

Martin Reynolds, Head of Marketing, Festivals Edinburgh

Strength in numbers

Martin has spent ten years working with some of the world's best-loved cultural brands. Since October 2008, he has been setting up the strategic marketing arm of Festivals Edinburgh: a body created and managed by Edinburgh's twelve festivals. He joined the Festivals after an eighteen month stint as Marketing Manager of Sydney Opera House during which time the organisation broke significant attendance and revenue records. Prior to this, he was Head of Marketing at the National Galleries of Scotland seeing footfall increase by 21% to 1.44m per annum and devising strategic projects such as the iPod exhibition tours with Radio 1 DJ Edith Bowman and midnight opening for the *Ron Mueck* exhibition. His career in the arts started at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1998 where he ran the Fringe's press and marketing operation, implemented the Fringe's award-winning re-brand.

This seminar challenged delegates to think about how we can work in a collaborative way to build audiences, visitors and participants for the arts or, to put it another way, how we can turn the well-meaning but often-tactical groups and committees into successful, strategic platforms to deliver in ways that were previously unimaginable.

Strength in Numbers

Festivals Edinburgh was founded by the twelve organisations representing all of the cultural activities in Edinburgh, from the Tattoo to the International Festival of Science. There are six funders and my role is to provide strategic marketing for Festivals Edinburgh.

I like collaboration, although it isn't simple in terms of stakeholder engagement. The challenges and new ways of working make this job much more rewarding. As a result, I have become an advocate for complexity and getting on with it. In this presentation, we will look at the background, successes, challenges and learning:

- Festivals Edinburgh story
 - establishing a marketing plan based on cross promotion
 - the difficulties and challenges of achieving this
 - the factors for success
 - the learning to date from this experience
 - how this experience can be used by other subsidised organisations

The collaboration between organisations is not necessarily new, but usually it has been tactical. The rationale for Festivals Edinburgh was developed from three pieces of research that were driven by the city and various stakeholders:

- City of Edinburgh Council festivals strategy of 2003
- An economic impact study communicating the value of festivals
- Most importantly: *Thundering Hooves* (named by the director of the festival) published in 2006. The title was a metaphor to convey the competition from other cities trying to take the festival crown from Edinburgh.

Thundering Hooves became the mode of practice for the stakeholders; the principles established have also been used on a large and small scale by individual groups. It was written as an extensive external research report; consultation was broad and the recommendations widely accepted by the stakeholders. It offered a new template for collaborative, strategic working. The competition worldwide is generally trying to model themselves on the scale and the remit of Edinburgh in order to reap the same rewards. The report covered four areas of need (or identified gaps):

- joint marketing
- programming
- infrastructure
- strategic development

Festivals Edinburgh was born. The directors of the different festivals lead on the organisation's strategic development and direction. Through mutual interest and collective strengths, they are able to collaborate for growth and maintain Edinburgh's lead. The structure lies at the heart of success:

- 12 directors on the board (one from each festival in Edinburgh)
- Four members of staff (director, director of marketing, marketing manager and administrator)
- Six working groups who report to the board of (marketing, programming, sponsorship, environment, professional development and innovation)

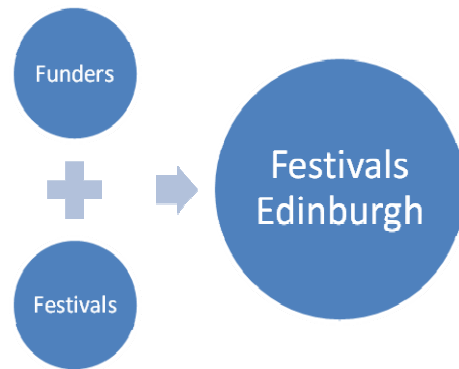
The reason this is effective is that the collaboration is embedded in the structure. The Marketing Working Group, for example, is made up of the 12 marketing directors of all the festivals and chaired by Edinburgh Festival's CEO. It is an entirely strategic group. Another reason for this being an effective model is the way that the original *Thundering Hooves* group of six funders meet regularly to discuss and revise the business plan with the Board.

