

**Su Matthewman, Communications Director,
West Yorkshire Playhouse**

Researching engagement – using action research to develop our understanding and inform our customer communications

Born and brought up in South Yorkshire, Su's first job in the arts was as Publicity Officer at York Theatre Royal in 1988. Following that she moved to Birmingham in 1990 to join Birmingham Royal Ballet as Marketing Officer and then Marketing Manager spending 10 years there. She moved to the National Railway Museum in York as Head of Marketing in 2000 and became Communications Director at West Yorkshire Playhouse in 2006.

In this seminar, Su Matthewman talked about West Yorkshire Playhouses' recently launched programme of action research which aimed to understand its audiences better.

Action research and organisational change

I'm going to tell you about an interesting journey we are on at West Yorkshire Playhouse, something about where we are now and where we have been and where I think we need to get to.

West Yorkshire Playhouse at a glance:

- National producing company
- One of the biggest producing theatres outside London
- 22 years old, having started life in 1990
- Two auditoria: Quarry (750 seats) and Courtyard (350 seats)
- Bar, café, coffee shop, small gallery
- Pioneering audience engagement work – SPARK, Heydays (Club for over 55s),
- Relaxed performances – targeted at people with learning disabilities and physical disabilities. We put on more FOH staff and the performers adjust the way they perform. It allows people who wouldn't normally come to the theatre to have a great time
- Turnover £6 million
- 60% self funded, 40% grant funded
- There have been three artistic directors over these 22 years: Jude Kelly, Ian Brown and James Brining who has just started and is creating a new vision for the organisation

Yorkshire is the largest county in England and we face a lot of competition as we are situated in a region that houses producing venues such as Sheffield Theatres, York Theatre Royal and Harrogate Theatres as well as large receiving venues such as Bradford Alhambra and Leeds Grand. Yorkshire is also packed with visitor attractions and museums.

Leeds is a large city:

- 770,000 people with approx 250,000 students
- Has its own opera and dance companies in Opera North, Northern Ballet and Phoenix Dance Theatre
- Lively arts scene in general
- The city is marketed under the slogan '*Leeds Live It Love It*' but people who live there have changed this to '*Leeds Love it. Leave it*'. It is marketed as a city where you can drink your head off and shop till you drop so it is difficult to get even the most basic performing arts events onto that agenda
- WYPH is based in an area called Quarry Hill, a redeveloped area which used to be one of the most notorious slums in Europe. The playhouse is being physically dwarfed by the developments around it.

WYP has average audiences of around 184,000 per year and it is representative of the make up of Leeds (there is an approximately 10 per cent Black and Minority Ethnic population). Annual average attendance is 64 per cent of capacity and the average ticket yield is currently just under £15 and growing. There is a healthy theatre going audience within Leeds and West Yorkshire. Our catchment area is massive, and growing.

Our operating environment at the moment is really challenging. We have lots of competition from venues around the county and there is a general recognition that to a certain extent WYP has lived on its past reputation. People keep talking about 'the Jude Kelly years' as a time when the theatre was really bold and pioneering and there is a general consensus that we seem to have lost our way a bit in that sense.

We are having a very honest debate now about whether we really are the democratic space we set out to be all those years ago and some of the results show that we probably aren't that space and aren't attracting the diverse audience we thought we were. So we are at the point now where we are asking far-reaching questions: who are we, what are we about, who are we doing it for? We know that we need to create a new business model because we have patched up the organisation with different pots of money and different restructures over the years but not in a sustainable way. There is a big question about how the audience fits into this and what they want from us. It is an exciting time but also a scary time – a bit like opening up cans of worms and not being quite sure what is going to crawl out.

We have decided not to close but to carry on. This is at the heart of what Action Research is about; carrying on with business while making massive changes at the same time.

