

Andy Ryans, Hallé

Imagine Marketing Insight Influencing Creative Strategy

Introduction

Andy Ryans was born, raised and schooled in Wallsend-on-Tyne and studied History and Drama at King Alfred's College, Westminster. Before becoming Marketing Director of the Hallé he was Marketing Director of the Royal Exchange Theatre Company, Head of Marketing at Theatre Royal Bury St Edmunds and Sales Manager of the Philharmonia Orchestra. He has been a board member of Arts About Manchester, the Arts Marketing Association and the Theatrical Management Association Marketing Committee. He is a guest lecturer at Huddersfield University, was a tutor on the first TMA/Scottish Arts Council Druidstone Scotland course and has spoken on a wide range of subjects for organisations such as the Association of British Orchestras, Arts Council England, South West Arts Marketing and Cambridge Marketing College.

In this presentation, Andy explored how audience and visitor insight might be better used within the arts sector to influence and support creative strategy. As one of the participants on an AMA pre-conference forum of leading arts professionals Andy presented some of the key recommendations from the group, along with his own thoughts and experiences on how arts organisations can effectively deliver both artistic excellence and public engagement.

Andy Ryans began by playing, very loudly, the 'complete performance of Elgar's *Smoking Cantata* - all 39 seconds of it', performed by the Hallé, conducted by Sir Mark Elder, featuring Andrew Shore, and available on a Hallé CD from www.halle.co.uk stating that if you can't plug your own company, you shouldn't be in the room.

Thrilling Hallé

Our mission this week is to examine the relationship between artistic excellence and public engagement. How high *do we*, or *should we*, set the bar when we make a marketing proposal to our audiences? How do we reach out to them? How do we go about impressing our audiences – the people on whom we rely? What makes us, and our message, memorable and persuasive? Excellent questions, and as those of you who know me, will not be surprised to hear, I have no answers whatsoever. I do, however, know some people who have some very interesting thoughts on the subject:

Derek Allan, Deputy Chief Executive and Commercial Director, Pitlochry Festival Theatre
Fiona Allan, Director, Arts & Audience Development, Wales Millennium Centre
Tim Baker, Director, Baker Richards Consulting Ltd & Vice-President, The Pricing Institute
Lisa Baxter, Marketing and qualitative research consultant
Sarah Chambers, Deputy Director of Marketing, Royal National Theatre
Samantha Evans, Head of Marketing, the Big Lottery Fund
Mark Hazell, Marketing and Publicity Director, Norwich Theatre Royal
John Holden, Associate, DEMOS
Gerri Morris, Director, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre
Andy Ryans, Marketing Director, The Halle
Mike Saunders, Director of Digital Media, Kew Gardens
Roger Tomlinson, Partner, ACT Consultant Services

These good people, foolishly described as 'leading', more accurately described as 'old', met back in January, in London. We were tasked by the AMA with offering our own thoughts on some of these questions, from a number of different perspectives.

I will be referring to some of their broadest conclusions – and shamelessly stealing some of their more original thoughts – during my comments today, but a more detailed précis of the January forum will be found shortly after the conference on the AMA website [see: www.a-m-a.org.uk/images/downloads/09ConferenceForumNotes.pdf]. I urge you to take a look and give the right people the right credit for their hard work. You will also notice that several of these names are making contributions to our conference this week and I would strongly recommend that you hear them if you can.

I was asked to summarise our key findings and in essence, that's very straightforward. If you want to get the most from a relationship with your audience, to engage your current followers more often, and to the maximum degree, and more importantly to engage with new people and begin a journey together, all you have to do is three things:

WORK WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES

IMPRESS THE AUDIENCE and

LISTEN TO THE AUDIENCE

The more you listen to them, the more you will find that the audience really is, nearly always, right.



Today I am making a plea. I plead with you not to over complicate and confuse the debates we are having this week. Don't think that our main topics are more complicated than they are – they really are not. The more complicated the issues are made out to be; the less any one person will be encouraged to go back home and consider them and that is exactly what we need to happen.

Let's start by thinking about some key words. The three words that came up again and again during the January forum were:

VALUE
QUALITY
EXCELLENCE

Our discussions often centred on different relationships between these three terms. How do we offer these three elements, universally agreed to be 'good' things, while engaging with the audience and encouraging new relationships?

Well, let's look at these words, and what they mean for us. There are lots of ways we can evaluate value. As Mark Hazel from the Theatre Royal in Norwich has said, there are plenty of evaluative tools and systems around. They can help us define economic, social, educational, individual and even spiritual value that is derived from the arts which, when

taken together, form the core of what most people would regard as a type of value to our society.

The key political point being that the relatively small amount of arts funding available produces a huge benefit; not just socially, educationally and culturally, but also economically, and is therefore, good value.

