

MAKING FRIENDS: VOLUNTEERING IN ARTS MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

This paper concentrates on the supporters of theatres (in the United Kingdom often called “Friends of the theatre”). Friends provide much needed funding, audiences, sponsorship, volunteer workers and support as well as acting as unpaid advocates for the theatre. As the competition for volunteers becomes more acute and volunteer managers have become increasingly concerned with the recruitment and retention of volunteers marketing techniques are playing an ever more important role in this sector. The aim of this paper is to assist those involved in theatre management and Friends groups in developing effective marketing strategies for the recruitment and retention of members. Given the lack of previous research in this area an exploratory research strategy was deemed to be the most suitable. Key informant interviews took place with theatre managers at the major theatres in the North of England and a focus group was held with the members of one Friends group. A telephone questionnaire was developed from this preliminary research incorporating a mix of both open and closed questions. Friends organisations linked to the theatres were asked to complete this to discover which had established Friends groups, their composition and organisation, current programme and strategies. Not only does a theatre have different customer groups, this study draws attention to the different groups within Friends: the activists and the theatre benefit seekers. It highlights the need to understand these segments as a basis for developing strategies to recruit ‘benefit seekers’, retain them and convert them into activists. Examples of best practice are highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Many provincial theatres in England are funded by subsidies from local authorities, the Arts Council or the National Lottery (or a combination of these). Although Government funding for the Arts has increased, funding for theatres remains uncertain due to the allocation of funds and a reduction in local authority grants (Higgins, 2002). It is, therefore, important that theatres look to alternative sources for funds to supplement those given by the state. Groups, usually run by a committee of volunteers, have been established or have emerged to support local theatres and to augment this income. In the United Kingdom key aspects of community development (and the welfare state) are now increasingly dependent on volunteer involvement. It has been estimated that half the population of the UK volunteer time to community activities (Palmer, 2000). Although levels of volunteering are high, there are signs that this may have peaked (Gaskin, 1999) so that organisations are now striving to recruit from a decreasing pool of volunteers (Jackson, 1999).

It is extremely difficult to define what is meant by a volunteer as there is no standard practice in volunteering (Gaskin, 2000), volunteers operate in thousands of different organisations taking on extremely varied roles. Also volunteers can not be considered to be one large, homogenous group (Wymer, 1998) as volunteers are of all ages and diverse backgrounds with a range of experiences and skills. Most definitions demonstrate that there is an element of exchange in volunteering in which volunteers respond to costs and benefits (Unger, 1991), but volunteering usually “*involves contributions of time without coercion or remuneration*” (Smith, 1994, p.244).

The role of marketing in gaining and retaining customers has long been recognised in the commercial world. The adoption of a marketing approach in the not-for-profit sector has been somewhat slower (Bruce 1995). Nevertheless, there is growing evidence that a marketing philosophy and the use of marketing techniques is being seen to be an acceptable and important part of a not-for-profit organisation’s strategy (Balabanis, Stables and Phillips, 1997). In the Arts, people have gradually become aware of marketing as a management tool (Rentschler, 1998; Jones, 2000). However, much of the research has centred on audience and visitor studies (Yorke and Jones, 1984; Screven, 1993). While audiences and visitors are essential to the functioning of museums and performing arts organisations, Drucker (1990, p.83) points out that such organisations have a “*multitude of constituencies and have to work out the relationship with each of them*”. The importance for marketers of this array of customers has been highlighted by Kotler and Andreasson (1996). Different strategies are required for each different customer group. Bruce (1995) organises this collection of customers into four sets: beneficiaries, supporters, stakeholders and regulators. Amongst supporters he lists donors and volunteers (fundraisers and workers).

Supporters are evident in many diverse organisations. Wymer (1997) identified six key areas: arts and culture, education and health, human service, religion, youth development. Much research has been undertaken on volunteers in general (Bussell and Forbes, 2002) but surprisingly little is available on supporters in the Arts. Wymer and Brudney (2000) show that arts and culture volunteers can be distinguished from other volunteers. For those working in arts management and arts marketing it is essential that they have an understanding of this important customer group to organise an effective marketing strategy.

