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Seminars for Arts Professionals

SEPTEMBER SEMINAR SUMMARY

Monday 28 September 2009

Never mind the answers, what are the questions?

Audience research for the arts

Panel

Dr Nick Herd – Director of Research and Strategic Analysis, Australia Council for the Arts

Michael Huxley – General Manager Finance and Administration, Museums and Galleries NSW

Rebecca Clarke – Writer, performer, marketer and audience researcher

Chair

Andrew Threlfall – SAMAG committee member

What is an audience? Who are these mysterious creatures that sit in front of stages and walk through gallery doors? Well, lucky for us - they *are* us! They are people; they love stuff, hate other stuff, and like lots of stuff in between. They have tastes and values that determine where they choose to go, and what they choose to see. So given then that the arts is all about giving people places to go and things to see, it is in our distinct interest to find out about our audiences. Getting to know them – who they are, who they *aren't*, what they want, what they *don't* want – is vitally important to ensuring that the services that we provide aren't being wasted.

While there are a number of relatively cheap and effective ways to collect audience information, it is still, for the most part, a fairly resource intensive exercise. So why do it? Ultimately, knowing about your audience gives you the opportunity to, amongst many other things, plan your strategic directions and either build your audience generally, or identify and fill demographic gaps.

Nick Herd, Director of Research and Strategic Analysis at the Australia Council for the Arts (OzCo) is well versed in the gathering and analysis of information. Having worked in numerous government bodies in a strategic capacity, and also as a consultant, he has experienced firsthand the role that research plays in the arts. In his role at OzCo he oversees a number of projects that aim to determine exactly who consumes the arts, how they engage with the arts, and why. The strategic aim that directs Herd's unit's work is to make OzCo the 'knowledge centre of the arts in Australia'.

While there are others, the major audience research project being undertaken by OzCo is the ADVICE (audience data and visitor information collection enterprise) program. This is a data collection project run in partnership between OzCo and a number of state governments. It was started in early 2008 and aims to gather consistent data on the audiences visiting Australia's cultural venues. The information is gathered through a program called *Vital Statistics*, which is linked to each participating venue's ticketing system. The information then feeds into an aggregate database containing the information collected from all the participating venues nationwide. Each venue can view their own information or aggregated information coming from across Australia, allowing them to make comparisons and see how they are faring comparatively. That's pretty damn cool if you ask me...

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So that's how the top end of town does things, but what about smaller projects run by individual organisations? Once you have decided that you would like to have a crack at some audience research, the first thing you need to do, according to Herd, is to sit down and have a hard think about why you are doing it. What do you want to find out? What are the burning issues? Is audience research just going to tell you things you already know? Rebecca Clarke states that it is important to know what the current level of understanding is when it comes to your audience. You may think you know your audience back to front, but Michael Huxley, General Manager of Finance and Administration at Museums and Galleries NSW (MGNSW), warns that sometimes what you think you know isn't always right. The study that he has overseen at MGNSW, *Guess who's going to the gallery*, has provided interesting results that really challenge some of the accepted stereotypes of what a gallery goer looks like. Be willing to have an open mind, and don't think that you know it all already.

Probably the cheapest way to develop your survey is to find research that has already been done. Make sure you do a literature survey; see what information is out there already. Who knows? Maybe some bright spark had the idea before you did, and the questions and survey tools – or even the answers - you seek are already out there. OzCo's online knowledge hub, or their research centre at the OzCo offices in Sydney, are a good place to start.

If you have done a literature survey and haven't found what you need, or if you're after more specific info about your particular organisation, you need to decide how you are going to go about the survey. You could do a questionnaire that you hand out to your audience, work online, run focus groups - or you could commission an external organisation to do the majority of the work for you. The method you choose will ultimately depend on how much you want to spend. If you have little to no money to spend, there are a number of online survey websites that allow you to set up a survey for nothing. The sites are great, because not only do they host your survey, but they also provide templates and guidance on how to form your questions. *SurveyMonkey.com* is one such website; another is *SurveyConsole.com*. However, one of the challenges with online surveys in particular is actually getting people to do them. Offering incentives such as tickets often works, or if tickets won't float any of your constituents' boats then try and get one of your sponsors to cough up a small prize or two like a dinner for two or night at a hotel.