We face many communication challenges:

- In terms of audiences, visibility and marketing, need to re-establish national and regional profile
- Need to know and understand audiences better
- Relationship between audience development and programming must be made explicit
- Focussed heavily on show marketing in recent years, largely in response to financial pressures

West Yorkshire Playhouse Aims and Objectives

- To re-assert its national reputation and relevance
- To be a creative powerhouse
- To be recognised for its innovation and excellence
- To have a dynamic and sustainable relationship with the city of Leeds
- To inspire and nurture tomorrow's generation of artists
- To be a place of possibility
- To be financially sustainable and operationally strong

When we started our Action Research project, we started by looking at the existing data we held about our audiences, primarily through our box office system Patron Edge. This showed:

- Core group of committed customers
- Three quarters of audience classed as casual attenders, attending either once only, or twice over a period of one year
- Very healthy percentages of new bookers (around 75 per cent of audiences each year are new)
- Not consistently successful at retaining new bookers
- Specific audiences that we have not maintained a relationship with (BME and students for example)
- Booking patterns and loyalty extremely dependent on artistic programme

My gut feeling about why we lose so many audience members is that we are not offering them the right sort of programming rather than it being a pricing issue. There is no clear way for them to stick with us.

Target audiences 2012-2013

- Frequent audiences
- Infrequent audiences
- Retaining audiences
- Young people
- BAMEs
- Digital audiences

A key goal for us at the moment is for us to get all members of the organisation to take this information and use it, not for it to be confined to the marketing department.

We want the education and HR teams to be involved in this process too so that there is a cross-organisational buy-in to developing audiences.

When we started our Action Research, I didn't know what it was so I looked up a definition. It's really about problem solving on the job:

'Action research is research that is initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving led by individuals working with others in teams to improve the way they address issues and solve problems.'

- Wikipedia

This is how Arts Council England went public with the fact that they are investing in the Playhouse:

'The Arts Council has invested in a small number of organisations who want to change the way they work and the funding will support organisational development, refurbishment and improvement of existing arts premises. Lessons learned from these investments will be shared with the wider arts sector. The action research follows on from ACE's recession programme Sustain, which identified a need for this kind of support.'

- ACE, press release 10 Jan 2011

In our case, this support is very much about organisational development. Everything we do in action research, we have to document and share with the wider arts sector. Arts Council England identified WYP as *'facing immediate challenges, where practical learning could happen in parallel with an organisational programme. To be invited to apply to take part in this research, each organisation had to agree to scrutiny throughout the process and to ACE sharing detailed learning from the project to the wider arts sector.'*

We were invited, along with several other arts organisations, to apply for funding and we received £1,466,000 to be spent on a major change of programme. The action research plan has to be executed by the end of May 2013. Some of the things we are carrying out require significant funding but some require no money at all.

What has been interesting in the process is that some people who have worked for WYP for a long time have been resistant to some of the younger people's ideas but as time has gone on, the newer people have started to guide the older people through the process of change.

Our application was all about 'Opening up and opening out' across the organisation. It is touching everyone in the organisation. It is about internal culture and about becoming a more customer focused organisation.

The action research is made up of five strands of work:

1. Creative pilots or explorations
2. Planning for artistic succession
3. Creating a new business model
4. Audience development, communications and brand
5. Developing people, internal culture and strengthening operational processes

Examining each of these in more detail:

1. Creative pilots or explorations

We have done two seasons, one called Transform and one called Furnace. They have each been about new areas of work and using the spaces in the theatre in a very different way. We decided to look at each season and asked ourselves how we could challenge what we do. We asked questions like 'Do we do too much?', 'Is our programme too varied?', 'Can we do less but better?', 'Can we do it in different spaces?' These are questions that don't cost you any money to ask. You need the guts to ask them and a forum and probably your Chief Executive behind you when you are asking those questions. I have been at the Playhouse for six years and I have really struggled to get into the artistic planning processes but I am there now. I have had to keep my foot in the door and keep banging on the door for the last five or six years.

2. Planning for artistic succession

This is largely done now as we have James Brining from Dundee. He is very much at the beginning of creating a new artistic vision which will be massive for WYP, and much needed.

3. Creating a new business model

This is by far the biggest thing we are working on. This is totally flipping what we do in every area on its head. I have been part of this process but this is very much driven by Chief Executive and Artistic Director.