The volunteer groups in United Kingdom provincial theatres range from play goers’ clubs to membership schemes offering different levels of benefits (Fraser, 1998). Such groups have a variety of titles but are most frequently called “Friends of the theatre”. In the USA these groups tend to be called “subscribers” (Voss and Voss, 1997; Johnson and Garbarino, 2001) but there is some distinction between long-time subscribers loyal to the theatre and those who renew their subscription merely as a means of obtaining theatre tickets. According to Cheung (2002), becoming a member of an Arts organisation or a Friend is more about buying a service than an act of philanthropy. Offering higher levels of membership assumes members are more in tune with the organisation’s core aims and so concessions become less important.

In the USA the Arts audience size is “*stagnant at its best*” (Scheff & Kotler, 1996, p.29), with subscription showing a decline as existing and potential customers become more spontaneous in their purchasing of leisure activities. In England, a recent study found a significant proportion of those asked attend theatres (27% had seen a play /

drama at the theatre in the previous 12 months, 24% a musical play, 13% a pantomime). Overall, there was evidence indicating that people “*value the arts*” (Skelton et al, 2002, p.3). However, there is little published work on more committed theatre-goers – Friends.

Friends provide much needed funding, audiences, sponsorship, volunteer workers and support as well as acting as unpaid advocates for the theatre. The objectives of such groups vary. Raymond (1992) suggests that they have two objectives: to increase ticket sales and to raise capital. Most Friends organisations are closely affiliated to the theatre, relying on the theatre to provide resources such as printing, meeting rooms, etc. In the current climate of commercialisation, with theatres expected to operate at a surplus, then cost cutting exercises could identify Friends as a cost to be reduced. Hill et al (1995) describe Friends as ‘ancillary products’ along with regular attendees where customers are seen as having a growing level of involvement in an organisation’s activities. Friends may need to be treated as part of the product portfolio and managed as such (i.e. time and money could be better applied to other, newer, targeted segments).

The aim of this paper is to assist those involved in theatre management and Friends groups in developing effective marketing strategies for the recruitment and retention of members. It also seeks to highlight instances of best practice which Friends groups can use as a benchmark for their own activities.

METHODOLOGY

Given the lack of previous research in this area an exploratory research strategy was deemed to be the most suitable. This paper covers the exploratory research carried out as the first phase of a larger scale study. An exploratory research design was used as the aim of this research was to “*discover significant variables.....to discover relations among variables and to lay a groundwork for later, more systematic and rigorous testing of hypotheses*” (Kerlinger, 1964, p. 388), drawing from humanistic enquiry rather than structured quantitative analysis.

Key informant interviews took place with theatre managers at thirteen of the major theatres in the North of England. Three of these had no Friends organisation. One large theatre (capacity 1900) operated on a totally commercial basis, receiving no grants at all, so saw no need to have “*a social element*” such as a Friends organisation. Another local theatre was awaiting major refurbishment and reorganisation. The third was closely linked to another theatre in the same city and benefited from their Friends scheme.

Twelve people were recruited through snowball sampling to form a focus group. This group size was selected so that participants felt neither pressured into speaking nor ignored (Mendes de Almeida, 1980). Respondents included nine Friends, two theatre managers and one local authority representative. The discussion identified and expanded on key marketing issues and explored Friends organisations and Arts management

From this preliminary research a telephone questionnaire was developed incorporating a mix of both open and closed questions. This method of questionnaire administration was considered to be appropriate as it provides an effective way of obtaining rich data from named respondents at times convenient to both the researchers and respondents. It was

particularly useful as the Northern region of England has a wide geographical spread. Telephone interviews were carried out with the main organiser of ten Friends groups linked to the theatres previously contacted. Questions aimed to discover details regarding the establishment of the Friends group, its composition and organisation, benefits to members and the theatre, the current programme and marketing strategies. To enable comparisons to be made a cross-case analysis (Huberman and Miles, 1998) was carried out on the data. A table identifying characteristics of cases was constructed. Data was arranged using the Four Ws of Volunteering classification (Bussell and Forbes, 2002): What (definition), Where (context), Who (characteristics of volunteers), Why (motivation).

FINDINGS

What?

