

**Caroline Griffin, Programme Director, Audiences Central and
Jo Taylor, Head of Marketing, Welsh National Opera**
***Fireworks or damp squibs? How to get your audiences and visitors
to take bigger risks***

Caroline Griffin has been programme director at Audiences Central since it came into being in 2004. Previously her diverse career had included marketing roles at Theatre Royal Stratford East and The Junction, Cambridge. She then moved to Sampad in the position of senior research bursar. Last year, the AMA and Arts Council England published her book, *This Way Up: a flat-pack guide to marketing the arts* and in 2006 she spoke at an international conference in Guangzhou at the invitation of The British Council.

Jo Taylor has worked at Welsh National Opera (WNO) for five years where she is currently head of marketing. Jo was previously marketing manager at St George's Bristol and has also worked in marketing for Bath International Music Festival and Bath Literature Festival following a variety of roles at National Youth Music Theatre, The Custard Factory and Birmingham Early Music Festival. Jo is on the board of the AMA and Audiences Wales and in October this year takes up the post of head of marketing for the Wales Millennium Centre.

Changing political agendas have encouraged arts organisations to reconsider the role of the audience in their planning. Some believe that this will result in 'dumbing-down': that if you give audiences what they say they want, we'll end up with dreary, middle-of-the-road, uninspired art. This session challenged this assumption with case-study evidence from Audiences Central's Captivate project and Welsh National Opera's subscription scheme.

Deal or No Deal?

[Caroline Griffin]

*'I dumb down for my audience and double my dollars
They criticize me for it; but they all yell holla!'* (Jay-Z, *Moment of Clarity*)

The projects described in this seminar looked at the way in which a consideration for the audience and artistic risk might work together. Audiences Central (AC) had been working on customer relationship management (crm) looking at the idea that if you have good relationships with your customers you can be more economically viable.

There were other benefits to crm such as the 'emotional connections' to be made with the audience and, what increasingly has become clear, is that there is an **artistic case** to be made for crm because it helps you to develop a life-long relationship with audiences so that we can take them on an ever more creative and challenging journey. This can work in tandem with an economic argument, that if you constantly have to attract new audiences you are forced to take fewer risks and make safer programming decisions.

Audiences can help to create great art and this is why.

Attitudes that help audiences make great art

1. A contextual notion of artistic risk – the risk is shared between the artist and the audience
2. A respect for the audience's ability to understand and respond to the work
3. A real curiosity about the audience and an eagerness to enter into dialogue

1. A contextual notion of artistic risk

- Synergy can be achieved between what the artist considers to be risky and what the audience finds risky, creating a holistic experience
- Audiences can be taken on a journey to raise their interest and skill in being an audience for more risky work
- Audience risk factors may include things other than the artistic experience

A couple of quotations from John McGrath, from last year's conference illustrate the points.

Letting the audience in

“Sketch City” is a combination of clubbing and live drawing, is run by a Graffiti Artist, other visual artists and DJs in Contact’s foyer. People come along, fill the foyers and start to make their own art and interactivity happen, making sure that there aren’t special places where art is made and other places where the audience is allowed to go is essential. ‘

(John McGrath, Contact, AMA Conference, 2007)

The Creative Audience

‘The journey Contact had taken the audience on, the journey from being participants to trying out new work with a different range of audiences to seeing work that might be challenging, is a journey that starts to build a more creative and responsive audience. And because of the nature of audiences, it isn’t only the individuals who’ve had that exposure, who become that creative audience. As we all know, an audience is a live organic thing. If you have a few people in there who have that history and have those complicated and personal relationships with the work, they start to inform the audience as a whole.’

(John McGrath, Contact, AMA Conference, 2007)

2. A respect for their audience’s ability to understand and respond to the work

- Don’t assume that audiences want easy work
- Believe that even non-experts can have real, complex and informed responses to the work
- Take responsibility for helping audiences have that deeper relationship with the arts

It's very common for leaders of arts organisations to make assumptions about the audience – that they only want something rather superficial and un-challenging. Is this based on what the audiences really think and is it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Brian McMaster's report, which has been receiving much attention makes an interesting point,

' . . . too many organisations, particularly in the performing arts, have been content to supply audiences with a superficial experience that provides immediate satisfaction but no lasting impact.'