4. Audience development, communications and brand

This is split into five elements and we are completely reviewing what we do, which is very exciting and a little bit scary. We will be asking 'Why do we do that?', 'Why don't we do it this way instead?' All sorts of things are emerging from this process. We are looking at audience development initiatives and trying to bring in different sets of intelligence. We have only just started on this journey but we are going to be looking outside of the arts, going into museums and visitor attractions, many of which are

way ahead of the performing arts, and going out to commercial organisations to see what they do and then to bring that learning back. We are also going to revisit our brand, which is hugely exciting. Our brand at the moment feels like it is on the floor and needs lifting up and revitalising.

5. Developing people, internal culture and strengthening operational processes

This is very much about opening up and opening out, getting people to have honest conversations which we don't always have the forums for at the Playhouse. Quite often I have found myself in the position of saying what I think people want to hear rather than what I really believe. Part of this is to look at how we communicate internally with one another. Many days we sit at our computers and send out emails to each other and there is little face to face contact so we are trying to develop a culture where we actually sit down and talk to one another.

By the end of May 2013, we need to have achieved the following:

- Creative programme refreshed
- A broader range of creative people who are influencing and shaping our work
- Working in new ways with artists and with community partners
- Using our spaces in more playful and creative ways
- A strengthened brand
- Be operating a new business model
- Our importance in the sector will be unquestionable
- A new artistic vision for the organisation

How did we go about doing this? It was driven by the Chief Executive Sheena Wrigley. We appointed a project manager and the steering group was appointed from staff; the senior management team and various heads of department. Involvement was voluntary but most of the staff have chosen to take part in it because they saw it as an opportunity for them to have their say. All of the staff were asked to choose which areas they would like to be involved in. One of the best things about the process has been that people have been taking part in these forums who don't normally interact with one another.

It is a three phase project and we are just coming to the end of Phase One, the research phase. The next phase is the learning that we bring back from the research and the final phase (probably in the new year) will be the planning phase.

We split this up into

13 HOUSES

ART: How we develop artistically and creatively

DIVERSE: How we make our work on stage, the range of people we work with and our audiences more diverse

GREEN: How we can become a greener organisation

OPEN: How we can open WYP up in different ways to more people

PLAY: How we work with young people

VIRTUAL: How we can use new media and virtual technologies

YOUR: How we can make the experience of visiting WYP better for our audiences

COUNTING: How we can ensure our economic viability in the future

FULL: How we can increase our audiences and visitors

HOT: How we nurture new artistic and creative talent

OUR: How we work together as an organisation

TRADING: How we can maximise our opportunities for trading

WORK: How we can become a centre for training, learning and development

Each house has a chair. I chair FULL HOUSE. I got twelve people from production, to box office, to a cleaner to a café supervisor. Within FULL HOUSE, there are some clear pointers that we are working towards. These are really massive. A lot of this is about trying to put audiences at the centre of what we do.

Audience development, communications and brand aims

- To put audiences at the centre of what we do
- To increase the number of people who experience the Playhouse's work
- To broaden the audiences
- To understand more about those who come to our theatre
- To explore new ways to communicate with them
- To increase their connectedness with the Playhouse and ensure they have a clear sense of our brand and what it stands for
- To agree clear development priorities for our work with audiences
- To think ambitiously about audiences and put them at the heart of all decisions we make.
- To understand more about those who come and about why people don't
- To review communications work. The communications team need to be able to market all areas of the theatre's activity

The action research money needs to be spent on quite specific things. Our programme is very full so we rarely have time to properly evaluate what we do and we need to move away from the current focus on 'show based' marketing activity and measurements.

As part of Action Research, FULL HOUSE was charged with asking two key questions:

- What does it mean to become a more audience-centric organisation (i.e. to put audiences at the heart of our theatre)?
- How do we get more people to experience the Playhouse's work and broaden the mix of people who feel WYP is important to them?

[Su invited delegates to discuss, in pairs, what they feel it means to become more audience focused, then to feed back].

Delegate: We discussed putting your research and programming in a different order so that rather than having a product that you then have to find an audience for, turning that on its head. We also discussed the idea of allowing your audience to become your programmers. York Theatre Royal recently allowed young people to come in for a week and not only choose the shows but also to act in them, market them, and develop a deeper connection with the theatre.

