Mission impossible

Is access for everyone seen as incredibly important? Yes. Is it achievable? Really? For everyone? No. Most people don’t come to our venues. They wouldn’t fit for a start. But most people don’t do most things. There are only one or two things that ‘most people’ do, and the arts are neither of them. So most people won’t visit our venues or book our tickets. The arts aren’t for all. Nothing is. Let’s accept it, and get on with the real issues.

 Lies, damn lies and segmentation

But if not everyone will visit, who will? Who might? That is the question. Take me – what did I do this month? I went rally driving in the Welsh mountains; I saw the film *Stuart Little* at the local cinema; I visited the Royal Horticultural Society Flower Show at Hampton Court; and I went to the Banana Cabaret Comedy Club in Balham. This makes me:

- An 18–24-year-old lager-drinking *Loaded*-reading red-blooded male.
- A 10-year-old Pokémon collector with a peculiar mouse fetish.
- An over-55 true-blue lady-who-lunches from Tunbridge Wells.
- A 30-something London-based *Guardian* reader with a terrible sense of humour.

Which is the real me? Easy to guess? No, because of course the answer is: all of them – and none of them. We need to recognise that really-rather-irritating-for-marketers factor of human individuality – and find new ways of grouping people into targetable segments – by who they are and what they want out of life, not what they’ve maybe once done.

*Whydon’tyoujustswitchoffyourtelevisionanddosomethingmoreinterestinginstead* was a 1970s BBC kids programme – well intentioned, life-enhancing, full of great ideas to keep us kids amused during the long summer holidays – but an incredibly irritating, patronising, goody-two-shoes approach. If we’re not careful, that’s how our audience development initiatives will come across to their innocent victims, who think they are leading perfectly interesting and fulfilled lives, thank you very much, without us suggesting a few wizard wheezes for them. You’ve got to respect people’s right to refuse. There were a lot of interesting things I didn’t do last week after switching off my television. I didn’t go to a cricket match, didn’t take up bungee jumping, didn’t visit a strip club in Soho, didn’t go to a Soft Cell come-back concert, didn’t buy a diamond tiara, didn’t book three months in advance for a new play, didn’t go to the big exhibition at the Royal Academy, didn’t phone my mum, didn’t eat sushi, didn’t listen to a Kennedy CD …

Why not? Well, because: I didn’t know it was on; because I’m just not interested; because I don’t get it; because I find it morally objectionable; because it’s scary; because it was in
Manchester and I was in London; because it sounded boring; because it’s not my style; because someone told me it was terrible; because I didn’t have the cash; because I had already done it twice that month; because I was tired; because my friends didn’t want to; because the sun was out …There’s a million reasons that we don’t do things. And all of the above could apply to the arts – even, in one particular week, with one particular set of circumstances, to your absolutely peachy, frequent, recent, core target market, database-driven, fully postcoded ‘I love your venue’ arts attender – never mind the never-beens.

There’s a lot of choice in the world – and half of it is delivered to our front rooms more or less free. We have to find what will get people out of those armchairs and choose arts, and decide what we can contribute to the overall picture of life in 21st century UK.

Concrete or paper?

But what about these barriers? There may be a million reasons that people don’t do things – from acts of God downwards – but let’s work out which ones we, as organisations and as individual marketers, can actually do something about – and deal with them.

Are the arts inaccessible?

- Yes if you physically can’t get in because you’re in a wheelchair.
- Yes if you don’t have anywhere to leave the kids.
- Yes if you can’t afford the tickets.
- Yes if your free day is Sunday and the theatre is closed.
- Yes if you’re too busy to trust booking months in advance.
- Yes if you haven’t heard about something.
- Yes if you have heard about something but God knows what that copy actually means.

