's only based on opportunity, it's going to be too shiny. It's important to strike the right balance between need and opportunity.

A simple thing we did at the beginning was to ask each partner to write down a list of their needs and opportunities, a sort of innovation audit. We then invited each partner organisation to focus on projects which would grow organically rather than a new idea being parachuted in.

Innovation is also about challenging what we already do. Organisations often have cycles and we get into a certain way of operating. Sometimes it is useful to write down the rules and regulations that govern your organisation and then try and break them. We did this with the API project. Our assumption was that all of our festival listings would only go to the media in a closed community. We then challenged that assumption. As a result, we then decided to open it up to a wider network of people.

Innovation is not about invention. Innovation is about adoption and adaption. Much of what we do is innovative for the culture sector but is not innovative in other sectors. We believe strongly in the importance of prototyping, but it is important to know when to stop. There has to be an end game. But then again, it's important not to stop, because innovation is infinite. Within the process, it is important to have end points and new starting points.

Everything we have found out so far is pointing towards us working with digital people as creatives; to move beyond the transactional. Don't hire web designers just to design your web site. Find a developer who is passionate about your organisation, take them out for a coffee, and discuss with them what you want to achieve. When marketing begins to blur the line with programming, you can enter an interesting area in which you are working directly with the audience and making things which enrich and deepen their experience.