

Seminars

Claire Byers, Director of Communications, Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art *Pathways to visitor frequency*

Claire Byers took up her newly created role at Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in January 2007. Since September her role has included PR, marketing and strategic communications and also public facing services. Previously Claire was head of external relations and then innovation and design futures manager for One NorthEast, the regional development agency for North East England. Claire has over twenty years experience in senior creative, cultural and design roles and is an authoritative voice in developing innovation in service based environments and championing service design and excellence. She was also integral to bringing Dott 07, the Design Council's first Design Biennial to the North East.

In this session, Claire looked at how investing in your internal audience creates a more innovative and memorable visitor experience, increasing the likelihood of future visits and thereby building a lasting and mutually valuable relationship with your audience. By combining customer experience mapping (CEM) and customer relationship management (CRM) techniques, BALTIC is strengthening its relationship with visitors, encouraging visitor frequency and deepening visitor loyalty.

Pathways to Visitor Frequency

Visitor frequency is tied in with so much more. It's a 360 degree equation; promotion is tied in with experience and you can't look at that without thinking about the experience of your staff.

Baltic is changing direction after a difficult year for the organisation. It is moving away from *presenting and marketing the best in contemporary art to creating unrivalled experiences and access to art and artists*. It's quite a shift of ethos.

Baltic was ten years in the planning with a capital investment of £50m, opening in July 2002. It is unique in its scale, being the largest UK gallery without a permanent collection, hosting between 15 and 20 exhibitions a year on four floors as well as in other spaces like the stairwells and café.

During the first four weeks of opening it averaged 4 – 5,000 visitors a day. The 100,000th visit was achieved by 4th August 2002 with a massive peak of interest right at the beginning. Over five years it has had 2.7m visitors with an average of 400,000 visits a year. It has hosted 200 artists from 24 countries with 30 commissions including Anish Kapoor, Sam Taylor-Wood, Antony Gormley and Spencer Tunick and in July 2007, a new learning centre (Quay) was opened across the second floor for both adults and children.

The Challenge

Although this is a success story, there are still challenges. Baltic has free entry and, with 3000 square metres of gallery space, a utilities bill alone of £1m a year. The arts lottery funded annuity runs out this year and there is still a very difficult balance between revenue generating areas and expenditure. Contemporary art is hard, challenging and controversial and Baltic has had six months of negative media attention.

Early curiosity can no longer be relied upon and there are a relatively small number of people who visit very frequently. It also seems to have lost the regional touch, with most of the drop-off of visitors being from the local population.

Why do the regulars come? According to survey responses, 80% do not care what's on! They like the building, the views, the shop, café, for the walk, to spend time with friends. Therefore, perhaps the marketing should be focused around a more rounded experience which visitors are obviously enjoying.

Supporters vs Raving Fans

In order to survive financially it was felt that Baltic needed either to appeal to more people (supporters) or appeal more to the people it already attracted (raving fans).

When CB joined the organisation it had only two dedicated marketing staff for her to line manage. It became an ambition to turn more of the staff into a wider marketing department and after six months she had succeeded in having the entire visitor services department of 80 people under her management. This provided a rich resource for a re-focus of the visitor service and a chance to enable the whole organisation to understand where you want to be, and what you stand for. Internal staff and audience is your most important resource, but they need winning over and enthusing.

It's about creating raving fans, but it can't be done with the art alone. Only 22% of visitors had any real knowledge of contemporary art so Baltic had had to work hard to persuade people to return regularly.

One of the most popular exhibitions was one of Antony Gormley's, which had a great deal to do with the way it involved local people. They had access to the art and were part of the art. Staff were also involved and were able to relate to the visitors, the artist and the art.

The Promise

Messages were not clear and potentially conflicting. Even staff weren't sure what the Baltic was trying to say.

The process therefore started with vision and value workshops. They took in cross-sections of the entire organisation. Participants were asked to

- Write down what characterised the Baltic experience now (2007)
- Write down what the Baltic experience would be like in 2017 when sustained improvements had taken place
- What would be required in between to make this happen?

Trustees were included and apart from enabling them to own the process it gave them the opportunity to speak to a range of staff from the centre.

Once messages were clear it was time to introduce ourselves to the visitor. A steady long-term relationship was required rather than a series of blind dates. To do this Baltic used

- Customer Relationship Management (CRM)
- Customer Experience Mapping (CEM)

This meant that it was possible to combine the factual with the personal and motivational. CEM is used widely in the public sector to put the customer at the centre of the equation, looking at immediate emotional responses and trying to record this so that we have a rounded idea of the person.

Creating service envy

Visitors who have never been to Baltic should be jealous of the experience that its customers are having.

