

Review and revitalise

Sally Worman embarks on a project of reviewing marketing practice at Norden Farm Centre for the Arts

Is it really worth spending time reviewing our practice when we are so busy doing what we do? Is pausing activity to review our practice terrifying, unnecessary navel-gazing or an essential process? What is the impetus behind our decisions to take stock and how do we know where to start?

I've been Marketing Manager at Norden Farm for nearly four years and, in that time, little has changed with the way we market events. With a marketing team of just two people, an average of 70 live events every season, plus films and classes, the time and money dedicated to each event can sometimes seem limited.

When I first started, we confidently testified that the majority of sales came off the back of the seasonal brochure run. The brochure is mailed to 8,000+ addresses on our box office system and then distributed (by myself and Robyn, our Marketing Assistant, on a two-day road trip) to over 200 libraries, tourist information centres, community centres, town halls etc.

It is no longer the case that the brochure brings in the bulk of our audiences so I had to wonder, is that

because budget cuts have forced me to reduce the number of people we mail to or is it a change in audience spending habits? Speaking to other venues, it seems likely that it is the latter.

So, we can no longer rely on the brochure to generate the majority of sales. At the beginning of every season, I put together a marketing plan which is more or less the same for every event – scheduling press coverage, writing a direct mail, planning a targeted eflyer and researching the best places and events to send flyers to.

If this hasn't changed in the last four years, but audience spending habits have, it is obvious that something needs to be addressed.

When I've spoken to my colleagues at other venues, we've all agreed the same thing – we would love to review our marketing practice but are too busy practicing the practice to spend the time reviewing it!

In September 2011, I attended the TMA's *Essentials of Arts Marketing* course at Druidstone. This was a chance to immerse myself in the world of arts marketing with like-minded colleagues from venues across the



country and it was reassuring to know that we all shared the same budget and time restrictions.

I came away from the course with a notepad full of actions and a head full of inspiring lectures and classes. But eighteen months on, I've not been able to rejuvenate our marketing plans as I had hoped. This has been due to a lack of time, and in some parts, a lack of confidence. Should I take time out of the day-to-day tasks to put together a new plan and what are the risks that come with that? What if the new plan doesn't work?

In April 2012, Norden Farm lost its core funding of £140,000 per annum from Arts Council England. One of the actions Jane Corry, our Artistic Director and Chief Executive, took

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was to increase the number of events, therefore increasing the opportunity to generate income. An obvious result of the funding loss was a cut in the marketing budget. So we are now faced with the daily challenge of marketing more events on a smaller budget.

Last year, we applied for an operational development grant from Grants for the Arts and marketing was a key area in the proposal. When we received confirmation of the grant, the first thing I did was get in touch with arts consultant Heather Maitland. I admitted to Heather that our marketing practice hadn't changed in three and a half years. This was a chance to harness all the theory I had picked up on various courses, and for a professional consultant to help us put it into practice.

We decided that the areas we need to look at are effectiveness and efficiency. Are our current marketing strategies effective? Is our marketing plan efficient and does it make best use of resources?

When I discussed the proposal with Robyn, we both had different

outlooks on the use of effectiveness and efficiency. Do we concentrate on effectiveness by dropping the actions that aren't effective, therefore streamlining what the marketing department does and making it more efficient? Or do we make the marketing department more efficient, which gives us time to ensure all our actions are effective?

With Heather, we've decided that we need to prioritise the activities which bring the greatest return for the time, effort and money we put in.

We're still very much in the middle of this process. To look at effectiveness, Heather has given our data a health check and it passed with flying colours. The box office staff do a great job collecting data and ensuring it is accurate.

The next steps are to analyse our audience – which geographical areas should we be concentrating our efforts in? How has this changed? Where do new audiences come from and where do our core audience live? Then we'll be looking at the relationship we have with these

audiences. How often do they come? How good are we at retaining audiences?

The above data crunching is important but I'm most looking forward to exploring our marketing efficiency. Heather will be helping us look at our website, email campaigns and return on investment of our season brochure and direct mails.

The thought of having our marketing practice so scrutinised is a little scary but, ultimately, it's exciting and should make our organisation more efficient and marketing cost effective for the future. ■



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