

Case study

# Rural Community Engagement: *I Was a Rat*



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## Background

*I Was A Rat* was toured to The Courtyard in Hereford 30 May to 1 June 2013. The show stood out from The Courtyard's programme, with physical theatre, musical and dramatic elements. This encouraged the marketing team to think out of the box and try and engage with a new audience. The Courtyard has minimal local competition for arts audiences but it has to tackle the challenge of rural Herefordshire's scattered population.

## Objectives

- to identify themes from the show and use them to try and recreate its essence in the community
- to engage with people in rural areas who would not normally think of buying tickets
- to engage with the identified communities and turn them into customers
- to provide a free activity/event
- to provide free transport linked to the activity from the customers' locations
- encouraging people to purchase tickets rather than persuade them with complementary tickets

## Target audience

- New bookers to The Courtyard
- Farming and rural families
- Dads and lads

## Process

The marketing team analysed the database, consulting a map to find out where our cold spots were in Herefordshire. We focused especially on previous family shows to find two areas with low engagement with The Courtyard. Both areas were 30 minute drive away, one in the north of the county and one in the south.

We then scoured the internet for venues in the two localities that could host an activity. We chose Moccas Village Hall in the north and Kingsland Village Hall in the south. We called the village halls' main contacts and discussed our objectives.

To promote the events we contacted the local parish newsletters, both of which ran a full page of editorial about the events. We sent a direct mail letter advertising the show and the

free event in their community to the customers on our database in the two areas. A month before the free event, we printed A6 flyers promoting the events and over two half days the Marketing Manager, Press Officer and Distribution Officer delivered the leaflets door to door and pinned them on local parish display boards. We emailed posters to village hall officials who printed them off and put them up.

We hired a local workshop skills leader to host the events (both of which were from 10am to 12noon). She explained what *I Was A Rat* was about and told a brief story. The marketing team helped to turn all the children into rats with face paints. There were sensory boxes for the children (and adults) to smell the things a 'rodent' would sniff out and they learned circus skills including parachute games, balancing a feather on their nose, Diabalo tricks, juggling, plate spinning, tightrope walking and hula-hooping. We hid toy rats for a treasure hunt at the end of the day and after this told the parents about a free bus to a selected performance of *I Was A Rat*, giving them information to take away and a booking form for them to fill in.

## Outcomes

Both events were a great success with 35 children and 15 adults turning up to the Kingston event and 30 children and 10 adults turning up to the Moccas event.

A total of 8 people attended performances of *I Was A Rat* from Kingston and 8 people from Moccas through the free transport. We looked at their booking histories and just two tickets were sold to ticket buyers already on The Courtyard's database.

## Key points for effective practice

The events cost us £145:

- Moccas Village Hall hire - £10.00
- Kingston Village Hall hire - £0.00
- Inhouse printing of flyers - £15.00
- Sundry items used for treasure hunt, etc - £20.00
- Circus Skills practitioner - £100.00 (for both days)

We spent an additional £60 on a large taxi to and from the performance of *I Was A Rat*. One of the things we should have considered is a feedback questionnaire after the activity to find out who and what people thought.

## Conclusion

This project has enabled The Courtyard to take this idea forward and use it for many other shows, for example the annual pantomime. An activity of this scale has often turned out to be cheaper than putting an advert in the local newspaper but with better results.