Unfortunately, McMaster takes it off in a direction which seems to make its own assumption about what the audience might want.

'I recommend that cultural organisations stop exploiting the tendency of many audiences to accept a superficial experience and foster a relationship founded on innovative, exciting and challenging work.'

(Brian McMaster *Supporting Excellence in the Arts*)

But, what is it that matters to audiences?

*'For members of the public, a **quality experience is something that audience members and participants really get something out of – it can be provocative or difficult but it should lift them out of the day-to-day and provide something more than basic entertainment.** Thus, for members of the public, quality can be judged by understanding the emotional response of the audience to a piece of work and the impact it has in terms of challenging perceptions and broadening horizons.'*

(Catherine Bunting, *Public Value and the Arts in England*)

3. A real curiosity about the audience and an eagerness to enter into dialogue

Organisations which seem to do this well, bear certain points in mind:

- They use a variety of ways of consulting audience members. For example, there is a theatre festival in Birmingham which uses exit interviews using video very effectively.
- They make it clear to the audience what is up for discussion and what isn't
- They look at creative ways of consultation
- They ensure that there are mechanisms in place for feeding results back into the company

The annual live art festival in Birmingham has become a huge event, led by Mark Ball at Fierce. Interestingly, the audience have been more excited about the more adventurous work than the safer material:

'So over a 3 year period we've concluded extensive research with attendance and non-attendance – interviews, focus groups, audience panels – about perceptions of the festival and work presented. It quickly became clear that the distinctiveness of the festival -its strong brand and its strong content – was its greatest asset. But that its presence within mainstream venues was often seen to undermine the distinctiveness of the product. Audiences wanted distinctive, unusual locations as well as distinctive

product – they wanted experiences. So it's no accident that around 50% of our work is now site-specific – in swimming pools, strip clubs, shopping malls and strip clubs – and trust that where we work with mainstream venues – such as RSC, the Hippodrome and Warwick Arts Centre – the work is often located in unusual parts of the building.'

(Mark Ball, Fierce, Leadership Symposium, Birmingham, 2006)

[Jo Taylor]

Welsh National Opera (WNO) Case Study

We're in danger of under-estimating our audiences. If we respect the audience, we can empower them. WNO is passionate about opera and wants to share that passion. It aims to surprise, delight and provoke and wants and has no intention of programming weeks and weeks of Carmen (which is not what people want anyway).

The WNO changed its way of working as a result originally, of the sales imperative as it moved into a new home (the Millennium Centre) with twice as many tickets to sell but not wanting to sell tickets at very high prices. Therefore, WNO took a long term strategy of developing and maintaining a relationship with the audience.

This involved increasing existing audience frequency and by its very nature this meant that the audience would need to increase their capacity to take risk.

What did we mean by RISK? To **the audience** it means

- Trying less familiar or known material (opera, composer, newer work, less often performed)
- Attending less understood work (specialist, unfamiliar setting)
- Understanding complications of different forms (modern dress, challenging subject)

What did we mean by RISK? **To WNO** it means

- Financial – WNO cannot operate with reduced audiences/income – serious risks when programming less 'popular' work

Most people think Opera is like this



When actually it could be like this



It's not necessary to take risks but it can pay off. Often, the most rewarding and powerful experiences come from the most adventurous approaches. The performing company is likely to perform better with a greater challenge and a wider variety of performances and for the WNO employees themselves, they are likely to be better motivated because this is why they work in the arts (not for the salaries).

We should remember that the audience is just as clever as we are it's just that they might not have had all the information we have access to. If those with knowledge and experience are excited by something – how can you equip others to discover it too?

WNO Subscription Objectives

This is the scheme which has worked for WNO. Subscription had been thought to be a thing of the past but it was successfully launched in Cardiff and has now been rolled out in Birmingham, Llandudno and Southampton. Subscription provided a secure, sustainable audience base and long-term financial stability, it needed to build long term relationships, to increase frequency and risk and to develop audience behaviour that supports WNO taking creative risks.