It is extremely difficult to define what is meant by the term volunteer. Whether or not Friends can be considered to be volunteers depends on their level of commitment to the theatre and the group. For most members joining Friends is not a high involvement decision. They look upon being a Friend in terms of an exchange (often a financial one). As can be seen by the number of active members (Table 1), these are paid up members but the benefits of membership are uppermost. They are certainly supporters but the support such members give to the theatre is a desire to be connected to the establishment. They may attend the theatre as the audience. Other elements of the audience may include non-Friends who subscribe to a promotional package (such as buy three tickets, see a fourth production free) on a regular or irregular basis as well as those who purchase tickets ad hoc (again on a regular or irregular basis). These are undoubtedly important customer groups for the theatre but inactive Friends cannot be considered what Cnaan, Handy and Wadsworth (1996) would call “real volunteers”.

However, within the Friends membership there is a more active group. These Friends can certainly be considered to be volunteers as they donate time “*without coercion or remuneration*” (Smith, 1994, p.244). The more committed join the committee to run the organisation, administer the group and the membership scheme, compile and send out newsletters and organise social events for other members. Some work hard, giving their time to raise much needed funds for the theatre. Friends groups have raised thousands of pounds for their local theatre (see Table 1). In instances where funding bodies operate a system of matched funding this has resulted in large amounts of extra funding being awarded. Rather than raise money, some Friends have provided gifts in kind (such as theatre curtains, refurbished dressing rooms) with members donating their time towards making equipment. Some volunteer to help run the theatre itself: ushering, staffing kiosks, selling programmes, and arranging publicity events.

Where?

In the United Kingdom the present government sees the Arts as a fundamental tool for addressing such issues as inclusion and poverty as well as, through the City of Culture bids, employment and tourism, which in turn reflects how public monies are apportioned to Arts organisations. The UK theatre sector contains both commercial profit generating theatres and not for profit, including local community theatre groups.

Table 1: Characteristics of cases

Case	Capacity	Friends structure	Members Active)	Demographic details	Costs p.a.	Members benefits	Theatre benefits
1	900	Formal	260 (100)	Middle aged & elderly Middle class	£15 single £25 joint	1,2, 3,4,5,6	1,2 (£1,500),4
2	619	Run by theatre admin office	100 (60)	Age 34 –55 50% male 50% female	£20 single £30 joint	1, 2, 3	1
3	510	Infomal		Older 50+ Students	£25 single £40 joint	1,2,3,6,	1
4*	200	None current Committee still meets	Mailing list of 800	Mature (Committee “young”)	£20 single £40 joint (proposed)	1,3	1, 2 (None current)
5	500	Formal. Committee 10-12	400 (100)	Middle aged & elderly Middle class	£7	1,3, 4, 5, 6	1,2 (£1,000),3,4
6	61 500+	Very formal	1000 (30%)	Retired, m’class, local	£15 £25 joint	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	1, 2 (£2,500+), 4,5,
7	387	Committee of 12 plus 20 volunteers	1300 (400)	Maj 50+, mainly m’class 50% not local	£10	12,3,4,5,6	1,2 (Not specified),3
8	1294 Plans to expand	Committee of 14 Friends run by Theatre Marketing Dept.	1750 (50-100)	Changing 50% middle aged, m’class 50% younger professionals, more females	£25 single, £40 joint (Concessions £18/£30) Stage 2 membership £5	1,2,3,4,5,6,7, 8 Stage 2 members: 2	1,2 (£5-7,000)4
9	750 350	Bimonthly meetings	500 (“not many”)	60% over 60 40% 25+ Mostly female	£10 (£5 seniors & unwaged)	3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2 (£500+), 3
10	863	Formal committee 12	105 (40-45)	Ageing, m’class, local	£10 £18 joint (Seniors £8/£14)	1,2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, (£3,000), 4, 5

Key

Membership benefits: 1 Ticket discounts, 2 Priority booking, 3. Social events, 4 Theatre trips, 5 Theatre talks, 6 Newsletter, 7 Loyalty scheme, 8 Discounts elsewhere in theatre (e.g. bar)

Theatre benefits: 1 Audience/support, 2 Fundraising (approx. amount pa) 3 Volunteers to help run theatre 4 Provide equipment, 5 Sponsor performances

*Theatre 4 currently being refurbished. Data given based on previous Friends group.

