

Audience Development Issues in the Visual Arts

DR IAN FILLIS OF STERLING UNIVERSITY OUTS FORWARD HIS IDEAS ON AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT AND MARKETING PRACTICE WITHIN THE ARTS.

While most current research on arts marketing promotes the adoption of conventional or mainstream approaches to marketing,¹ there is a growing consensus that this also has its limitations.² Cultural organisations in general may practice recognised forms of marketing but their overall aim is not necessarily to satisfy market needs.³ Any audience development activity should acknowledge its role in social, as well as economic terms. This can be achieved by focusing on relationship marketing and the exploration of existing and development of new networks. Creative input into the process is also needed, rather than continual reliance on step-by-step processes. In other words, if particular context-specific thinking is required due to the needs of the venue and / or the audience, then this should be embedded in the process, rather than slavishly adhering to textbook forms of marketing planning and strategy. In other words, we should design audience development programmes fit for the purposes of the venue's audience.

Audience development involves three groups: the producers of the art (the artists), cultural intermediaries such as galleries and museums, and the audience. When considering the involvement of the audience in addressing future needs, this can be thought of in three ways: consideration of the utilitarian or physical value of the exhibition, the meanings generated by the audience about the exhibition, and the hedonic or pleasurable sensations acquired during and after visiting the exhibition.⁴ This would suggest that a combination of qualitative (face to face individual meetings or focus groups) and quantitative (questionnaires) methods should be used to acquire feedback from audiences on, for example, why they came to the exhibition, rather than just who they came with.

Slater and Armstrong (2010) identify a number of audience involvement characteristics which can be used to drive visitor numbers: centrality and pleasure; desire to learn; escapism (spirituality and creativity); sense of belonging and prestige; and the physical and motivational drivers of involvement. It is also the quality of the experience which drives audience numbers,⁵ which of course then raises a further question: How to measure quality? If the audience deems the experience to be of high quality, then this can have a positive impact on driving higher levels of loyalty in the longer term. Another way of looking at the relationship between the audience, gallery or museum and the artist, is that the audience is the consumer and co-creator of the experience.⁶ Therefore, it should be directly involved in shaping future audience development strategies.

A further issue to consider is whether the museum or gallery should follow its own instincts or adopt a market orientation approach to audience development. This raises the issue of either following their artistic ideals or continually offering what the audience expects. The creation of demand through innovative programming introduces an element of entrepreneurship and risk-taking into the equation. A gallery or museum could, however, develop a balanced programme containing both orientations in their offering. Although galleries and art museums must consider particular marketing strategies in order to either broaden or deepen their audience,⁷ it is how they go about doing this, which is of interest here. Today's environment is a challenging one where galleries must clearly communicate the correct messages with their audiences when vying for our leisure time in an increasingly crowded marketplace.

Rentschler neatly summarises how arts marketing has evolved over three periods of development, and how we can formulate programmes of audience development from this.⁸ The Foundation Period (1975–1984) describes the era when arts organisations realised that an alternative, more strategic, approach to 'doing marketing' was needed, rather than focusing on audience research alone. The Professionalisation Period (1985–1994) identified a time when formalisation of marketing practices and the setting up of marketing departments within arts organisations was occurring. More recently, the Creative or Discovery Period (1994 – present) focuses on the realisation that those working within the industry must acquire and practice creative, entrepreneurial marketing in order to successfully differentiate their businesses in the ever increasing cultural industries marketplace.

For centuries, artists have existed in a world which has been shaped in part by their own attitudes towards art but which also co-exists within the confines of a market structure. Many artists have thrived under the conventional notion of a market with its origins in economics and supply and demand, while others have created a market for their work through their own entrepreneurial endeavours. Existing marketing frameworks often fail to explain how and why the artist develops an individualistic form of marketing where the self and the artwork are just as important as the audience as customer and consumer. Little account has been taken of the philosophical clashes of 'art for art's sake' versus 'business' sake'.⁹ Visual art has long been a domain where product and artist centred marketing have been practiced successfully. We should consider the motivations of the artist in making art. It may be useful to think of this in terms of creating the market versus following

the market. The former orientation can be viewed as innovative and even entrepreneurial while the latter is more to do with fitting in with mainstream perceptions and taking fewer risks.

Hirschman suggests that the marketing concept does not match the behaviour and philosophy of the artist as a producer of products because of the personal values and the social norms, which impact on the artistic production process.¹⁰ We need to also relate to the aesthetic values of the audience too. Artists create mainly to express their subjective conceptions of beauty, emotion or some other aesthetic ideal. Aesthetic creativity is the central influence in the process, and is expressed or experienced purely for its own sake rather than responding to customer demand. The notion of the producer and consumer as distinctly separate entities does not necessarily hold within the art world. The subjective interpretation of issues relating to value are perhaps much more subtle than in other sectors.

Some conclusions:

A differentiating factor between the visual arts and other market sectors is that art as a product has little or no functional or utilitarian value. There is also a close link between artistic practice and entrepreneurial thinking, with links between art making and intuitive vision. The artist can also be viewed as a risk taking entrepreneurial owner / manager, as can the audience development manager. The philosophical clash of 'art for art's sake' versus 'art for business' sake' should not be viewed as an inhibitor of the visual arts marketing progress, but rather as a catalyst for creative change. Instead of perceiving philosophical clashes as problematical, they should instead be viewed as opportunities for developing new solutions to audience development.

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Notes

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