

Experience counts

Lisa Baxter (below) describes how putting the audience experience on the agenda makes good business sense for arts organisations

What is the arts for?

When I asked this question to a room of 30 senior arts professionals recently they couldn't answer. Why do you think that is? My view is that such is our belief in the intrinsic value of the arts, we've taken our eye off why we're here... for the audience, for their experience of the arts and the value it creates for them. That's why we are funded. That's why we exist.

And just as 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder', so the value of the arts can only be truly appreciated from the perspective of the audience. I'm not talking about the quality of the art here but the value of the experience.

Experience is the new currency of wealth creation for today's business. Experience is also the universal currency of value creation in our lives. And yet, despite the fact that we offer some of the best experiences of all, we focus more on 'harvesting audiences' than on creating and delivering value. No amount of tinkering with pricing, promotion, PR or CRM mechanisms is going to deliver genuine loyalty - the kind of loyalty the arts needs to operate as a viable, not-for-profit, funded sector entrusted to deliver public value.

The key to achieving business success is to focus on the experiences you are offering. Let me introduce you to the concept of Experience Design - which is about understanding how your audiences access, engage with and experience your offer, and then figuring out ways to make it better.

Every single experiential touch point a person has with your brand, your building, your staff, and your offer, has the potential to create or undermine value. Experience Design can help you lever the best possible advantage for your

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Photo: FCBS



business by optimising your audience experience. The results will be new audiences, happier audiences, loyal audiences.

Delivering great brand experiences

Audience Experience and Brand Experience are one and the same thing. Don't just view your play or exhibition or concert as your sole product offer; your stage or gallery as your only platform. You are in control of a smorgasbord of experiential offers that you can play with, add to and monetise. How might you develop experiential delivery platforms that simultaneously create value and deepen loyalty? Or grow audiences? Or increase revenue? For example, a premium booking service that allows you to print your own tickets as well secure a parking spot and order pre, interval and post-show drinks.

I've been working recently with the new National Football Museum (opening in Manchester later this year) to help them develop a Visitor Experience Blueprint strongly aligned to their brand. Using a combination of audience insight, creative thinking, concept testing and prototyping, we've developed a set of shared and discrete experience offers that matches the needs and inter-

ests of potential visitors, whatever their relationship with football. Rather than the visitors telling us what they want, their creative input has served as inspiration for the professionals to design, build, interpret, communicate and manage every element of the visitor experience, and monetise some of it!

Creating fantastic environments

Whether through repurposing, retrofitting, new build or immersing audiences in new and interesting contexts on a shoestring, work with your spaces to create desirable, attractive experiences that increase footfall and even retail opportunities.

Last year, Bristol University Student Union engaged me to inform a £3m redevelopment of the Union building. Working with students in workshops, we created an experiential blueprint for the social area of the building which would add value to Student Union membership. Architects Feilden Clegg Bradley are using these insights to inform the look, feel and functionality of the social spaces. More happy students in the building for longer delivers on mission, and also increases the chances of in-venue spend.

Focus in audience enrichment, not just audience development

Audience development is seen more as a numbers game than a value game; but audience retention, not acquisition, is our biggest challenge. Shouldn't we be focusing more on creating audience enrichment initiatives that empower the audience to experience arts and culture in the best possible way? And to keep them coming back?

This could be about 'readiness to receive', where the audience is warmed-up to the experience beforehand. It could be about co-authoring of meaning, where the audience is encouraged to bring their own meaning to the work, on their own terms, rather than buying into the received wisdom of the programmer or curator. It could be about participation, co-creation or co-curation.

I worked with Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival (hcmf//), as part of an ACE funded THRIVE programme, to gain insights that would help to inform new approaches to attracting and engaging audiences. Contemporary music is not easy to 'sell' or experience, so we embarked on research to understand audience motivations and experiences of contemporary music in general and

hcmf// in particular. The results helped hcmf// develop a strategic focus on year-round on-line engagement designed to deepen appreciation, cultivate relationships and enhance people's experience of the Festival. Over the past 2 years, hcmf// has placed e-marketing, the website and social media activity at the heart of its communications, with rich content underpinning all of this. Website visits increased by 41%, there's been a 220% increase in Facebook fans and an eight-fold increase in the number of Twitter followers. The next step is to embed these insights into a new membership scheme.

And so ...

... I'd like to put Audience Experience firmly back on the agenda because we are losing market share to other, more desirable experience offers - social networking, video games, festivals, zumba! We need to understand how the arts can occupy a valuable, meaningful place in people's lives, and then shape experiences that deliver on that, because if we don't, they won't come.

Lisa Baxter is the founder of The Experience Business (www.theexperience-business.co.uk)