All these things we can do something about – some more easily than others. Instead of feeling overpowered by the idea of a Berlin Wall of inaccessibility, we need to sort the paper barriers from the concrete ones, and work out which we need to chip away at long term, and which can be torn down tomorrow. Then follow the wisdom of Nike – and just do it. But look out for spring-loaded barriers that might come down but bounce back up again. OK, so you’ve put on some Chinese opera. What about next month? Audience development is a long-term commitment. It can be hard work to lower the drawbridge, but once it is down, we’ve got to keep it down.

People like us

What about the inaccessibility that stems from going to something but feeling awful, because you stick out like a sore thumb – maybe you’re a different colour to everyone else, or have the wrong kind of accent, or you’re 30 years the wrong age. I’ve experienced all three recently – at the Summer Carnival in Southall, which is a mile from where I live but a thousand miles culturally from where it seems many other whites are; at a drinks reception for the National Association of Fine and Decorative Arts Societies; and during
a rather ill-advised trip to a roller disco. We didn’t know roller discos were for children – but there we were, three feet too tall, trying to have fun but feeling pretty embarrassed.

The thing is, it’s not funny. Collectively we seem to be OK. But are we? Am I? Are you? We need to reassess our assumptions, which are, absolutely in the wrong sense, whiter than white. Nice or nasty, we are infectious. We recruit ourselves, we employ ourselves, we market to ourselves, we go out together. Our ideas are catching – among ourselves. Do we want to stick with ‘Arts R Us’? Nice, mostly white, mostly graduate, mostly able-bodied folk with passive liberal tendencies? Or do we want THEM, whoever they are? If so, we’re going to have to try harder. And how far are we willing to change to encourage others?

Kicking and screaming

Opening the doors to the many means a loss of privilege to the few – and they will fight it. V.S. Naipaul recently sparked a huge debate by saying that the government’s aims for social change through the arts have ‘destroyed the idea of civilisation’ in this country and imposed a ‘terrible plebeian culture’. The esteemed curator, writer and art critic David Sylvester was quoted in the *Guardian* on 1st July as saying, ‘The whole education argument is crap. I hate museums cluttered up with children’; ‘One really doesn’t want to be in a gallery with more than a few people. This is the great problem with art. A big audience is no good for it’; ‘I wish there was less interest. Perhaps the answer is for art to become unfashionable and un-loved again.’ These are important people, with important allies. Change can spoil the essential experience for those who’ve grown to know and love it. A Glasgow cinema put on an Italian film season for the big Italian community there – Italians came in droves. Italians like to talk during films, loudly. Glaswegians weren’t happy. You can’t please all the people all the time.

Changing what we do to attract new people will almost inevitably displease the ones that like it like it is. Won’t we just swap one audience for another, and leave our loyal supporters out in the cold? Who is more important, the ones that like us now, or the ones that might be persuadable? Do we want to keep some barriers up? No? Then prove it.

Change for good

Do we have a problem – or an opportunity? We need advice, from people who actually know. We must find new communication networks and media channels; new opinion-formers, new figureheads, new directors. New alliances – with churches, shops, sports. New ticket outlets. New language, which is honest and informative not sensational and pretentious. New environments with different lighting, smoking, late licences, drinks in the auditorium, audience participation, the World Cup on screens in the foyer. Radical? The RFH did it two years ago – and it worked. Maybe even a new venue – or at least get our organisations to pop out for a bit of fresh air every now and then. If the three tenors can go to Wembley, the arts mountain could go to Mohammed – literally.

The payoff could be huge. Buzz to your building. New audiences – desperately needed. Also new artists, who wouldn’t have touched you with a bargepole before. New staff, with challenging perspectives and the motivation to do something different. And new
income sources: black pound, brown pound, grey pound, pink pound. Can we afford not to change? Probably not. Change would be good. And should be for good – forever. This is not contentious. But it ain’t happening yet. And that is.

Richard Whitehouse examined some issues relating to internal barriers.

Three little words

• Unique
• Selling
• Proposition

Let’s just focus for a minute on reasons to visit rather than barriers – why we need to position our organisations and find their USPs. It’s not a new idea. It’s not particularly sexy. But it works.