The arts deliver value for money in almost every context we can consider, except perhaps, on occasion, one: value for money in the eyes of the customer. While a member of an audience, in having an evening out, succeeds in boosting the local economy by travelling, eating, drinking and buying the ticket in the first place, they may well emerge from their local chosen pleasure palace thinking 'well that's taught me a lesson', never to return.

Better a night in watching the box with a glass of something. Cheaper, more reliable, more predictable; nothing special, but good value. Expectations have plummeted, but at least no one feels ripped off.

Let's think for a second about quality. Stelios, he of EasyGroup, was speaking on BBC Radio 4 a few weeks ago and said something rather good. *The best definition of quality I've ever heard, said Stelios, is when expectations are met or exceeded.* He didn't expand the theory very much, Stelios didn't get where he is today by sitting round expanding theories, but I was tempted to think he meant that if your expectations were met, then the experience was good. If your expectations were exceeded, then that experience was high quality, or even, excellent.



A few of us have wondered how much excellence, exactly, there is knocking about at the moment. And who is it that decides what is excellent anyway? Well, apart from everyone else, we do. The people in this room.

Our judgement is essential when assessing excellence, quality or value. It is we who are tasked with being the middlemen, it is we who have to look at an event and then convince everyone else of its excellence, quality and value. But we obviously aren't the most important judges.

There is only one group whose assessment is more important than ours: the audience's; the public. It is they who are the primary arbiters of value, quality and excellence.

We persuade, assist, explain and encourage. We take what our musicians, directors, actors, and curators produce and translate it into something the public will find attractive. Sometimes that is easy, sometimes not. But the only relevant judgement about whether the event was good value, high quality and excellent, will be made, retrospectively, by the audience.

In persuading them to experience your product in the first place, you've got a result. But if they judge the event to be found wanting, they simply won't believe you the next time you issue an invitation.

Let us not, by the way, fall at the first, and associate any of our three key words simply with money or subsidy. Cash and quality may indeed sometimes coincide. Money can enhance production values, which can encourage excellence. Money can pay for talent. But the commercial sector can be excellent. Small-scale theatre can be excellent. Amateur art can be excellent. It's the expectations that vary.

Art for Arts' Sake is not something I have ever held in high esteem. The audience is the most important part of any artistic experience. There is a difference between stretching, developing or expanding an audience's experience and insulting it.

John Holden's recent publication *Democratic Culture* makes some excellent points. The paper was partly a response to Sir Brian McMaster's report and governmental focus on the economic value of the arts. A key point was that if the only people to decide what is and is not excellent are arts professionals, how we can claim to be engaged in any serious way with the audience? Excellence does not have to be difficult, nor does it have to be about 'high' art.

We need to focus on telling people what is entertaining and stop being mealy-mouthed about what is 'art and culture'. We need to get rid of the notion that Popular = rubbish and Excellence = difficult. Beethoven was excellent and so was Frankie Howerd.

The focus, very often, on these issues, is placed squarely at the feet of the marketer. The assumption can all too often be that whatever the writer / director / conductor / artist has produced is excellent. Take that as read. The reason therefore, that there aren't thousands of people crashing through doorways to see or hear it, is a communication problem; a marketing problem.

The departmental boxes all provide homes into which the different members of staff can crawl, but wait! What if the art and the message were discussed and originated from the same team – or at least from teams that were closely linked?

If we are all – artists, producers, marketers and audience – in the business of creating quality experiences and if we specifically want to create an enhanced market for those experiences, we have to start by working and planning together in the first place, and ensuring that we all see the value, quality and excellence of an event, from our different perspectives, as it is being created.

We need to break out of the neat compartments of a departmental title. The good news is that some organisations are starting to take this seriously and have actually restructured. As we'll hear in a few minutes, The Cornerhouse in Manchester is leading the field here, as is the Wales Millennium Centre in Cardiff. I think this is a question everyone here can take back to their workplaces. It is an issue that does not discriminate between art form or venue type. Everyone here works within an artistic policy – including receiving venues; everyone here should have influence over that artistic policy and ownership of it.

Let's take a few moments to think about the bigger picture and to think a little more about this popular phrase 'public engagement'.

The last twenty years have seen massive developments in arts marketing. We have professionalised, found a place within a constantly changing bureaucratic structure,

developed new ways of working, fine-tuned the art of operating within stupid budgets and begun to look at the benefits of new media and technology.

The next twenty years will, I believe, mark a sea-change in how we operate. As pressure to maintain or increase audience numbers builds, the gap between what it means to be an arts marketing professional and a programmer will (and has already begun to) diminish. Quality is the watchword. Artistic excellence is what we should all be demanding, not least because, as a former boss of mine once said a long time ago, 'Andy, whatever else anyone tells you, remember, quality sells'. The challenge lies in creating a bigger, broader market for quality, while feeding those simply hungry to be entertained.

