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Seminars for Arts Professionals

FEBRUARY SEMINAR SUMMARY

DEVELOPING AUDIENCES THROUGH COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

CHAIR

Lisa Havilah – Director of Campbelltown Arts Centre;

PANEL

Tim McGarry - Co-founder of Monkey Baa, a theatre group specializing in theatre for young people

Stephen Champion – Manager of Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre

Kathy Baykitch – Former Director of Western Sydney Dance Action, which is based at the Parramatta Riverside Theatres

Developing an audience through community relationships is not at all unlike a romantic relationship. With both there are two key challenges at hand; attracting the attention of your beau to be, and once said quarry is attained, keeping them interested. Tonight SAMAG turns relationship counsellor, and offers some advice on how to attract and retain committed audiences.

The Point of it All: Sustaining the Arts

Although currently a bit of a buzz word, sustainability is the primary reason why audience development matters. Sustainability refers to - and I run the risk of stating the obvious here - making your organisation, venue, community and audience successful for the long term. Making the arts as a sector sustainable is important because its benefits are not as easily seen as many other sectors. It does not get people to work on time, it will not pick up your garbage, and you cannot eat it. The intangible benefits of the arts unfortunately mean that it does not attract money without significant effort from those who understand its true value. The responsibility for making the arts sustainable lies with the industry, that is to say, *you*. By focusing on audience development, particularly through community relationships, you will not just be looking after your own financial interests, but the health and wellbeing of the sector and society as whole.

Putting the Moves On: Developing New Audiences

Selling Yourself

Marketing is the first and most obvious form of audience development. It's the stylish haircut of the audience development arsenal; what makes people sit up and pay attention. Do it poorly, or without much thought and, like a haircut, it has the potential to go horribly, horribly wrong. The SAMAG panel have some advice to help you avoid the Flock of Seagulls or Poison moments you may regret later.

McGarry admits that Monkey Baa previously had very little structured marketing and chose to bring in a consultant to 're-brand' their public image through a redesigned logo and website. While re-branding is most often associated with the corporate world, it remains a very real and practical way to reach audiences. The public respond to brands, and having one that is eye catching and consistent engages potential audiences in an effective and persuasive way.

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Monkey Baa also took on a board member from the music industry with extensive experience in e-marketing and marketing to young people. Surrounding yourself with skilled people is a highly effective way of coming up with new strategies and techniques to put the proverbial bums on seats. Champion reiterates the importance of marketing, saying that Bathurst Memorial Entertainment Centre (BMEC) has suffered from the lack of a dedicated marketing employee. While Champion generally takes care of marketing, it is difficult to give it the attention he knows it needs while trying to run the centre as well!

Both Champion and Baykitch, like McGarry, recognise the benefit of close relationships with skilled people. They have both benefited from their relationship to their local government, which can provide resources and staff to assist you in your marketing. Champion also stresses the importance of relationships with like-minded organisations. This can be informal, simply sharing information with other venues, or through structured sector organisations such as the peak body, the Australian Performing Arts Centres Association (APACA), which organises forums and sector development strategies, as well as lobbying for the interests of their network.

It is very important to tailor your marketing to the audience you seek and to target your groups carefully, Champion says. The theatre groups that come to perform in Bathurst, usually from larger cities, often arrive with large promotional posters and other material that just isn't suitable for the area. Cafés are reluctant to put large posters up, as often they just do not have the space for it. Champion has solved this problem by developing a medium sized poster that lists all the upcoming events at the centre. The design of the poster changes just enough to grab people's attention, but remains in the same place so that people know where to look for the information.

McGarry recalls when Monkey Baa was putting on a show in Orange, they gave out almost 200 posters for a show. Walking around the town, there wasn't one in sight. When McGarry asked around about where the posters had gone he was told that they had been put down the bottom of the wall, below his line of sight, to where children (his target audience) could see them. This simple out of the box approach attempted to harness the 'nag factor', a powerful and persuasive force.

A Bit of Give and Take

Workshops are another effective form of engaging the community to develop new audiences. They work well to introduce people to the arts and engage them with your organisation.