Those that are publicly funded are expected to combine both social and commercial roles, answerable for their survival to local and national authorities.

This study has found that the publicly funded theatres in the sample (bar two, see above) had established Friends organisations. These theatres range in size from a capacity of 387 to over 1,000 with plans to expand. Some are modern theatres others are more than a hundred years old. They are based in city centres, in rural areas, in market towns and in seaside resorts. They may be receiving or touring houses (theatres which offer an empty stage to companies to present their own production with their own resources) or producing houses (theatres which resource and stage the complete production). Overall, the theatres appreciated the benefits obtained from an active Friends organisation.

The majority of Friends organisations are run by a formal committee of members with the usual offices (chair, secretary, treasurer, membership officer, etc). Committee members appear to be drawn from those who are willing to serve on the committee and officers seem to remain in post for quite a while. Regularity of meetings varies but most meet monthly. The committee agrees the programme of events and activities and decides (usually with the theatre management) on funding requirements. One theatre organised its Friends through its own office rather than through a committee of members. Another had appointed one of the theatre's marketing team to run the Friends, although there was also an active committee. The committee of one organisation still met even though the theatre was closed for refurbishment and the Friends group had been disbanded temporarily.

Friends have different levels of influence in the theatre. Some are seen as useful sources of fundraising, others as a means of income generation through increasing audiences. The chair of one Friends organisation automatically has a place on the Theatre Board, which gives the group some say in how the theatre is run.

Who?

The involvement and profile of the more active members within each Friends organisation (committee members, events organisers, regular attendees and theatre volunteers) resembles that of those volunteering elsewhere. They are more likely to be female, over 50, retired and middle class. There was no evidence amongst the sample in this study of a segmentation strategy. The selection of activities is driven by the demands of the existing active group. Accordingly, younger, less active members were not inclined to join in. However, one group was seeing changes as result of the theatre's marketing strategy. The theatre's image had changed recently as result of its promotional campaign and a more attractive programme (drawing the highest level of theatre and musical productions). The audience composition was now very different from a few years ago. It was felt that "*the Friends committee reflects the audience*" consequently younger people were now joining. The committee was split into equal numbers of "*old school*" (mainly retired) and employed, professional people in their 40s.

Among the other Friends there was little attempt to attract younger members (25-40), despite the importance of this group (identified by Cheung (2002) as being important as tomorrow's trustees). One group had considered, but dismissed, setting up a Young Friends. Another had tried it but it "*did'nt work*". It was generally considered to be "*not their kind of thing*", although one group did have a young person on their

committee. Youth activities were left to the theatre to organise through its youth theatre programme. Some theatres offer reduced tickets to young people and students to attract a younger audience but this was seen by the Friends to be a concern of the theatre and did not relate to them. Overall, there appeared to be a desire to keep the status quo.

Members were overwhelmingly local to the theatre (within a 15-20 mile radius). Some ex-residents remained members when they moved away (one group boasted of a Friend in Monte Carlo). Three groups varied from the norm, each due to a peculiarity of the theatre. The Friends of a theatre located in a tourist region attracted half its member from holidaymakers living outside the area who were regular visitors. One theatre was also a theatre museum so its mailing list attracted extra members. The theatre which had successfully attracted the top productions had a wider membership (but still generally from within the region) because of interest in its programme and the difficulty in non-members obtaining tickets for these performances. However, Friends who lived a distance away were paid up members but not usually active.

Why?

The key to an organisation's success in recruiting and retaining its volunteers is to have an understanding of the motives of its target group of volunteers (Chambre, 1987). Rather than volunteer for another activity, Friends join because, as King and Fluke (1989) discovered, they believe in the Arts. They are concerned that their community would lose a valuable resource if the local theatre ceased to exist. Friends gain strength responding to a crisis situation. Often this is a demand for funds. The largest group in the sample (with over 1,300 members) had been established when the theatre required new premises. Funds were raised towards rebuilding costs and Friends continue to provide a huge team of volunteers on a daily basis to carry out retailing and administrative work within the theatre to ensure that the theatre continues.