Companies of all scales need to understand that artistic planning cannot remain the sole dominion of artistic planners. We need to convince more senior figures and funders that encouraging a dialogue within organisations can lead to new ideas for public presentation and that this process must be a quality led process.

This is not the first step towards a steady decline into commercialism. The audience needs to be encouraged to follow more things enthusiastically, not be asked to lead the agenda.

Let's talk about my world; classical music. Commercial classical music presenters – naming no names, there are several – offer a dazzling array of *Evenings with Mozart* (complete with wigs and tatty frocks), *Handel by Candle-light*, *Last Night of the Proms*, *Last Night of the Summer Proms*, *Last Night of the Autumn Proms*, and, I kid you not, *Last Night of the Christmas Proms*. They offer, pretty much, a reliable supply of the same. The last four examples all appeared within one season at the Bridgewater Hall last year. In that same season there were around twenty-five such presentations and that doesn't include many more similar events around Christmas. Some did well, some didn't. But is it sustainable, and what does the audience make of it?

The usual charge from the subsidised orchestras is 'This will saturate and kill off the market'. My own orchestra, the Hallé, is required, not least for economic reasons, to join in.

The Hallé's reputation as a fine ensemble, performing great music, has been much enhanced over the past decade. But we became concerned that some of our audience were being left behind. We promote our own series of Pops concerts, and we don't just do it because they can make money. This is a vital market, an entry point into live orchestral music, a market with vast potential. We have more new attenders for these events than for any other.

This is an audience that has been mistreated by the market place in general, and had been taken for granted by us, for far too long. We judged that expectations were low, but were being met, hence reasonable numbers of people having a reliably good time.

We know – for a fact – that the audience was quite often not sure, or bothered, if they were hearing the Hallé, the BBC Philharmonic or one of Raymond Gubbay's numerous ensembles. We decided to engage. We decided these concerts needed some investment.

We looked carefully at the Pops concerts we offered; the programmes, the rehearsal arrangements, everything. We started to develop some new ideas about themes and repertoire, and we have started to earn dividends. Last season's Halle Pops series was the

most successful for twelve years; and those concerts devised by a wider group were the most successful of the season.

Orchestras are well placed to experiment, because of the structure of most orchestral seasons. Many of our concerts are one-off events, which means we can try something different with a relatively low economic risk.

In many regards, the most important change was the planning of the events themselves. It came a collaborative process, involving, from the outset, the Head of Artistic Planning, the Chief Executive, the conductors, me and others in the marketing and planning teams.

We tried to prioritise the audience, the product and the planning at the same time and it wasn't easy. We aimed to show that something can be better enjoyed and more entertaining because it is of the highest possible quality.

And it's not just the Pops concerts. In March 2008, we asked some of the Hallé's hardest-working supporters what they would like us to perform. Having the odd conversation like this isn't a bad idea. You just have to be disciplined enough to reject the answers.

Researching artistic preference is, frankly, impossible and any consultant that says otherwise should be forcibly removed from your office. Anyway, you're meant to be leading. You can, however, gain an impression from a broad sweep. Glean something that might inform a change. The audience we were talking to were Opus One group leaders. The Hallé's Opus One concerts are a rarity, nine programmes a year with each programme performed three times. Over half the audience comprise long-established groups. The repertoire is traditionally structured, usually an overture, concerto and symphony, and, in the main familiar greats of the nineteenth century.

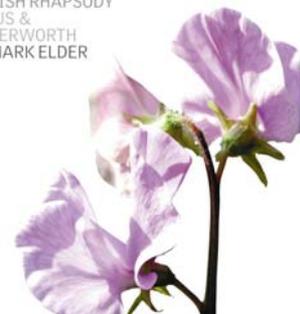
Not pops. But not too challenging. And what did they want? To be challenged. And what did we want? To challenge them. The problem was a practical one; we were running out of repertoire and in danger of repeating ourselves rather too often. Sir Mark Elder asked the question at the end of a concert – 'what do you want?' Back came a lone reply 'different works ... just sometimes!' Everyone clapped.

This discussion prompted more research and a re-appraisal of the artistic breadth of the Opus One concerts.

Audiences have held their ground and last year, Opus One fixed subscriptions were up. A major benefit for our planners (which also, in this series, includes the marketing team) is that there are now more repertoires on which to draw. Some years ago we instituted a rule that repertoire shouldn't be repeated within the same series more than once every three years. This was ambitious for Opus One concerts. Now it is more sustainable.