• At John Lewis you won’t find the same thing cheaper anywhere else.
• At Waitrose you’ll pay more but you know it’ll be good.
• Nike is the best good because it’s used by the best athletes.
• On the London Eye you get the best view of London there is.

But what do you get from a day at the Dome? And what were you buying at C&A?

I know the ats is different. Performances/exhibitions/happenings are here today, gone tomorrow. But most of us work for organisations that aim to be around for a while and maybe that’s what we should focus on. In order to do so, we should all be able to give reasons that someone should visit us rather than a list of why they shouldn’t. ‘Marketing’ = internal processes of working together. Are we limiting ourselves by this definition?

One more word

• Planning

How many of us can say what their organisation aims to be in ten years’ time? How about five? How about three? Three years is not a long time. It can take three years to get the funding in place to finance one audience initiative. And that’s before you’ve done the project and evaluated it. We’ve heard about a number of planning issues. Some may seem too abstruse and abstract to get your heads round. How many people looked at the pre-conference papers and saw a presentation about economic indicators and shrugged? How many of you were deeply cynical about why the AMA should bother to include a presentation about race relations in the Metropolitan Police? ‘Not more political correctness please.’

Maybe what we have been given here is not a magic wand that will turn our organisations into overnight successes. Jane McDonald (she of the BBC Cruise series fame) was an overnight success – 20 years after she first started in the entertainment business – and on the verge of giving it all up. Maybe what we’ve been given here is some ideas that will
help us get round the subsidy problem. You know the one I mean: the funding merry-go-round which keeps us focused on this year’s box office targets; which doesn’t give us any head space to think about what we need to be doing in three years’ time; which would help us to be around in five or ten years’ time …

And another one

- Creativity

It’s interesting, isn’t it, that we work in a creative industry and for most of us the nearest we get to a creative thought is ‘How do I get this image approved by the artistic director?’ And I imagine that’s why many of us get a bit bored servicing those who ‘do the art’, for very little money and even less encouragement.

I can’t believe there is anyone in this room who wouldn’t fancy working in an environment where we never had to hear someone else telling us what had to go on the poster. Not because we wouldn’t be doing posters. And not because people don’t feel strongly about how their ‘art’ is sold to the public. But because the debate that precedes the discussions about how to communicate have been preceded by discussions about why are we doing what we’re doing and who we’re doing it for. If our organisations are going to survive, we all have to challenge assumptions. How are you going to do it?

Maybe you’ll be able to develop your influencing skills from within the marketing department. And maybe internal advocacy is something you need help with and the AMA should be providing. Hands up anyone who’s ever had a problem with an artistic director. In my experience they can be the most capricious, difficult, manipulative people you ever have to meet. And that’s on a good day. How many of us have ever wanted to go on a negotiation skills course that would help you deal with what can be an extremely stressful situation? Well, maybe you should ask the AMA for one …

Or maybe you’ll not be able to really do anything until you are running organisations yourselves. Maybe that’s what we all have to aspire to: running organisations. And maybe the AMA has a part to play in leading the debate about what sort of organisations are required to meet the audience needs over the next 50 years and helping senior marketers make the move through the tinsel ceiling. Maybe the AMA should run a ‘Druidstone’ for potential chief executives.

But whether you want to run the world or just get more people in touch with your art form, you will need to have thought about how your organisation is going to develop. And the key question is: how are you going to build meaningful relationships with your customers? You will have to have thought about the criteria on which your success is to be measured. And you will have to build evaluation into your planning processes.

Why, why, why?

Barriers exist. The trouble is they’re a bit like a giraffe. Hard to describe but you know one when you see one. Except, of course, you can’t see most of them. We just know they’re there when we don’t quite hit the box office targets!
When looking at possible reasons that people don’t come to your performances or exhibition or attraction and what you’re going to do about it, ask yourselves another question. *Why* do you want to do something about the things that prevent people from coming? Think of any important event in your life, something that you planned for rather than something that just happened. Ask yourself which question came first: *how* am I going to do this or *why* am I going to do this?