Local Stages is a program that the BMEC participates in. Funded by the Australia Council, Arts NSW and Bathurst Regional Council the program allows young local performers to train with professional theatre groups and touring companies. The program works to develop the audience in a number of ways:

- It sets up relationships with outside organisations, such as theatre groups and Charles Sturt University, which in turn exposes the BMEC to a vastly increased potential audience.
- It helps to develop local talent and, hopefully with time, a local scene. Encouraging people to be involved and share in the success of the final product is an extremely powerful way to engage an audience. It empowers them to expose unrealised potential, and gives them ownership and practical engagement with the arts, rather than remaining simply a viewing audience. Champion calls it 'developing a practical audience'.



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- Having a structured program helps bring theatre and touring groups from outside Bathurst into town for more than just one or two nights. Short stays do not generate the same local interest, and do not allow for 'word of mouth' marketing as, by the time word spreads, the group has usually left town.

Baykitch echoes the need to develop practical audiences, and Western Sydney Dance Action (WSDA) have implemented programs to ensure this happens. WSDA have a strong policy of promoting best practice dance performance, workshops and forums in Western Sydney. Despite this, however, there have been problems in overcoming the perceived inaccessibility of contemporary dance. Workshops and master classes are excellent for making your art accessible to people who might not naturally engage with it as a viewing audience. WSDA have employed simple tactics such as giving away a ticket to a performance to people attending master classes. This offers value for money for new audiences as well as engaging current audiences in the full range of WSDA services. WSDA also work with visiting dance companies to provide an ongoing and varied program of quality workshops. Baykitch points out the importance of engaging people across a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures as providing an open and accessible service is a key priority for WSDA.

There are, however, significant challenges that come with workshops for developing audiences.

When offering workshops for young people, the issue of making the content align with school curriculum can be tough. On the one hand, basing your workshops too loosely on a curriculum can deter teachers from bringing their students along; while on the other hand, it can be very restrictive to only base your workshops on prescribed texts and curriculum. One way of getting around this, McGarry suggests, is to make sure that you plan far enough ahead, so that teachers have time to mould their plans around what you are offering.

Havilah says that another problem with providing workshops for schools is the issue of actually getting the students there. Schools often don't have the funds to shell out for a bus, or too steep an entry fee. ConnectEd, a program run by Arts NSW and the Department of Education and Training, offer schools 'access grants' that may be able to help in situations like this. McGarry also says that it is important, if possible, to find ways to make your workshops free.

Committed: Developing Existing Audiences

Once you've successfully had people come to look at your etchings, the challenge that remains is keeping them around. Even in large cities such as Sydney or Melbourne, it is tiresome work to be constantly trying to find new people to drag through the doors.

It's Quality, Not Quantity

One way to keep your audiences coming back is good old fashioned quality control. WSDA maintain their reputation for quality by finding artists and connecting with them. This benefits both their performances by ensuring that people can come and see talented artists, and their workshops, by giving people the opportunity to learn from skilled practitioners.

Getting to Know You, Getting to Know All About You



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Understanding what your audience wants is paramount. Champion admits that at BMEC there has been a drop in season ticket sales recently, something they were not expecting as sales had been steadily climbing for a number of years. The reason they identified was that the Centre's program was trying too hard to appeal to everybody, rather than focusing on the needs of their core audience. It is important to identify your strengths, and to execute them well, rather than trying to appeal to all audiences.

Spending Quality Time

It is in this stage of the game that developing relationships with the community is most important. Monkey Baa is well known for their workshops for young people. One of the key reasons for Monkey Baa's success has been its policy of wherever possible engaging audiences and workshop participants over periods, rather than just a couple of nights. McGarry speaks of how the success of an initial workshop series run in Broken Hill has resulted in local schools lobbying for funding on their behalf, and through this Monkey Baa has successfully gained more funding and will return to the town for another five weeks later this year. McGarry also tells of some previous workshop participants in regional NSW who travelled over 60 kilometres to see him perform in another town. When he asked them why they had travelled so far, they replied simply that, because he had come so far to be with them, they felt it only fair that they should return the favour.

Growing Old Together

Audience development is integral to the ongoing viability of the arts. Without it, all that remains is a series of one night stands, not a long term romance. I use the word romance quite intentionally, despite risking overworking my metaphor, as romance and passion is exactly what the arts provide. As McGarry says, by engaging the community to develop your audience, you are showing people how important the arts can be in their lives. The arts inspire, and sharing your passion for them with as many people as possible not only makes good business sense, but is also a noble and worthwhile cause in itself.

by Hugh Nichols