At an officer level, there are day-to-day conversations about funding. Again, the funders are embedded within the structure and function of the organisation. There is also a festival forum that has external influence and whose job it is to ensure that competitive threats are covered and resources are embedded within funders' plans. A consequence of the structure and its careful meshing of agendas and needs, means that Festivals Edinburgh is entirely mandated by its funders and stakeholders.

This moves away from the traditional model:



Instead, Festivals Edinburgh looks like this:



Before Festivals Edinburgh the marketing directors would meet three or four times a year with a series of tactical objectives, for example, a joint website or an electronic press kit. The group was project driven.

Now, Festivals Edinburgh is mandated to deliver the strategy and plan. They followed the same model as *Thundering Hooves*: research audiences and then develop a strategy and plan. Four of the outcomes have been transformative, but hard for the festivals. There has been a willingness to embark on this journey. Martin gave one example of a recommendation that has become an outcome: new markets believe that festivals are all offering the same thing, especially coming from overseas. Therefore Festivals Edinburgh invested in an umbrella brand for these new markets. It has been difficult for the individual festivals to hand over control and overcome their fear of diluting their brands, but it is proving to be successful in attracting new partners.

Another example was the aim to have defined and strategic new markets/channels. Festivals Edinburgh now does consumer-facing campaigns to bring more people and share those audiences between festivals. We are also investigating product development such as in the travel trade. In this instance, we have taken the research and developed a strategy which has been approved by the marketing group, who meet monthly.

However, PR is a good example of one of the difficulties that we have had to face. Before Festivals Edinburgh, there was a clash diary, an electronic press kit, and an annual meeting with visit Scotland. This was all delivered by well-meaning volunteers and was very much extra-curricular. Festivals Edinburgh used research, then consulted with the individual festivals and identified areas where PR strategy would be more effective, rather than a series of tasks. Now, there is a PR agency that handles travel trade etc, so that the individual Festival PRs focus on the specialist markets.

Other initiatives that Festivals Edinburgh has been able to develop includes a media relationship with Visit Scotland, in order to deliver on media targets. Visit Scotland has its own TV channel, which is syndicated with media partners. Festivals Edinburgh has also initiated an Ambassadors programme - thinkers and big names who are nominated by the individual festivals to talk about the total Edinburgh experience. Festivals Edinburgh also now has a radio and broadcast tour schedule. These changes have been enabled by the team, who also have the resources to do it. There is no doubt that bringing together the initial partners may be defining difference. These changes have made a number of differences to the marketing available to the festivals of November:

- Campaigns and initiatives were short lived, but now have longevity
- The campaigns were pragmatic and delivered as such, but they now fulfil the ambitions of the festivals
- Festivals would collaborate if there was funding available, whereas now they do it because it is one of their defined objectives to collaborate
- It was easy to sit back (creating an imbalance of input), but now everybody takes responsibility. The balance of power has changed: if you don't participate now, you will lose control and disinvest, and therefore your festival will miss out. This places demands on the stakeholders.
- There was a responsibility for delivery but now there is an accountability for achieving the outputs

There are five reasons why this approach works so well:

1. There is trust between festivals; they want to work together. This won't work if the collaboration is forced. Furthermore, there is trust between the Festival marketing directors and Festivals Edinburgh; it is their organisation, so they can choose to stop or change the direction. In my role as marketing director, I am doing what they ask.
2. Ownership. Although it can be annoying to have a centralised resource, Festivals Edinburgh doesn't do anything that the individual festivals haven't agreed and it is accountable to them.
3. This is the same for funders. They are all involved and to that extent, all own Festivals Edinburgh. They also have a responsibility for investing and maintaining this collaborative approach. The funders have been able to have an input in ways that were not possible before with the traditional models.
4. Festivals Edinburgh is ruthlessly strategic. This takes the festivals out of their comfort zone but it is necessary in order to fulfil the research. Because it is strategic and there are no tactics, there are also no arguments about print etc. Instead there are very clear rules about what Festivals Edinburgh can't and mustn't do. There are well-defined rules; additionality is key to the marketing strategy. As overseas markets are currently untapped, Festivals Edinburgh focuses on these, not with local markets, which are already covered. The clarity of these rules is key to their success.
5. Collective power: many organisations can be lazy, but their role and involvement has enabled Festivals Edinburgh to work with big organisations without tears and act as a broker, for example, between festivals and Visit Scotland. Festivals Edinburgh is able to act as an interpreter and mediator and as a consequence has transformed relationships. Furthermore, for organisations like Visit Scotland, Festivals Edinburgh has made their life easier, as they now no longer have to deal with 12 individual festivals. This underlines the power of the group.