It is undoubtedly true that many volunteers find the activity to be a rewarding experience but Chaan and Goldberg-Glen (1991) demonstrate that, as well as an altruistic motive, volunteers tend to also act on egoistic motives. People volunteer to satisfy important social and psychological goals. Friends may be motivated by what Mueller (1975) terms a "selective incentive"; a sense of belonging, need for affiliation, gaining prestige or self-esteem, a way of making friends. Indeed, the fact that these organisations are called "Friends" demonstrates the desire to build relationships. For some Friends the social element is the main attraction. This is recognised by some of the groups who put a great deal of effort into organising social activities. Some such events, such as coffee morning and book sales, have a fund-raising as well as social function but often the purpose is purely to bring together like-minded people. The social programme is usually decided in advance based on suggestions from current active members. There is no attempt to introduce activities to attract new members or draw in those who are less active. Many organisations arrange coach trips to other provincial theatres and overnight theatre trips to London. Some events are purely social and have no links with the theatre (for example, a murder mystery weekend was arranged by one group) but sometimes theatre premises are used for social events. One group holds a regular monthly luncheon in the theatre foyer attended by 50 members. However, conflict arose between the theatre management and one Friends group when its 'Clubroom' in the theatre was repossessed as the theatre manager needed the space for theatre business. That group now holds its meetings and social events in a local public house.

Some events provide not only a social function but appeal to those members who wish to enhance their status or gain some prestige through volunteering. The connection with an established, high profile organisation is an incentive for some Friends. Post-performance buffets with the cast and question and answer sessions with the director or playwright are always very well attended events. Here Friends can rub shoulders with the stars, meet well-known celebrities, question the professionals as well as build up their autograph collection.

Okun (1994) found that the strongest correlate of frequency of volunteering among older volunteers was the need to feel useful or productive. The majority of Friends are middle-class and middle aged or elderly (see Table 1). Many are retired but feel they have specific skills enabling them to contribute positively to society. Active members are keen to use these skills to benefit the theatre. Several have organisational and communication experience and skills developed during their paid working life. For example, the retention strategy of one organisation had recently been given a boost by a newly retired husband and wife team with IT skills taking on the role of membership officer. They had set up a sophisticated membership database and were in the process of approaching lapsed members with some success.

The majority of Friends are not active members but join for the theatre benefits: ticket discounts, priority booking, theatre restaurant discounts, etc. These often depend on the type of membership. Some Friends have a number of different levels of membership, each requiring a different subscription to obtain the required benefit (for example, £5.00 may put a Friend on the mailing list but to receive priority booking would cost £25.00). Such benefits are not affected by how active a member is (although activities involving meeting the stars are often oversubscribed so there may be some priority given to the more active members).

Marketing strategy

Successful Friends organisations tend to have a good committee, often led by one charismatic member (but if that member leaves the focus can shift dramatically). In most cases marketing is done intuitively, very much on an ad hoc basis and concerned primarily with marketing communications. Other than asking existing active members which social events they would like to take part in, there is virtually no market research carried out amongst members. Inactive Friends are rarely approached to identify what would attract them. There appears to be no research carried out among theatre-goers to encourage them to join. Promotion strategies vary greatly in the level of professionalism and are closely linked to promotions carried out by the theatre: advertisements in programmes and the theatre itself, a page on the theatre web site or a display inside the theatre foyer. There was no evidence of an integrated communications policy. What promotional strategies there were seemed to rely on the awareness element with very little monitoring of whether this developed into desire or action. Indeed, carrying out this research provided a practical demonstration in how difficult it is to find out and make contact with Friends organisations.

Publicity given to crises involving the theatre is the most successful spur to recruitment. There is even less in the way of retention strategies. Most Friends have a newsletter of some sort but the regularity of its distribution and reliability of mailing

lists varied. Some committees work hard to retain active members by arranging social events in which existing members would be interested but there is little acknowledgement of the need to attract potential members. There is little evidence at all of efforts to reactivate lapsed members. Once they were gone they were lost for all time unless they came back of their own volition. Much depends on the existence or sophistication of an accurate membership database and individual membership secretaries (see example above).

