

Arts Marketing: An Unexpected Journey

Lindsey Cook, Head of Sales & Marketing, mac Birmingham

As a department, the team at mac Birmingham had almost too much success. The team delivered, people came to the venue, their budgets balanced with a modest surplus and demand sometimes outstripped supply – particularly in Trading. They worked really fast with a huge volume of work on a comparatively small budget, but they weren't working smart.

Their resources were predominantly expended on informing existing audiences, but more people still came so why did they care? It was because of one meeting. A meeting of the entire organisation's management team where an external communications consultant described their Marketing Department as a toilet. Lindsey's hard working and target-achieving department! In hindsight, she could see that they'd lost strategic focus and were on that wheel of marketing where you just keep churning out what everyone expects and you do enough to not get shouted at. It took them a long time to understand that all of this was within their control.

Last year at the Spektrix conference she "got it". A quote from Ben Cameron's keynote inspired her: "Burnout is not a synonym for exhaustion. Burnout is a disconnect from core values." The truth was that they were burning out. mac has existed for over 50 years on a simple ethos that was about connecting the community with art. But truthfully that wasn't always driving them. Bums on seats and income were.

They wanted to be doing the sexy ambitious stuff that would deliver on their ethos (on the upper quadrants of slide 6) but they were ploughing loads of resources into the two lower quadrants (slide 6) with barely adequate return. There was an opportunity to get a higher ROI from their existing audience base if they stopped over-communicating, making their voice irrelevant and sometimes annoying.

Answering the questions:

- Who is our audience?
- What is our product?
- What are our priorities?

Lindsey's answers are:

- Everyone.
- Everything.
- To get everything to everyone.

As a sector, Arts Marketers share a lot of learning and resources. She believes that we owe it to artists and audiences alike to not be lazy in our thinking or our doing. And if you think you don't have time, she's telling you to make time. mac never goes dark. They get busier when most venues stop.

Lindsey was sure that she was part of the problem. So they asked Katy Raines of Indigo to facilitate a workshop with them to look at breaking these patterns using her Total Audience

model of segmentation. Her business partner, Sarah Gee, already works closely with mac on fundraising and they knew that cracking these segments would help them achieve these objectives.

Total Audience assumes that rather than trying to build crossover, most people stick to one segment of similar product, with clearly defined behaviours and motivations. It also hypothesises that people don't really segment hop. The crossover is so small that focussing there will be a low ROI. It's better to look at focussing on increasing frequency of attend and loyalty within each segment.

The mac doesn't do mainstream and it's taken years for that breakthrough moment when they realised this. No one realised that even when the product was mainstream their customer experience wasn't. You could see a Bond film, but they didn't allow latecomers, there was no eating or drinking in the cinema because they decided you must respect the artform. It's at this point Lindsey nearly resigned because it's then seemed so obvious to her. They had to rethink the Total Audience model to fit them and they did that by carefully layering up data from the box office, from surveys, from anecdotes and gut instinct until they built mac's Total Audience (slide 11).

They kept Classic and Contemporary but separated out Family and Learning segments as that group behaves distinctly. They also found that Spectrum market segmentation could sit over the top of this quite well too. Their contemporaries are Metroculturals (even outside of London) and Experience Seekers. Their classics are Commuterland Culturebuffs, Home & Heritage and Dormitory Dependables.

For the Contemporary audience, they knew their messaging had to be about their social impact and ethos. It was important to get messages out there that they are a great venue for emerging artists, they produce high quality and challenging work, that they're a sustainable and resilient business, they focus on the community of Birmingham and that they have a great ambiance for socialising. They even wanted to make it known that their café offers are brand-matched to their values, for example everything being fairtrade and locally-sourced.

On the other hand, the Classic audience wanted to feel valued, heard, and protected even. And they like information because they are planners. They will give the venue a lot of love in return.

Indigo sent out some specifically tailored questionnaires to each segment, as part of a fundraising research project with University of Birmingham. Contemporaries responded well to an artistically ambitious ask whilst Classics responded well to an emotional ask. They're currently having great success asking them to buy an extra ticket for our Christmas show, which they can match fund and will go to a family/child who wouldn't normally get the opportunity to attend.

In the first column on slide 15 you'll see the ROI measurement that most organisations use. The problem is that they're really only pocketing 20% of those receipts for their outlay.

They also used this segmentation on their emails. The open rate went up between 7-10% but they didn't see a huge leap in income generation. Then their ROI for mailings got worse.

They knew their crossover audience was more likely to respond to contemporary print but they tested them with classic anyway. Their contemporary print had more pages so cost increased per unit and contemporaries generally don't book in advance so any ROI wasn't worth doing until the end of this year. (Not the 6 week point that most print ROI is judged on).

Their organisational language changed to a shared nomenclature. Even their board get it. They're currently producing a quick guide for their producing team, to help them understand how they can connect artistic content with an audience. Their customer-facing staff understand that some people need detail & time while others just need quick signposting. Their retail offer is changed depending on who's likely to be in the building. They hope to extend this to catering offers. Digital will be a huge part of this in the future where hopefully they'll be able to serve up different landing pages according to a user's segment.

They brought in a new audience development role, part funded by savings in print and mailings. Lindsey now manages the marketing, sales, conferencing/space hire and retail areas because there's a new ambition for inter-connectedness where there had once been silos.

The mac take risks, they fail, they tweak, they interrogate and they say NO. They stamp their feet and declare that they are the authority on our audiences. They aspire to send out emails that barely mention their programme but that make a useful brand connection with their audiences. They dream, they fall flat on their bums and they get up again.

Lindsey says that if this was just about tickets they wouldn't have tried anything new. Their spaces are comparatively small and they could fill them with Tribute Acts every night if it was just about tickets. But mac exists to make art a part of people's lives. To connect artistic ambitions with those people. The ethos was Lindsey's guide. If it doesn't feel like you're getting your art to the right people, try something new. But above all, be brave.