Delegate: We talked about how difficult it is as people within the inner sanctum of the arts to imagine what it is like for someone who doesn't have that knowledge or sense of ease with walking into a theatre or art gallery, to imagine what the barriers might be. It is difficult to bring yourself out of this way of thinking and this is why we need to talk to our audiences and especially the people who don't attend.

SM: Ask yourself whether you are a customer focused organisation. I can say, hand on heart, that the Playhouse is not. We want to be, but we are not there yet. The crucial thing is for you to define what it means to you as an organisation.

The outcomes we want from the FULL HOUSE part of Action Research are: an outline strategy with clear audience development priorities; input/challenge into the artistic leadership discussions; the basis from which to commission a review of structures, working processes and resourcing in the future.

FULL HOUSE met three times.

In Meeting one (November 2011), we discussed:

- What does it mean to become a more audience-focused organisation?
- How can we get more people to experience the Playhouse's work?
- How can we broaden the mix of people who feel the Playhouse is important to them?

In Meeting two (January 2012), we discussed:

- In your job, how close do you think you are to the show audience?
- In your job, how close do you think you should be to the show audience?
- In your job, how close do you think you are to the non-show audience?

As part of this process, we realised that we wanted to treat staff as customers so we have already begun a major cultural shift by speaking internally to people with the same degree of respect we speak to people externally. The staff made it clear that they wanted a forum with the Chief Executive and they also want different information from different people at different times. This has caused us to trial various approaches to staff meetings. For example, we have tried a 'show and tell' meeting in which we met in a front of house area and brought things from our departments (press releases from the marketing department, dummies and props from costume department et al.) The result of that meeting was that people came out with more knowledge about other departments and a more respectful tone to fellow staff members and this has continued.

In Meeting three (February 2012), we discussed:

- What's the ideal balance between being audience-led and artistically led?

As we were just about to appoint a new Artistic Director, I also asked participants if they were on the interview panel, what questions they would like to ask the prospective Artistic Director and the following questions emerged:

- What are the essential components of a viable regional theatre in the 21st century?
- Under your artistic leadership, what role do you see WYP playing in the community, and in what ways would the community influence your artistic leadership and the work of WYP?
- Under your artistic leadership, imagine the WYP bar after a show on Friday – what does it look like, who is there and what is happening?

The first and third questions were actually used in the interview process, which I was thrilled about. A spin off from this has been that people now want to put an audience focused question into their own department's interview questions, whether it is for a cleaner, or an education officer or someone else.

The FULL HOUSE group came up with the following recommendations:

1. Start to work in a more commercial/entrepreneurial way whilst remaining as accessible as we can

Examine ways of maximising box office income and secondary spend whilst remaining accessible

Action: Commission external consultant to examine ways of maximising income. Tim Baker has been commissioned and has been working on this for approximately three months

Work to begin in the short term:

2. Become more knowledgeable about its customers through a formal and regular customer research programme

More formal and frequent customer research

Action: Full Housers to research organisations who have trialled/implemented regular customer research programmes. This does not cost much money – it is more a question of sending people out to bring back the learning.

3. Be clear about audience segments

Segmenting our audience

Action: Commission external consultant to develop culture segments specific to WYP. Morris Hargreaves McIntyre have been commissioned

4. Develop a full integrated approach to customers across the organisation, which includes customers who are not just show audiences but includes all external customers

Create a CRM plan

Action: Full Housers to research organisations who we believe have created, implemented and developed successful customer relationship management plans. One idea we in the early stages of looking at is having a help desk, maybe run by volunteers, at which someone would sit with an iPad and be able to show visitors which shows were busy or less busy, where to have a cup of tea, and so on.

5. Create a clear 'journey' and point of entry for customers

Defining the ladder of giving

Action: Defining the ladder of giving with Fundraising and Development team in the first instance and then clarification of our offer as part of Audience Development plan. We are looking at the moment about whether we can bring our Friends scheme in on this and perhaps redefine their role.

Work to begin in the longer term:

6. Become more audience focussed

Research organisations who we believe have been successful in becoming a more audience focussed company

Action: Send Full Housers out to venues who have achieved more audience focus. Full Housers will have a clear brief and a clear set of criteria to report back on.