Major challenges

- This model is very time consuming; the technological tools didn't work and so we need several face-to-face meetings. As a consequence, the festivals complain that it is hard to keep up and Festivals Edinburgh has to work hard at finding ways to keep them informed and in the loop without wasting time.
- The model also stretches ambitions and capacity. Website, print, press kits are easy, but co-programming so the BBC can broadcast work is more complicated. On the other hand, the broadcast footprint can impact on the festivals' awareness of other events and opportunities, e.g. Glastonbury.
- The travel trade has stretched the festivals' capacity and understanding. With the exception of the Tattoo there are very few sales from the travel trade. The Tattoo, on the other hand, was always 50% sold out just through the travel trade (coach trips, etc). In some ways, the nature of the Tattoo, compared with that of the Fringe makes this understandable with the travel trade's lead-in times. So Festivals Edinburgh went to the travel trade and asked what they wanted; they are now developing the Edinburgh Festival pass where the idea is that you would come to Edinburgh and sample a full range of festivals without having to buy separate tickets for everything. It is proving hard to come up with a single pass across several ticketing systems etc, but we are making progress.
- Protectiveness. Festivals have delegated some of their brands to Festivals Edinburgh and whilst there is trust and understanding about the overall benefits, there remains some competitiveness. Similarly, fundraising could have been an issue, but the group has moved beyond nicking each other's prospects by establishing a can and cannot approach. This also allows Festivals Edinburgh to develop a global partner. Therefore it is agreed that the Book Festival's media sponsor, The Times, might be ideal for a joint approach but it is not possible under the rules they have made. Again, this clarity helps.
- Dilution. Does centralising mean that the festivals lose their individual marketing teams? Festivals Edinburgh has found that a centralised approach has increased the capacity for individual festivals because defining the additionality provides clarity.
- One by-product of this model is that it has highlighted issues within individual organisations. For example, some marketing directors have more influence through Festivals Edinburgh than they do in their own organisations.
- Communications: although all these working groups have relevant representation, Festivals Edinburgh has some members who are not talking to each other in between meetings. Because the festivals don't communicate normally, they have had to start doing this internally, in order to manage Festivals Edinburgh.

Implications

Festivals Edinburgh's success lies in being driven by the subscribers through their ownership and the way in which the funders have been drawn into this collective buy-in. This contrasts with the usual audience development agency model, where there is inevitably a tension between the responsibility to the funders and the subscribers. The traditional model usually offers a suite of services: practical for subscribers and strategic for funders. This is not always a comfortable balance.

Closing thoughts

- How can audience development agencies work to the mandate of their organisation/ subscribers and ensure that this collaboration is sustainable?
- Frequently people collaborate to get funding, but it is more difficult to turn this into a collaborative strategy. However, as we have been hearing at this conference, the collaborative trend is growing. If an organisation is project led, how can collective groups become strategic and yet still deliver practical needs?

Questions

Chester Festivals: how much resistance did Festivals Edinburgh have from the old school? (Chester Festivals is a grouping of voluntary organisations.)

Dealing with this issue is down to the power of relationships; and Edinburgh people have generally been around for a long time. The committee structure works very well, because it becomes *their* project and so they can't take it personally. There is no resistance to the change at the marketing level and we've only had to take one issue to the board so far. At the moment, it is a very strong group, who all chose to be together and are able to leave Festivals Edinburgh if they want. The external input is very helpful, for example the brand group had representatives from the Olympics, Tate Modern and Sydney Opera House. This also has the advantage that the marketing group would be disagreeing with real experts, rather than just me (more difficult to ignore). Furthermore, this approach actually gives festivals more access to expertise than they had before. The most difficult individuals are usually the most helpful once you win them round and although that process may be difficult at the time, it certainly helps to build strong relationships.

