

## TARGETING YOUTH

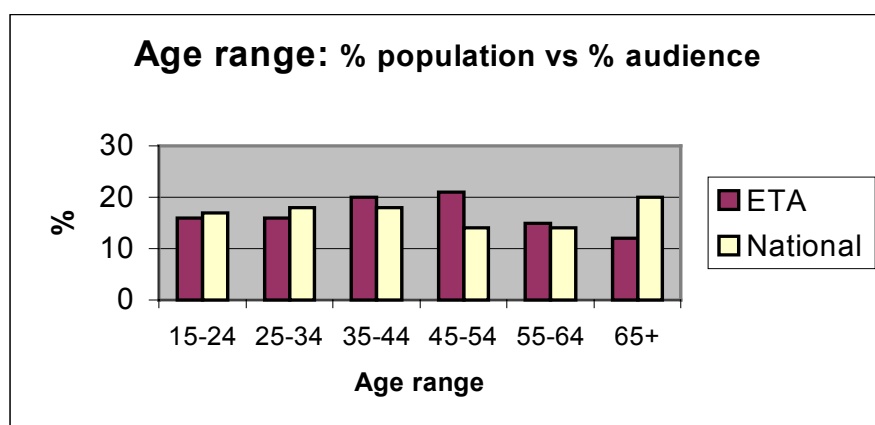
*Anne Roberts, Rob Macpherson and Samantha Orrell*

*Anne Roberts unveiled evidence to debunk the myths and legends about youth arts attendance, and suggests that efforts to attract 'young people' to the arts are unlikely to meet with great success.*

Many arts organisations feel they're failing to develop young audiences – that there are spring-loaded barriers: they come down once and spring right back up again. Perhaps it's time to unpick some misconceptions about young people: to inject a note of realism into expectations and fight for organisations' rights to say 'no!' to developing youth audiences.

### Myth no. 1: There aren't enough young people attending the arts

It could be argued that the arts is not underachieving with the under 24s to the extent that is sometimes feels it is ... A bigger concern might be considered to be the over 65s. Who says the arts are not attracting enough young people, and how many would be 'enough'?



### Myth no. 2: Young people are a priority target segment

Young people don't really comprise a target segment at all. A 14-year-old schoolboy may have little in common with a 20-year-old female student and often will not respond to the same product or promotional mechanism. Consider these quotes taken from qualitative research:

- 'Anyone over 20 is old' (pub'n'clubber 16–18).
- 'I don't want to be in a youth club' (trendy early 20s).
- 'I don't want to be around those stuck-up students' (17-year-old office assistant).
- 'I wouldn't want to be anywhere my brother or sister would go – he's 18 and she's 14' (16 year old, Dunstable).
- 'We don't want over 18s at our venues' (16-year-old school leaver, Birmingham).

### **Myth no. 3: Young people don't have any money**

Young people find the money for things they have a value for. The problem is that any price would be too much for many arts events, because many young people do not want what we are offering.

- '£15 is okay for a club night' (16 year old).
- 'I regularly pay £30 for a club night.'
- 'I'd expect to pay around £30 at the pub in an evening' (21 year old).
- 'My football seats are around £15-£20' (21 year old).

### **Myth no. 4: Cheap tickets are the solution to young arts attendance**

Young people are articulate at reading the 'discount' signs. They do not want to have tickets 'dumped' on them and discounted tickets often equate for them with a low value experience.

- 'You know you only get discounts for events they can't sell.'
- 'Cheap tickets are always for things we don't want to see.'
- 'You couldn't pay me to go to some things – like modern dance. I wouldn't mind cheap seats for the "Rocky Horror Show" or something.'

### **Myth no. 5: Young people are broad minded**

Generally speaking, most young people tend to be conservative thinkers often because they lack confidence to do things on their own.

- 'I don't want to do that – because I've never done it before and I don't think I'd like it.'
- 'My friends think I'm weird liking dance – they think all dancers are queer, even though they know that's not PC.'
- 'I'd be interested as long as all my friends want to go too.'

### **Myth no. 6: Young people are more interested in experimental arts than old people**

Often we try to target young people for contemporary dance, physical theatre and new music. The evidence shows that more traditional art forms (musicals and well-known plays) are more successful at attracting young people.