This is so big for the organisation, we are going to devote two whole days to this, a sort of mini conference.

7. Examine ways of ensuring that WYP communications can accommodate much more than just shows

Communications audit to re-evaluate current WYP communications capabilities, identify any gaps and prepare the communications team so that they are capable of being fit for purpose for wider organisational needs

Action: Commission an external consultant to carry out communications audit

8. Redefine who/what it is and who it is for

Review WYP brand

Action: Brand review through commissioning an external consultant following input from new Artistic Director (James Brining rejoins us in September 2012 so we will be continuing on this journey soon)

9. To be clearer on our offer

Refining our offer to customers

Action: Consultation with James Brining in the first instance and then clarification of our offer as part of part of the brand review.

This is very bold, questioning the assumptions about why we do certain things.

10. Be clear about who our audiences need to be/should be and create priorities from that

Create an Audience Development plan

Action: Full Housers to research organisations who we believe have created, implemented and developed successful audience development plans.

11. Examine further ways of judging success rather than just assuming that Box Office income is the only criteria for success

New ways of judging success, beyond simple box office achievement

Action: Consultation with James Brining and Management team in the first instance and then clarification of success criteria as part of organisational objectives.

12. Include the voice of the audience in the artistic planning process

Ensuring audience focus is part of artistic planning

Action: Audience research, data and market intelligence to form part of artistic planning process

I would now like to share with you some initial findings from Tim Baker's piece of work on pricing:

Box Office data from Aug – July financial years 2008 – 2012:

- Massive volatility in sales between productions and between performances
- Vast majority of bookers attend only once a year
- Around two thirds of bookers do not return year on year
- Small groups (3-9 people) represent a significant percentage of bookings (33% total bookings, 41% total tickets, 45% total income)
- Catchment area is widely spread (over 45 minutes)
- Potential market is huge: 2.4M adults including 1M theatre goers
- Overall the market is not well off, nor particularly strongly populated with arts attenders, but the potential is still huge
- Significant growth in internet sales in past 4 years, but growth now stalled
- Competitor pricing....our lowest standard ticket price is £17, which is high in comparison
- Comps represent 10% of all tickets annually (average worth per year = £225k)
- Hot seats – particular seats go first consistently
- Demand is strongest for the highest priced seats
- There is potential for us to explore dynamic pricing
- We are a late booking venue
- We are not cannibalising our audiences
- Customers who attend comedy spend more £ in the bar and less in the café
- Customers who attend ballet spend more money in the coffee shop
- Friends – currently a separate org, need to come in house
- In terms of secondary spend, we make the most £ on coffee (plain ordinary filter)
- There is scope to introduce a booking fee (adding £1.75 per transaction per year would generate an additional £87,500)

The big surprise for me was the number of comps we issue each year, with value of £225,000. Some of those comps have been used to attract audiences to specific shows and some have been used just to paper the house. So we need to see who these people are.

We run two auditoria concurrently and for years we have been blaming low sales in one venue because of competition from the other auditorium but Tim's research is showing that is absolutely not true.

Another surprise was that the greatest secondary spend was on coffee; not fancy lattes and so on but just plain old filter coffee. This begs the question of where we serve coffee (the café is stuck away in the corner presently but perhaps we could make it more central).

I was also surprised that we had no complaints whatsoever when we introduced a transaction fee. This is probably because we were one of the last organisations to introduce it. This in itself is going to bring in just under £90,000 per year.

From Tim Baker's pricing analysis we have already identified a number of QUICK WINS:

- ✓ Xmas pricing
- ✓ Autumn 2012 – dynamic pricing (similar to airline pricing)
- ✓ Transaction fees
- ✓ Transaction donations
- ✓ Scaling
- ✓ Premium seats
- ✓ Control comps
- ✓ Coffee (where are the best locations for us to sell more coffee?)
- ✓ Creating then shifting demand throughout the runs

I am particularly excited about the work we are doing in identifying our culture segments and thinking about the differing motivations of people in each segment. Also, working strategically with the fundraising team is very exciting as this is something I have never made work before. The idea of looking at different measures of success is really key to the organisation. Changing the culture to accept the fact that it is okay to challenge received ideas and bringing the audience in on this process is a really big one, probably the biggest one for me. We are starting to market test things on our audience now before we commit to doing them. This need not cost money; it is simply a question of asking people what they think. We quite often do this with print design; we approach people in the foyer or café and ask them what the design says to them.