One Friends group in our sample was taken over by the theatre's marketing department as part of the theatre's income generation strategy run by the Development Manager. She works closely with the committee arranging activities for members as well as organising the marketing effort. In some instances, the choice of activities is influenced by the theatre. For example, events are selected according to the profile of the members the theatre wishes to attract (lunches and wine tastings have replaced coffee mornings). Theatre trips are chosen to ensure productions visited are not in competition with those offered in the theatre's programme for that season. A loyalty scheme has been introduced offering money off vouchers (to be used in the theatre bar, café or booking office) to those renewing membership. There is a twice-yearly campaign to contact lapsed members who are mailed with an incentive to rejoin (giving a varied response rate of 10-50%). Regular membership drives are staged in the foyer during performances. There are regular mailings to audiences who are not Friends encouraging them to join. These strategies, plus the theatre's attractive programme, are having an impact on the Friends. Not only are younger people being attracted but membership is increasing (although, at the moment, the number of active members remains constant).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that there are a number of committed groups of people throughout the country who are prepared to volunteer to support their local theatre. These groups are certainly well meaning and are extremely active in attending theatre productions and events, fund-raising and acting as advocates for the theatre. They are successful in providing a network for those who love the theatre and wish to socialise with like-minded people. Theatres value their Friends and encourage these groups. However, many Friends organisations have been established for a while and have not adapted to the changing environment. Consequently, some have not flourished as much as others. Many Friends organisations have an ageing membership. They appear to outsiders to be cliquish. They operate in an amateur fashion relying on few and outmoded information sources without a business strategy. There is a lack of clarity as to whether the key objective is income generation or a social club. Friends' objectives and operations may even conflict with those of the theatres they are designed to support (Johnson and Garbarino, 2001). Offering discounts and other benefits to Friends rather than selling tickets to full-paying customers can reduce a theatre's income. As funding becomes subject to commercial pressures and measured outcomes, theatres are keeping tighter hold on their limited resources. This study highlighted examples of theatres reducing the facilities provided to their Friends, such as accommodation and help with printing and publicity materials. Although Friends do raise funds for the theatres some of the amounts raised, whilst helpful, are not significant. Even social events can cost the theatre. For example, theatre trips provide revenue to competitors.

Some Friends groups recognise the need to be more professional but may not have the wherewithal or expertise to reorganise themselves. There were instances where individual Friends had improved the structure or part of the operation. One theatre had recognised the importance of Friends as a means of income generation and had taken over the running of its Friends as part of its marketing strategy. This group had specific objectives and targets (which had been exceeded) and a marketing strategy directed towards these. There was a clear and ongoing recruitment and retention programme, based on an effective information system, aimed at a target audience determined by the type of productions staged by the theatre. Not only were the Friends' marketing efforts integrated but also the Friends' strategy was integrated with the theatre's marketing programme. The result was an increase in membership, but importantly for the future, a shift in the age profile of members towards a younger cohort. From this organisation's experience Friends must work closely with the theatre management and operate on a more professional basis.

Not only does a theatre have different customer groups, this study draws attention to the different groups within Friends: the active Friend and the Friend who wishes to be seen to have a connection to the theatre, perhaps seeking specific benefits. It highlights the need to understand the different segments as a basis for developing marketing strategies to recruit not just an audience for productions but to move the irregular playgoer up the Theatre Loyalty Ladder (see Figure 1) to 'benefit seekers' (as a subscriber) and ultimately to becoming a Friend. Relationship marketing techniques can be employed to retain Friends and convert them into activists. A relationship marketing paradigm has been shown to be more appropriate to the volunteer market than a traditional transactional model (Bussell and Forbes, 2002) for the aim of the theatre should be to develop a long-term relationship with its supporters. Long term Friends may eventually wish to become involved in the running of the theatre and join the Board as a Trustee.

Figure 1: Theatre Loyalty Ladder*



*Adapted from Christopher, Payne, and Ballantyne (1991)

Finally, it should be noted that the findings presented here are based on an exploratory study, which is intended as the first stage in researching Friends organisations. Further research is to be carried out on Friends demonstrating best practice and on the relationships between Friends and the theatres they support. There is also to be a larger scale study on Friends.

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