

Heather Walker

Improving the visitor experience at cultural venues

From modest Victorian beginnings in 1846 as a steam-engine repair shed to legendary cultural venue, the Roundhouse in Camden London has an enviable heritage. The Grade II listed building is now home to a bold and exciting programme of live music, theatre, dance, circus, spoken word, installations and digital media.*

When the Roundhouse re-opened 2006 following a £30m redevelopment programme, it was felt important that the public areas of the Roundhouse were separated to cater for those attending its 11-25 creative activities independently from visitors and audiences enjoying the building during the day or attending performances. It quickly became evident that this made sense in the hour prior to a show but that for much of the day, the Studio reception would be busy with school groups and individual members checking into activities and room bookings whilst at the Box Office staff sitting at a separate desk had few customers and yet were not able to help-out.

I was asked to assess whether there was another way of making this work which resulted in an improved experience for all visitors, a better organisational arrangement and no more, and preferably, less costly to operate.

What I discovered was two individual operations, managed by different managers working at adjacent desks in the same foyer staffed by two entirely separate teams. Yet most of the individuals in these teams worked on a casual basis across both operations effectively totting-up the equivalent of full-time hours. And whilst the individuals had the skills and expertise to work in both areas, what they actually did on each shift was dictated by which desk they were operating.

In my experience, public-facing operations like this develop because they are conceived on the basis of how the organisation is arranged between directors and managers rather than focusing its services on the end-user. Looking at this operation from the outside-in a visitor might wonder why they were gently ushered from one desk to another or indeed why they are waiting in a queue at one when there is little activity at the alternative. Internally this might make sense; externally it looks like bureaucracy and a lack of thought.

Following a detailed review involving the staff working in these areas, the Roundhouse amalgamated the activities and introduced a new Visitor Services structure. One welcoming counter now acts as the reception, information desk, studios booking-in area and Box Office operation. In the hour prior to a performance, the ticketing part of this separates out into a distinct area so that those young people attending drop-in sessions are not caught-up in the crowds collecting tickets for that night's show.

All visitors are the subject of all the team's attention, and the shift in customer perception is of people on-hand to help with whatever they need. On the back of this change all visitor operations were streamlined so that the team working in this area also covered front of house positions, cloakroom and merchandise roles. Their skills have been developed so that they can deal with a range of systems, issues and transactions; there are now some permanent full and part time positions alongside casual shifts, and perhaps most importantly from the staff's perspective, there is now a structured team with entry level jobs, development opportunities and a career path. The team is centrally recruited, trained and managed and are considerably more motivated in this new structure. Since its introduction two years ago assistants have been promoted to supervisor positions as supervisors take on manager roles. It also turned out to be less expensive to run.

This change was fundamentally about improving the visitor experience and that's been achieved through changes to structure, roles and reporting lines which in turn have supported the really important shift - attitude. The Roundhouse's visitor-facing teams previously had roles named and conceived around where they worked – Studio Receptionists, Box Office Assistants and Venue Managers; now they are a Visitor Services team focused on looking after the customer wherever they may be and whatever service they require.

New recruits into the team are selected firstly based on their attitude towards customers and our assessment of their ability to welcome, help and communicate. These days, most systems are pretty easy to learn and most recruits are PC-savvy so the Roundhouse does not advertise with lines such as 'must have two years Box Office experience' which perhaps perpetuates the myth that operating a system is the central skill in working with the public.

Organisations who organise themselves with their customers in mind feel quite different to visit. Out on the shop floor or public foyer, staff feel as if they represent the brand or company; somebody working in one area can answer a question about another; rarely do you get a team member looking at you somewhat incredulously that you have asked them a question outside their apparently obvious remit; the occasions when you are referred, invariably with a point, to another desk are few and far between.

When this is not the case, as in some retail outlets, the experience feels as if it were conceived as a series of franchises. In such, comments such as "I'm not on shoes – you'll need to find someone who works in that area" or "you can't pay for that here, you'll have to go back to the [insert brand] desk" are not uncommon. Perhaps visitors to arts venues sometimes feel the same – "you'll need to go to the information desk for that" or "I see you've also booked a programme voucher with your tickets - you'll need to take that to an usher to exchange" ...

It has always seemed anomalous to me that organisations that spend a lot of time and money developing an online experience where customers can get everything they want in one place and in one transaction, might offer quite the reverse in the physical environment. A customer is as time hungry once on-site as they are online – rushing from work, eager to meet friends, have a snack and a drink, and read those programmes. Getting that experience as streamlined and efficient as possible is not just good service, it also gives visitors more time to relax, engage and spend money at your bars and restaurant.

That's a win, win for everyone.

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