This is where we are up to with your journey. Mostly, I think it is a question of having the guts to stand up and ask questions of your Chief Executive or Artistic Director. It might be difficult but I would urge you to have a go at it.

Questions and answers

Simon Seligman, Nottingham Playhouse: *Thank you so much for your frankness which I really appreciate. Some of what you said resonated alarmingly with some of the challenges we are facing. Has the process you have undertaken had to have an impact on the governance of the organisation in terms of the board and the competencies within the board, the extent to which the board have self examined how they have been keeping an eye on the progress of the Playhouse over the last decade; the extent to which the funding might be linked to ensuring that the board becomes more fit for purpose if that is relevant? Also, can you say in public whether this process would be proving much more difficult if you weren't changing Artistic Director? Perhaps a new person arriving allows you to open up all those cans of worms?*

SM: The first one is easy to answer. Luckily for us, we have a new board. This would have been incredibly difficult to do with the board we had up until a year ago. The new board are very fresh, very keen and very much on board with the change. This work started when our previous Artistic Director was still around; some of the process would have been quite challenging to go through. It has definitely helped having a new Artistic Director. It has given a new impetus to the organisation, although it has been difficult for him because he has only been with us for seven weeks, has gone again and will be returning in September so he has not had a massive impact on the Action Research but he definitely creates a sense of urgency.

Paul Reece, Birmingham Repertory Theatre: *A lot of what you said resonated with me as well and we have gone through similar processes at the Rep. During the process we tend to invite input from other departments. How do you maintain that consultative approach beyond this process? What is your plan to keep the whole organisation engaged?*

SM: There will be so many changes that come out of it that there won't really be a forum for going backwards. There are now about six or seven people in the organisation who are now seen as the gatekeepers to change. We have only got one shot at this. You can tell from people's tone of voice how engaged they are in this process. It will not be possible for us to go back.

Roger Tomlinson: *Great, frank presentation. Thank you. You used that dreadful expression 'bums on seats' and it seems to me that one of the issues of addressing becoming more audience centric as an organisation is how some people can refer to their valued audiences as 'bums on seats' when the change process you are trying to go through is to get people to see that they have to win those people's hearts and minds. In your roots and branch change, how do you address the issue of banning that terrible expression? I'm going to start a petition against people using that expression. In the States, they use the expression 'butts on seats' which is even worse.*

SM: I don't have a problem with 'bums' so I fundamentally disagree with you on that one.

Laura Jukes, Glyndebourne Opera Company: *I have been through two brand reviews with different organisations. In the first organisation I worked for, we were a team of forty year round and it is much easier once you have opened up the opportunities for people to engage with you to keep going. However, in my current organisation, where we have 120 staff day to day and up to 600 artists during our peak season, then we have had to implement quite a formal engagement programme. We run monthly sessions called 'Champions' which is a spread of people from across the organisation, coming together on a voluntary basis and discuss any issues that they have identified that they don't think live up to the brand values we have arrived at. It is challenging but it has been absolutely crucial to have that formal framework in place.*

SM: I have taken two organisations through rebrands, both very different. And you're right; it needs to resonate with everyone in the organisation at every level to keep that going. I don't as yet have a plan about how we do that at the Playhouse.

Helen Cassidy, Citizens Theatre: *How are you planning to identify which organisations to send members of your team to, which are felt to represent best practice?*

SM: There is no formal plan. I think I'm just going to phone people up and ask them what they have been doing. We may start that later today at the conference as I'm sure there are lots of delegates we would want to speak with. I have some ideas in my head about which organisations to approach, but some of my colleagues will also suggest ones I have not yet thought about. One of them is in Sydney but I'm not sure I can swing the air fare.

Helen Cassidy: *At the end of the process, will there be a report that we can share?*

SM: Yes. We are documenting everything we are doing and we will be sharing what we are doing with the whole of the arts sector.