- 'I wish they would offer us discounts for "Cats", or "Miss Saigon", or other big musicals.'
- 'If I was given the money, I'd choose music first, then comedy, then ballet.'
- 'I'd go for anything I hadn't experienced before' (pensioner).

### **Myth no. 7: If we don't get young people now, then our audience will die out**

Audiences are declining, but not as much as they would be if we were not recruiting new attenders. Not all audiences were once young audiences! There is evidently a life-stage effect here.

- 'I hate classical music. I'm into clubs and music and stuff. I won't be into it until I'm 40, then I'll come. I'm 17 and I'm going to do all the things young people do, and then I'll think about classical music.'

### **Myth no. 8: Young people are more easily communicated with through the Internet**

The Internet is a huge growth area for young people, but they are even now more reliably targeted through other media. Most have access through places of work or education but are unable to use the service for their leisure needs. Around 20% have access at home.

### **Myth no. 9: Young people like bright, colourful, busy print**

There is evidence that they are even less tolerant of fussy, highly coloured/ designed print than older people; they are impatient to get to the real message.

- 'There's too much going on here.'
- 'Why do people always think that young people want upside-down images and text over the top – you can't read it.'
- 'I like the Arts Theatre's print. It's clean and crisp and you know what's going on.'

### **Myth no. 10: Young people like the live experience**

Many young people are easily embarrassed, and the fear of embarrassment sometimes detracts from the live experience.

- 'I saw someone fall off the stage at the theatre – it was so embarrassing.'
- 'You can't guarantee that it will be as good as the performance, I prefer to buy the CD.'
- 'What if they forget their steps – it would be awful.'

### **Myth no. 11: The arts are relevant to young people**

They can be, but generally the arts have a bad reputation with young people: they find them irrelevant.

- 'I've lived here all my life, but it isn't my history they're portraying on stage – it isn't people like me or my friends or family. What has it to do with my life?'

- ‘I liked “Trainspotting” and “Shopping and Fucking”: it hit my jugular – drugs, sex, material possessions, irreverence. It’s what our lives are about.’
- ‘I’ve got nothing in common with those who go to arts events ...’
- ‘They’re sad bastards, those people.’
- ‘They’re rich people who don’t have anything better to do with their money.’
- ‘They’re just old people showing off.’
- ‘I don’t want to be anywhere where old people go – most arts places are full of old people.’

### **Myth no. 12: Young people have a short attention span**

No, they don’t, they are just intolerant of being bored.

- ‘There is never enough information for you to judge whether you want it or not.’
- ‘Don’t assume that we can’t read.’

### **Myth no. 13: Young people hate the arts**

No, they don’t, it’s just that our definition of the arts is very limited. Every person indulges in some kind of creative activity. Perhaps we need to stop making value judgements about what is good and what isn’t, and what constitutes ‘art’ and what doesn’t.

- ‘I love paintings, I just hate galleries – you can’t talk, or eat, or lean against the walls.’
- ‘I get a real kick out of dancing in clubs. Why isn’t that as good as your ballet or modern dance?’
- ‘I was taken to the panto when I was little. I loved it. Does that count?’

### **Key issues**

There is considerable political pressure to deliver the arts to this hostile and declining market. But developing a young market requires a relevant ‘product’, organisational focus, commitment and *resources*. So do we just give up, and:

- provide information to those who are receptive?
- sell to ease the edges of the best marketplace?
- focus, commitment and realism – hand over control?

Or should we work with a different marketplace, and JUST SAY NO?

#### **Sources**

- Arts Strategy Consultation: Southwark Borough Council
- Needs Analysis for Dunstable: South Beds District Council
- Audience Research: The Junction, Cambridge (Erica Littlewood)
- Smart Card Research: Birmingham Arts Marketing
- Members Research: Stage Pass (Youth and Music)

- New Moves & First Steps – Qualitative Evaluation: Rambert
- Young People & Arts Attendance: Arts Theatre, Cambridge (Young Direction)
- Needs Analysis for Stamford: South Kesteven District Council
- Nothing By Chance – Investigating Risk: Warwick
- Arts Audiences in the East of England: APU/ETA
- NOP Internet Research

*Samantha Orrell described a scheme at the Royal National Theatre, designed to address the under-representation of under 26 year olds in its audiences.*

Free access to the National Theatre (NT) was provided to 100 young people, giving them a forum to meet, exchange views, and an opportunity to use theatre as a social activity. The scheme, NT100, was also used to test the hypothesis that repeated visits increase understanding and appreciation of theatre. The aim was to foster ongoing relationships and encourage peer-to-peer marketing.