Briefly, the traditional subscription model which doesn't really work anymore seemed to mean

- Buy the same seat for every performance
- List of benefits
- Forced into buying performances you would not normally consider

The pros and cons of this approach meant

PROS	CONS
Significant advance sales for the whole programme	Strong customer loyalty – can feel like a club
Marketing spend can be more focussed	Same seat purchasing becomes restrictive
Strong customer loyalty – can feel like a club	Benefits become costly and tricky to maintain – but expected by the audience

WNO Subscription model

The WNO's operas were split into three categories, broadly classified in terms of popularity and familiarity (i.e. risk). Subscribers could choose from a variety of lists (A,B and C). This was a completely transparent and honest process; it wasn't a matter of trying to con the audience. They received lower price tickets were offered for the riskier repertoire with other benefits such as priority booking, flexibility of booking seats, price range or same number of seats for different performances attached. It was also important to ensure that there was a strategy of under-promising and over-delivering, not articulating benefits which we could not give them.

Results: Year 1

- Launched Subscription with Bryn Terfel in 'Flying Dutchman'
- Could have sold every ticket £100+
- Instead, used it as incentive to subscribe
- People would do anything to get a ticket – including booking 6 more operas!
- Audience knew *Dutchman* would sell out before public sale opened. For many *that* was a risk they were unwilling to take so subscribed just for priority booking

What had they gained?

- Priority booking – rewarding commitment (managed to get tickets for Bryn)
- Financial reduction in risk (reduced prices on package booking)
- Planned their opera-going year in advance
- Spread payment options
- Flexibility (still have choices, don't book same no of tickets in same seating area)
- Closer relationship with WNO – different, more personal communication
- Deeper, more rewarding, varied range of artistic experiences may otherwise not have tried
- Risks paid off (List C were among the highlights of the season)
- Unexpected extras

Retention?

It was important to be honest about why they subscribed and therefore to plan for the next year, as there was no Bryn Terfel. The experience needed to be so good that it would still be worth it.

Therefore, the subscription scheme aimed to make them feel part of something, they were continually thanked and, as before, the approach aimed to under promise and over deliver. In addition, there were special evenings such as masterclasses, talks on operas from creative team, and backstage access to sets, occasional drinks receptions and a number of events for the C list events (the riskier ones) which were designed to reduce the fear of the unknown, to unpack and make familiar.

Reduced risk

- Operas which were originally perceived to be risky often turned out to be more rewarding than that they had expected
- Better understanding (insight events)
- Closeness with organisation reduces risk
- Brand fit – WNO takes creative risks but always maintains outstanding musical standards
- Audiences gaining more and more confidence – comfortable that WNO will reward their adventure and experimentation
- Increase in trust and brand strength

What did WNO gain?

- Secure audience base
- Strong customer loyalty
- Audience willing to try varied selection of experiences not just 'safe'
- Big booking commitment a far in advance
- Significant advances for the whole programme
- Ability to focus marketing spend – plan better/ maximise efficiency and ROR

No regrets...

- Audiences have been thankful that they were encouraged to take the risk
- They are grateful that the size of the risk was reduced through price and insight events
- They tell us they were rewarded with great experiences they would not have otherwise had

'We were not intending to see Khovanshchina as we didn't know much about it. It seemed good value to include it in our booking and thank goodness we did! Well done to WNO for such a wonderful experience it was truly great. We will be more careful not to dismiss the unfamiliar opera next time.'

*'(Dear Jo [this reflects the closer relationship – normally they write 'Dear Mr Taylor'])
Thank you for such an interesting evening on Friday at the Rossini Masterclass. Although my wife and I have been attending orchestral concerts for many years with the odd opera, we are now going to more and more operas – Friday's opportunity to see what goes on behind the scenes was very informative – please do more of these!'*

'The event was fantastic. It greatly enhanced our pleasure attending the opera itself. We're very grateful to the performance team – and a first-time experience to hear members of WNO in close proximity.'

'I didn't know what to expect of the opera but thanks to last week's event I was given a rich and memorable treat. How fantastic to have four outstanding representatives explaining by narrative and music. I am utterly blown away and very grateful.'

