

Panto Wheels



Laura Greenfield interviews **Victoria Willingale**, Marketing and Education Officer at Cambridge Arts Theatre



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Panto Wheels: a sponsored fundraising event in the arts

Panto Wheels is a scheme by Cambridge Arts Theatre to help children from culturally and socially deprived areas attend the Christmas pantomime by subsidising the cost of travel, which can prove prohibitive. For many this is their first experience of theatre and, as pantomime is bright, engaging and fun, it gives a solid foundation for children to develop a relationship with the arts.

Many schools also use the pantomime story to inform teaching and learning across the curriculum, helping children encounter subjects like science and maths in exciting contexts. In 2014/15 Panto Wheels helped 2,500 children from 14 schools or groups.

In 2013 Education Officer Victoria Willingale did a sponsored bike ride to raise awareness and money for Panto Wheels. By working with local partners, including the local paper, she was able to get press and social media attention, raise £1,600 (plus Gift Aid) in sponsorship, and create a relationship that led to a £3,800 grant.



Objectives

- Raise money
- Raise the profile of the Panto Wheels project and Cambridge Arts Theatre.
- Demonstrate Victoria's personal passion for the project.

Target audience

Victoria aimed to get sponsorship from her friends and family, the staff and trustees at Cambridge Arts Theatre, and existing supporters of the theatre and of local children's charities.

She aimed to raise awareness among the general public via social media and news outlets: this allowed her to increase awareness among both potential supporters and potential beneficiaries (for example, local teachers and parents who could suggest the scheme to their school).

Process

Deciding on the challenge

Victoria saw an article about the *Cambridge News*' 'Big Bike Ride' (100km), which was designed to raise money for various local charities (not including Cambridge Arts Theatre). Despite the fact she owns a heavy, bright red, single-gear bicycle with a basket, she got in touch to ask them if she could do it for Panto Wheels, and they agreed. (Victoria also made a personal donation to the other local charities as a thank you). Signing up to an externally run event was helpful because there was a definite date when she had to do it, and it helped with motivation.

Setting up the infrastructure

Victoria sent up a fundraising page on Virgin Money Giving, because this site had the lowest charges on donations (so more money would go to Panto Wheels). Because the event was externally organised, there was no need to arrange the event itself.

Letting people know

Victoria's Big Bike Ride was included in theatre brochures and publicised through social media. Cambridge Arts Theatre is a receiving theatre with a different show each week, and so each week a picture was taken of a different actor holding a sign asking people to sponsor her. The sign made sure the messages were consistent and correct, but the photos all had a lot of personality and got a lot of both social media and press attention. Both Cambridge Arts Theatre twitter and Facebook accounts were used, as well as Victoria's own accounts.

Victoria sent press releases to Cambridge Evening News, and says it was very helpful that the bike ride was organised by the local paper because they were also keen to publicise it. They ran news articles when celebrities like Lenny Henry had their pictures taken, and it was a great 'good news' and goodwill story. This was helpful in building more regular informal contact between Cambridge Arts Theatre and the local newspaper.

Victoria also sent out emails to friends, family, staff and past Panto Wheels supporters. These were a great way to demonstrate her personal passion for the project and to show them she cared just as much about it as they did.

Training

From March to July Victoria got into training. She felt it was important to do something that was a genuine personal challenge, so that people could see her commitment. She said she thought it would be wrong to do something like a 'play watching marathon' – that that would be the equivalent of someone who runs marathons for fun doing a 10km race and asking for sponsorship. Victoria went training three to four times each week, including an early session every Saturday, and made sure her weekly efforts were reflected in the personal emails she sent out.



Raising sponsorship

Victoria originally set a target of £1,000, and when she achieved this she increased it to £1,500. She eventually raised more than £1,600 plus Gift Aid. Some individuals whose businesses support Panto Wheels chose to sponsor her personally, and Cambridge Arts Theatre also did bucket collections during two weeks' performances (one adult production and one family production).

Letting beneficiaries know

Victoria kept in communication with schools and groups who benefit from Panto Wheels, to show them how important the programme was to Cambridge Arts Theatre and to her, and also to inspire those who were fundraising to add more funds to their Panto Wheels grant.

Completing the challenge

It took Victoria a difficult 5½ hours, cycling into a strong headwind, to complete the challenge. Her bridge red, single-gear bike was a real disadvantage in the weather, but the basket was good for carrying water and it meant she stood out and got a lot of attention from spectators and the other cyclists, which helped with profile. She said the people who sponsored her really kept her going – there was no choice but to finish.

Outcomes

Raising money

Victoria raised £1,600 plus Gift Aid.

Raising awareness of the theatre as a charity

Not all of the local community think of theatre as a charitable activity, so it was really helpful to engage in such a traditional method of charity fundraising to change perceptions. The press and social media attention really enhanced this outcome.

Building a relationship with *Cambridge Evening News*' Press Relief Charity

Part of the sponsorship from the Big Bike Ride goes to the newspaper's grant giving charity, Press Relief. Victoria applied for a grant and received £3,800 towards Panto Wheels. This was a huge bonus on top of all the sponsorship, and the relationship that she built with the *Evening News* was really helpful in getting advice through the application process.

Things to remember

1. Make sure you communicate your challenge, both while you are preparing and afterwards.
2. Engaging with externally organised events where there is mutual benefit.
3. Pick something which is difficult but achievable, and relatable. People need to be able to imagine what is like to do the challenge (no Iron Man triathalons), but it needs to feel difficult to them (no 5km cycle rides).
4. Know why you are raising money. You need to be completely confident about why it is important to get you through the training.
5. Get your organisation on board. If they are enthusiastic the benefits will be much bigger.
6. Do it! If you genuinely think it's worthwhile, it feels brilliant when you've completed it. Victoria said it was a great feeling to have contributed 'beyond the day job'.

Future plans

Victoria is planning a 2015 'Cambridge Triathlon', with a 100km bike ride, four hours of fancy dress punting (for which seats will be auctioned), and a performance of *Not I*. Since she doesn't know how to punt and hasn't performed for a few years, she's got a lot of training to do. She aims to raise £2,000 this time round.