### **Recruiting the group**

The target market comprised young people in Greater London, with an emphasis on the South Bank and areas of deprivation. We were aiming for one-third in full-time education, one-third waged and one-third unemployed; 50/50 male/female; and from varied ethnic backgrounds, with 10% non-white. Every effort was made to accommodate applicants with disabilities. A large number of contacts were made to generate sufficient participants from the target segments of the market. Publicity materials were developed to attract applicants to the scheme, These departed in style from the NT's regular output. The selection of participants was made on the basis of the criteria defining the target audience. Those who had visited more than once in the last two years did not qualify.

A wide range of events was programmed for the group, including an introductory evening, backstage tour and a range of productions. Participants could choose any of the shows, but they were asked to bring a party of their friends and/or members of their family who had never been to the National before.

### **What happened?**

Over the course of the programme, attendance declined. Most apologised for lack of attendance, giving time constraints, and work/exam commitments as reasons. There was a significant drop-off after the lengthy summer break. Since the end of the programme, a further two offers have been made to NT100 participants, and 90 tickets have been requested by 35 members.

Other information has been generated through quantitative and qualitative research, which was planned into the project. Questionnaires were issued after each event, and focus groups took place halfway through and at the end of the project. Some were prepared for this, but it was difficult to get feedback from others. The mechanism for collection of feedback clearly needs to be designed so that it does not detract from the enjoyment of the experience.

Individual responses to the different shows varied enormously:

On 'Summerfolk'	'Amazing, astute, social comment, accurate portrayals of society and human nature. Very literary and ironic, the play within a play worked well.'	'It was far too long considering the main theme was the banality of the bourgeoisie. It could have come out with a stronger impact in a shorter time.'
On 'Honk the Ugly Duckling'	'Fun, witty, classical, beautiful, entertaining.'	'Colourful, comforting, ordinary, children's entertainment, no innovation.'

Response to the whole experience, however, was uniform. Young people spoke of the awkwardness of the first visit; difficulties finding the door and not knowing anyone in the foyer. The lack of publicity aimed at young people was remarked upon, and some asked why we don't distribute more flyers. They also wanted more shows on the Terraces, more fast food, young casts, friendly prices, and shows in their territories – student unions, music venues, etc. They also want a time and space for socialising after shows – a place to hang out. It had been our intention to offer practical drama work as part of the NT100 experience, but most were more interested in watching than doing.

One of the most successful sub-groups in terms of attendance was a group of homeless young people from Centrepoint. They were usually accompanied by a group leader, and it was obviously important that these young people had a mentor they trusted who could persuade them to try things.

An advisory group had been set up comprising theatre staff from a range of different departments, and this was used in an experiment to introduce mentors from the NT – meaning that the group had been introduced to enthusiastic people who would act as 'friendly faces' in the building. This worked well at first, but it proved difficult to sustain with fluctuating numbers and large commitment from staff.

Originally participants were meant to attend events on their own, but early on participants began to ask for tickets for friends. After the first two visits we gave them the opportunity to bring a friend, and 112 further young people were introduced to the National Theatre by NT100. Bringing one guest at a time was more popular than organising a group, which naturally involved more effort. Asking them to organise groups was less successful than we had hoped. Many found it too much effort to organise this.

As for the forum for young people, we wanted to provide a forum for NT100 members to meet and exchange their views. Participants wanted to socialise with other members, but it was tricky to organise pre- and post-performance events. We were unable to provide a regular meeting point, but we needed an identifiable space where younger audiences felt at home. We also need to programme events around shorter plays – or on non-performance occasions.

## Conclusions

NT100 was a rewarding experience, both for participants and NT. Thirty-five per cent of members stayed the whole course, and some have already come back to the National on their own and visited other theatres. Many have expressed a wish to continue their association with the National. From our experience we believe we have identified the key features that will encourage young people coming to the National for the first time to become regular theatre-goers:

- Affordable tickets.
- Regular visits.
- Offers to attend on particular dates.
- A supporting programme of events and talks to promote understanding.
- An opportunity to talk and socialise.
- Named contacts at the theatre.