Audiences London is currently working with 12 theatres, using face-to-face meetings and conversations etc. An event called Burning Platform was used to provide and devise key goals together, and the approach fostered a compulsion to collaborate, but it is not possible to underestimate the complexity of working in this way.

The power of group think shouldn't be underestimated. The best approaches are personal, individual and one-to-one and continually trying to find consensus. Marketers are generally activists and doers, constantly balancing between action and waiting for research to inform their actions. I would advocate constant experimentation and a necessary belief in the overall goal. This kind of work can also be exciting because it is not possible to know what can happen.

How do you manage communications when meetings are not popular?

This is difficult but it's okay, because ultimately it means that they are involved. It is not possible to communicate too much. We are constantly trying new ways of communicating effectively, particularly using technology and platforms like Ning. We still have to come up with a surefire way of dealing with it. This boils down to client management in many ways. There is a basic structure of strategic approvals and management every three months. Ongoing management is done face-to-face or by phone.

Dumfries and Galloway Arts Association are currently being asked to feed back on their economic impact to the area. They are finding that Visit Scotland is a real struggle, because they only want to sell rooms, not promote the activities. Their question was: *how do you work with unwieldy organisations?*

Visit Scotland and Edinburgh's individual festivals did not have a happy marriage originally. The strategic framework has helped and Festivals Edinburgh now has a quarterly meeting to talk about how to sell Scotland on that overall basis. Festivals Edinburgh is lucky because it is a big enough player to get that kind of attention. We also have a service level agreement with Visit Scotland, which helps. The problem is that individual festivals didn't have the time to understand Visit Scotland's strategy; once you've broken through the initial barrier, they are very good people, and it is worth investing the time to achieve this.

Cultivate has no subscribers so organisations are free to engage as they want to. There is no membership base but they run a variety of networks (touring, capital buildings etc). The difficulty is that different organisations have different levels of capacity; are there any strategies for overcoming this?

This situation is similar to the Mela in Edinburgh, who have one and a half people full-time. The smaller sized festivals met to discuss the structure and agree to represent each other where they have particular specialism and expertise. In other words, they worked it out for themselves and make it work. Festivals Edinburgh also found that small festivals felt overwhelmed by strategy so before marketing meetings they have familiarisation sessions and capacity building opportunities.

The Liverpool Everyman and Playhouse: it takes time to get people together and then they also have to take time out of the office. Does Festivals Edinburgh have any tips to offer about juggling this?

As a result of the work that the Festivals Edinburgh team have done to date, the individual festivals no longer feel that the time dedicated to Festivals Edinburgh is extracurricular. After all, they all agreed the strategy and the investment at the start. The best way to deal with this situation is to do lots of the actions between meetings and monitor the progress by phone. The meetings then become an update or a discussion about strategy and not about decision-making (making it more streamlined and easier to move forward).

West Yorkshire Playhouse Leeds have found themselves on a tourism (corporate) website and felt that they had not been included by their agency, as well as the vision not being strong enough. Is there a need for a Thundering Hooves report for the Yorkshire region?

Yes! Every region would benefit from it.

Audiences Yorkshire then joined the discussion to explain that the Playhouse was talking about a campaign led by Welcome to Yorkshire, and although they had been touted as a strategic marketing partner, they had not been included in the process at all. Organisations frequently talk about what needs to be done but are unwilling to commit to the necessary investment.

Perhaps the agency and organisations need to be empowered further up the chain. Agencies can play a very valuable role in learning about development and funding sources. It would be a shame to miss out on this channel for communications and activity when it could be developed. It is possible that the Yorkshire tourism board needs the cultural sector to make their offer better. Perhaps a strategy could be developed and then roadshow it, so that the agency and organisations can help these potential partners understand their needs better and build on that