Don't underestimate what it is your audience wants, just because they don't always ring you up and tell you to put on harder stuff. Also, don't assume that it is only the premium end of the market that needs to be challenged. Another important point to make, particularly with audiences like Opus One, is the importance of making them feel a part of the bigger story.

HALLÉ
ENGLISH RHAPSODY
DELIUS &
BUTTERWORTH
SIR MARK ELDER



Sir Mark Elder's effect on the Halle has been astonishing. A word from him, literally, to the audience during a concert explaining why we have programmed a piece, can transform an audience's attitude towards it.

We could spend a whole session talking about the audience development benefits that stem from direct connections between artists and audiences. Mark once performed the short, but to the average music lover, very challenging, *Five Pieces* by Webern. Mark told the audience of a 'surprise' at the end of the concert. The surprise was, in fact, a reprise of the piece, with anyone that wanted to, invited to stay behind and listen to it again, with some words from Mark, and with as many of the audience as possible sitting on the stage in between the musicians, so they could see the strange notation that is required for the work. I took a phone call the following week asking when we were next going to programme Webern. If that isn't public engagement, I simply don't know what is.

Of course it's not just about repertoire, it's about the experience as a whole. This is probably particularly true of Pops audiences. I say 'probably' because we haven't seriously begun to tap the possibilities. The Americans are ahead of us here. I was recently at a conference in Chicago discussing Pops concerts. It was interesting that the American market had to address very similar issues to our own; investment, programmes, standards and how to develop new ways to enhance the concert-going experience. They are, as I said, ahead of the game: concerts with huge screens, showing not silent films, but eighties computer games, which inspire a live soundtrack that gradually takes over the performance. The audiences lap it up. And what they are actually listening to is new music.

High quality product, polished, passionate, interesting; something that causes curiosity; something that prompts recommendation; something that may not come from the head of a professional planner. We need more.

Before I leave you, I want to plant one more seed inside your heads. One more element of audience engagement that I have an awful feeling we are about to get totally and horribly wrong.

Remember first of all that it's not a bad idea to ask your audience things, as well as telling them things. I'm not just talking about research here, with questionnaires and focus groups and interviews and surveys, useful though all that is. I'm talking about simply talking to your audience, and looking at them and wondering about them.

I started this little seminar with a performance of Elgar's 'Smoking Cantata'. Smoking is a big part of my life at the moment because I'm trying to give up. Not too bad, I'm down from about 25 to 5 a day. But at concerts, during the interval, the badge would come off and the Silk Cut would come out. And I'd listen. Listen to what the audience was talking about. Sometimes I just couldn't help myself and I'd advance, I'm sure frighteningly, on some poor soul to ask why they'd bought this, or why they hadn't bought that, or taken advantage of one sales promotion or another. Their answers are always freely given and they give you gold.

As I mentioned earlier, we have, as an industry, done extraordinary things over the past twenty years. I am concerned now that the work we have done to develop and improve the marketing mix for the arts (which has produced a loyal and trusting audience base) is in danger of being jeopardised by a confusing mix of new media.

While I firmly believe that every appropriate channel should be used to strengthen and broaden our audiences, is too much emphasis being placed on the new, simply because it is new and are we forgetting what made us successful in the first place? Twitter till you're blue in the fingertips (the Hallé is developing a Tweeting policy along with everyone else) but not every piece of new technology or new media will necessarily help our cause, or be welcomed by our audience.

I stand before you shamelessly unconcerned by accusations of recidivism and there is a part of me that is proud to be labelled Luddite. My concern is that the progress of new media risks making us lazy. We risk losing those fantastic, imaginative elements of marketing and promotion that helped found this association and gave us all a professional footing. Paul Keynes, Roberta Doyle, Kate Horton, Anne Torregiani and others, raised very similar issues at the Edinburgh AMA conference, eleven years ago. They wanted a bit more 'Ballyhoo' in our marketing and perhaps a little less subtlety. I think they were right and are right. I think we need to take a stock-check of the marketing mix for the next twenty years.

Some of the things that make our message memorable and impressive are some of the elements of the marketing mix that might just be starting to look a tad old fashioned. But we forget them at our peril.



Show people your music and your theatre and your art. Invite your local cub reporter to have a go! Take your plays and your concerts and your pictures and sculptures into town squares, create a fuss, create a bang, invite people to stare and to laugh, give people reason to question you, to be angry with you, to show emotion. This is public engagement.

Remind them that not every message is best conveyed with digital efficiency. Remember that people like to open a letter as well as click on an email. We are in the business of showing humanity its own finest and most astonishing achievements. We are in the business of giving people a good night's entertainment. Technology can help, technology is vital, but the spirit is human, and the human touch is what makes us successful.

Thank you.