'I want to congratulate the whole company for the staggeringly good production of The Sacrifice. I have never come away from a performance of any genre so excited and moved by what I have seen and heard on stage – there was an electricity to the performance. To think I nearly didn't book – thank you for creating the package that convinced me to give it a try – I bet the marketing team doesn't usually get letters of praise!

This reflects an honesty with the audience which was very important. Subscribers were frequently thanked for their support, they were perfectly capable of 'getting it' and over time they gained an appreciation of why WNO wants to take creative risks and promote variety.

Results

- 700 Cardiff Subscribers who book 7,750 seats a year which is a value of £200,000 of tickets (20% of target)
- This is equivalent to 5 full houses sold before public booking even opens and many of these bookings are for the riskier performances
- 95-98% capacity for WNO performances at Wales Millennium Centre

The four venues taking WNO have also benefited from the successful subscription scheme resulting in:

- Healthy houses for risky repertoire
- Before public booking opens, list C operas lead the way with strongest sales (sometimes retained throughout)
- Good houses across the spectrum
- Good advance box office
- Closer relationships with audiences
- Audiences who trust us and are willing to take a risk with us

It is also affecting programming, leading to decisions about taking more risky approaches. WNO's audiences are beginning to influence actions through their behaviour. Where this model has been developed, audiences are not asking for dreary, middle of the road uninspiring art!

Rather than a 'dumbing down' process happening, the WNO is taking risks collaboratively with those who value what it stands for and who want to come along.

Questions [taken from both sessions]

We've had an opposite trend in that our audience seems to have become and more risk averse. We're a safe theatre and don't take many risks and may have conditioned the audience in this way. How might we turn this round?

The danger of thinking that the audience is becoming lazy is that they might not be being challenged. It's not a quick fix, it takes time and you need to take the audience on the journey.

It's also about crm and 'showing the workings' – we think this might be mad – it's a risk – join us in taking the challenge with us. It might be rubbish, that's the risk you are taking. It's important to establish that you are not conning them however.

WNO usually writes to people the next day and says 'thank you for coming' and 'do tell us what you think'.

There seems to be something particularly effective about talking to people immediately after the performance. It seems to provide a verification of their experience of the risk they have taken.

It's important to value the audience and recognise their view and this builds a process of trust, respecting them as intelligent adults.

Is it difficult to get people to take risk in the second half of the year? How do you get them to keep taking the risk?

With opera, we try and get people to think about opera as being something you might regularly want to do, rather than a luxury purchase; extraordinary in its power but a regular thing to participate in.

It does mean having to pay hundreds of pounds in January, which is not the best time to persuade people to part with their money.

In periods of financial instability it is even more important to ensure our crm strategy is right because we need to maintain value over a number of years.

How do you sell in advance of a new piece?

We talked to the directors, the designers and look at the plans and models. We took photos of the first night audience from *Sacrifice* and then put it on the website. We allowed the audience to articulate how they felt about it. Even though we are selling a piece that doesn't exist yet, we can still tell the right stories and not be afraid to tell audiences how it is going; the story should include the audience.

Has this strategy been successful with the board?

We are getting there in terms of demonstrating and proving the model and there is only one board member we still need to persuade. Pricing is only one part of the picture and we should be building models across the structure. We find that even if they don't agree, they understand the need.

Did you have people not turning up to the risky production?

We had no problems at all. Particularly with one show that was the outcome of the education department - subscribers definitely enjoyed that one. It is important to have flexibility in the ways that you can use performances.

What about the 80% of audiences who come to new or risky work but aren't subscribers?

We find that they are already consuming radical work; subscription tickets take up more of the house on risky stuff, admittedly with a smaller capacity. We find that our brand works differently in different places.

A delegate from the Royal Shakespeare Company also commented on the difficulty of building on audiences in the second year after a season that includes David Tennant [currently Dr Who] and Patrick Stewart [of Star Trek fame] in *Hamlet*. She pointed out that it can be very helpful to remind audiences of good experiences like that to encourage them to keep on coming.

Discussion

Delegates were challenged to discuss these matters addressing these questions in small groups.

- How well do companies respect their customers' intelligence? How might you use your audience to increase the risk of what you are doing?
- If being porous means doing things differently – what one small thing can you change when you get back to the office?