When it comes to designing the survey, or whatever instrument you choose to gather your information, asking the right questions is vitally important. If you want quantitative data then choose simple questions such as age, salary, number of visits per year etc; whatever it is you want to know. Getting qualitative data can be a bit trickier and will require more open questions such as 'What did you think about the exhibition?' Be careful not to lead your audiences though- 'What did you think' is drastically different to 'Did you like'. Whichever way you choose to go, remember that it is not always a case of qualitative vs quantitative; you can get both types of information from well prepared audience surveys. Ultimately, the questions you choose should be determined by continually coming back to that first question that Herd put forward: what is it that you want to know? For large projects such as *Guess who's going to the gallery*, you might even consider getting together a steering committee to guide the project. MGNSW did this, bringing together a mix of people with both research expertise, and industry knowledge. Having a number of perspectives on the project will help cover all your bases.

So let's say you have taken the panel's advice and built a strong survey with questions that you believe will yield the results you seek. The next thing to do is to send it out into your audience - right? *Wrong*. All the panel agree that a pilot, a dummy run, is absolutely integral. Threlfall says that often the questions you have decided on will provide answers that, while interesting, don't contain the specific type of information you're after. A pilot will save you a lot of time and/or money if this happens, as it will give you the opportunity to

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bring the survey back, rework the questions, and make sure that you have it just the way it should be. Clarke says that she often tries her surveys out on friends.

The pilot has been run, all is well. Now who do you ask? The methodology that you use to select people to survey can be random, such as choosing every 6th person in a crowd. This type of sampling will give you a good idea of the demographic spread of your audience and is particularly useful for gathering quantitative information, such as what percentage of your audience is male or female. MGNSW used this type of methodology, but excluded large tour groups as they, in a demographic sense, generally consist of similar people and would have skewed the results. The number of people you decide to survey is also important. Generally speaking it is a case of the more the better, but you need to be realistic about what your resources will allow. MGNSW used volunteers and gallery staff to conduct the survey, and this allowed them to use a sample size of 200 for each of the galleries where they conducted the survey. Clarke says that if you already know your audience makeup, the people you choose to survey can be determined this way in order to have a representative sample. For example, if you know that your audience is roughly 60% female and 40% male, you might choose a sample size of 100 people, surveying 60 women and 40 men. This method can be used to get a reasonable indication of how your current audience views your organisation and its services.

Once you have the results of your survey there are number of things you can do with it, again depending on the funds you have available. If the project is of a significant scale, and you can afford it, you may want to get in a statistician to crunch the numbers for you. This isn't always possible, however. If you've thought about what information you want at the beginning of the project, and set up your questions accordingly, it may be that you don't need to do anything with the results other than put the information to good use. Clarke says that if you spend sufficient time preparing, then the results will often speak for themselves. Another thing that you will be able to do, if you have prepared your questions well, is to break the data down and look at it from a number of angles. Referred to as 'segmentation', data that is drawn from well formed and consistent surveys can be viewed from a number of angles and in a number of ways. For example, you may want to know how many 55+ males with a salary of more than \$100,000 a year are attending four or more shows a year. If the data is collected well and the sample size is sufficient you would be able to find this out, as well as any number of other combinations of information.

If you find that the project is worth repeating, the panel says that being consistent is important. There is a lot of value in being able to compare results of surveys over time or across locations. This was particularly important to the MGNSW's survey, which was conducted at a number of sites simultaneously. By ensuring that the questions being asked were consistent across all the sites meant that comparisons could be made between the different galleries. As Huxley pointed out, the results of audience research can often be surprising. The panel agreed that you need to be ready to confront things that might not be so palatable at first. The results may not always be to your liking.

Parting ways on the night, the panel each offered some key pieces of advice for potential researchers. So while normally I would try and come up with a nice neat conclusion to this seminar summary, I thought that this time I would let the experts do it for me.

Michael Huxley implores you to:

1. Want to ask the questions.
2. Commit the resources.
3. *Act* on the results.



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Rachael Clarke says that you need to be:

1. Curious and open to the results.
2. Clear about the issues you want to confront.

Nick Herd wants you to ask yourselves these questions:

1. What do you want to know?
2. Why do you want this information?
3. What are you going to do with the information?

Happy researching!

By Hugh Nichols

P.S. Check these out:

Museums & Galleries NSW – *Guess who's going to the gallery?*

http://mgnsw.org.au/resources/audience_research/

Australia Council for the Arts – Online research hub

<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research>

Australia Council for the Arts & Arts Victoria – *Audience research made easy*

http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/arts_marketing/audience_development/audience_research_made_easy

Survey Monkey

<http://www.surveymonkey.com>

Survey Console

www.surveyconsole.com

Arts Council UK – Arts-based segmentation research

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/about-us/research/arts-based-segmentation-research/>