In addition, we have found that young people from marginalised constituencies need additional support structures such as an appropriate adult mentor, additional targeted development programmes prior to seeing plays, and travel and other costs.

To follow on from NT100, we are establishing a priority ticket scheme for young people aged 15–26, with top-price tickets to designated performances for £5. A £5 membership fee will be charged, as an investment in their commitment (which will be waived in cases of special need). We will also be developing ‘hang out’ areas front-of-house, and will approach other arts organisations to arrange linked activities outside NT. This will be a three-year scheme, with a target of 250 members in year 1. We will work closely with community partners, and will continue attitudinal research. Success will be measured by numbers joining the scheme and number of visits.

*Rob Macpherson described how a project involving the National Theatre, Warwick Arts Centre and Milton Keynes Theatre succeeded in getting closer to young, first-time theatre attenders.*

This project took place in November/December 1999, based around Patrick Marber’s hard-hitting black comedy ‘Closer’, directed by Paddy Cunneen. Its objectives were to:

- widen access to NT’s regional touring productions
- attract 3,150 new, first-time attenders between 16 and 26 years old
- provide affordable tickets for young people
- support new attenders’ first visits
- explore the impact of new technologies in marketing and feedback among the target audience
- involve young people in the promotion of the scheme.

There were seven performances in a 535 seat theatre, with a total capacity of 3,745 tickets. The target was 1,050 attenders (i.e. about one-third), and target groups were young people aged 16–26, including those in formal education, those on low incomes, those active in the arts and those starting professional careers. We aimed also to maximise ethnic diversity and disabled representation.

A special first-timer offer was designed, offering best available tickets for just £3. Promotion 1 involved print, direct mail, sales displays, magazine listings, telesales reminders, bulk print distribution and handbilling/exit leafleting. Promotion 2 involved advocates and youth representatives, direct selling, wage packet slipping, email distribution, radio advertisements, an ‘underground’ campaign and a website.

Contacts were made through youth and community groups such as the Prince’s Trust, the Careers Service, Coventry Social Service and youth clubs. Other contacts were made with young professionals through organisations which included West Midlands Fire Service, AXA Assurance, Barclays, Powergen and Marconi, as well as solicitors, accountancy firms, beauty salons/hairdressers, design studios, IT consultancies, architects and computer suppliers. Arts and education contacts were made through other organisations, including Depot Studios, local secondary schools, Belgrade Theatre Coventry, Playbox Theatre Warwick, universities of Coventry and Warwick, and DanceXchange Birmingham.

## Results

A wide range of measures were taken, revealing the following booking patterns:

• Number of £3 tickets sold (as % of target)	791	(75%)
• Number of actual bookers (i.e. new masterfiles)	371	
• Average number of tickets sold per booker	2.13	
• Number of groups	14	
• Group tickets sold (as % of overall attendance)	170	(21.5%)
• Tickets sold to individual bookers (as % of overall attendance)	621	(78.5%)
• First-time bookers		67%

Further information was generated about the demographics of attenders:

• Gender	<i>Male: 37.5%</i>	<i>Female: 62.5%</i>
• Age	<i>16–18: 35%</i>	<i>19–26: 65%</i>
• Occupation	<i>Employed: 34.5% / Unemployed: 4.5% / Full-time education: 61%</i>	

The predominant source of information was word of mouth (51%), followed by picked-up postcard (28%); 89% felt welcomed at the venue, and 61% cited ‘can’t afford it’ as the reason for not attending more often. When asked ‘Has this experience made you more or less likely to attend again?’, 82% said more likely.

The website promotion involved 16,000 postcards, 2,000 stickers, on-line prompts and search-engine registration. There were 412 hits and 346 unique visits. Average daily hits were 6, and 169 hits were made once the play opened.



## **Evaluation**

Video documentation was developed and carried out mainly by students from Depot Studios Coventry, a film and media training base for young people. In addition, written exit surveys were conducted. A range of follow-up activity is planned, including:

- thank-you letters sent pre-Christmas to all first-timer £3 buyers
- prompt to visit website until January
- spring season diary, explaining variety at WAC
- follow-up special ticket offer for two January shows: VTOL's 'Without Trace' and Out of Joint's 'Some Explicit Polaroids' (Ravenhill).