To begin with, staff were sent on a '**Service Safari**' in which teams went out with disposable cameras to assess the service of a variety of businesses such as a beauty salon, sealife centre, Waterstones, library, MacDonaldis and a four star lunch. Interestingly the four star lunch group were the most dissatisfied because their expectations were very high. The people who had the best time were those who went to Waterstones to find an obscure book. They were greeted by an enthusiastic staff member who took them to where they wanted to go, found the book and suggested alternatives.

Next came **ideas generation** and **prototyping** in which they were encouraged to convert this knowledge into ideas which could be implemented there and then, with participants having to use images to convey their suggestions. In order to ensure that there was no enthusiasm and energy lost some of the ideas were tried out that day with everyone voting for their favourites from an overall list of 150. A range of imaginative suggestions included

- Donation box – with changed wording saying 'give us your money'
- Ad-hoc history tour of the building itself
- Kids cardboard wheel – a roulette route through the building
- A friends' scheme for the day – with loyalty cards, discounts in the shop, free coffee, preferential treatment
- Cardboard bubbles above the 'crew' (invigilators) saying 'ask me a question' and badges for them giving more information

The visitors were actually co-creating the experience with the staff.



On this basis, blueprints have been created and over 20 ideas have been implemented. Some of those involved have now formed a 'Better Baltic' group who meet monthly to generate further new ideas.

The Knowledge

Collecting data and making sure that the data capture is good is also important. This has involved finding new ways of asking people, collecting postcards and observing visitor behaviour. The Baltic is looking at harnessing new technology by, for example, people using swipe cards in the gallery.

Comments and feedback are actively encouraged, with a system similar to Yell.com's rant line, in which people can phone up and say exactly what they think of the organisation.

'Net promoter' is an idea from the USA which is based on the question '*on a scale of 1 to 10, how likely are you to recommend this gallery to friends or family*'. The first person to follow up is the one that has put down 1 or 2 because you can convert them. Your net promoter score is the fans score minus the detractor score which gives you an indication of progress.

Whist technology is important; it is still the human connection between staff and visitor which is of paramount priority. Technology is there to help the human experience not replace it.

It's still important to lower barriers by making it easier to engage. Initiatives such as 'Smart Arts', which was a three week course on 'bluffing your way through contemporary art' – though most people discovered they knew much more about contemporary art than they realised. After a graffiti and skating project last year, many of the young people involved have returned on a regular basis.

Right people, right roles, right support.

'Strengthfinder' is a programme which ensures that people are working in the right places. There is no point in training the life out of people if they aren't appropriate to the role. It looks at what people are really good at, using their enthusiasms and what they enjoy doing.

Each person in the organisation has an individual learning plan – a flightpath of where they want to go. There are coaches on the floors who are working with individual crew members and there is training in place to improve the overall management of the organisation.



It's important that they have the authority to go one step beyond. Recently in the café there was someone who wanted to buy a sandwich and drink but didn't have enough cash and handed over her debit card to pay, but the pdq machine wasn't working. Everyone was getting flustered so she was told [by CB] that she could have it for free. The customer was really grateful, not being able to thank the staff enough. Importantly though, café staff have been given the authority to do the same thing should a similar incident happen again.

There's a big difference between trying to motivate someone and enabling them to really feel motivated. Saying 'thank you' makes a big difference.

Reaping the Rewards

There's a long way to go, but already the outcomes are very positive:

- Staff who are enthusiastic, empowered, motivated
- Staff who want to go the extra mile
- Visitors that trust the experience
- Visitors who we know well
- Visitors who want to return
- Visitors who enthusiastically recommend
- Visitors who want to invest in our longevity

The dream now is for people to have a unique first hand experience of contemporary art and artists and become raving fans – inside and out!

Delegates were then invited to discuss their own customer experiences good and bad in small groups and to feedback their thoughts.

One person provided a story of how she had really enjoyed a gallery, wanted to feedback this information to someone but was sent on to different places and people. By the time she had found the right person to talk to she was feeling frustrated and had totally forgotten how much she had enjoyed the experience in the first place.

A good experience included someone who had attended a theatre performance, was late and couldn't go in until a break in the performance. The stewards though were very friendly, suggesting she have a drink and then updating her about what had happened in the play up that point.

Questions and discussion

- *You said earlier on that the organisation didn't know who it was for? Did you decide who you were for?*

It's a difficult question to answer, because the Baltic is currently being restructured with a new business plan so we are discussing this issue at the moment. What the exercise did clarify for us is that the Gallery is not primarily a tourist destination, it has to be for the locality/region and it has to be about learning and developing understanding of contemporary art.