

Are we keeping our promise?

Heather Maitland looks at how a small organisation evaluates the promises it makes in its mission statement

Owning a bold vision as Mel Larsen states in the previous article, is vital to inform a mission statement that everyone in your organisation can buy into.

Just how audience focused is your organisation's mission statement? Is it just a list of what you do? Or does it tell people why you do it and what's in it for them? It's easy to prove that you are keeping your promises if all you are promising is to put on a certain number of shows, exhibitions or classes. But the things that are measurable often don't matter much. So, how do you evaluate an audience-focused mission statement?

Last year, the team at Lincoln Drill Hall, a 400 seat mixed-programme arts centre, made a dramatic shift towards becoming audience focused. The new mission statement created by staff and trustees goes like this:

We believe Lincoln Drill Hall is the place to go to see events and have experiences that you just can't find elsewhere – we offer special moments by the bucketful. Our job is to ensure that you have a good time when you're with us and to encourage you to come back and try something else. We believe that the arts can make people's lives better and we want to do just that!

That's some promise! So, are they delivering?

To find the answer, the team has had to challenge their approach to evaluation just as they are challenging the way they engage with existing and potential audiences. And, with just six full-time members of staff, they were looking for solutions on a shoestring.

To them, audience focus means developing a dialogue with audiences so, no more questionnaires. Instead, they focus on real testimony from real people. Facebook fans and Twitter followers are likely to be Drill Hall enthusiasts so they use comments in third-party social media such as TripAdvisor alongside feedback gathered by the Village People, their network of advocates based in villages surrounding Lincoln, to see whether the moments they offer really are special.

They have drastically reduced the number of season brochures they mail, restricting them to their most frequent attenders. Their objective is to increase the season brochure's return on investment so their measure of

effectiveness is how much these customers spend on tickets divided by the total cost of designing, printing and mailing each brochure.

The monthly e-newsletter is designed to fill the gap so the team measure its success by the number of subscribers, open and click-through rates, unsubscribe rates and, as far as possible, ticket sales. Its efficiency is measured by the delivery rate and bounce rate. Lincoln Drill Hall uses social media, however, as tools for dialogue. Activity is evaluated using the usual numbers as a broad indication of impact – Facebook likes, Twitter followers, mentions and reach – but just as important are some simple measures of depth of engagement: comments and replies, shares and re-Tweets.

Again, simple numbers, particularly the number of unique visitors, give a broad indication of their website's impact but evaluation mainly focuses on engagement, for example the number of visitors that watch the embedded videos.

Their ticketing system enables the team to keep a close eye on whether they are successful in persuading people to come back and try something else. They have compiled a customer relationship ladder and each year monitor how people move between its rungs. This has meant a re-evaluation of what loyalty means. A sizeable chunk of the audience has been coming for a decade but buy tickets less often than once a year. These customers talk in terms of loyalty, but this doesn't translate into frequent attendance. There appear to be different sets of values at work. The team are therefore planning a series of customer circles, each with a different kind of 'loyal' audience, to explore where audience and organisation values intersect. This will feed into future individual giving strategies.

Last year, customer retention rates increased. But this year difficulties at a neighbouring theatre have led to a huge influx of first-time ticket buyers who look nothing like their existing audiences. The team have lots of questions about where they come from, what they see and whether they come back which can be answered by some straightforward crunching of box office data. But why do they come? And what do they make of an experience that is very different to the conventional plush of their previous theatregoing? It's time for two more customer circles.

Customer circles will give them inspirational insight into what makes a small number of people tick. But they want feedback from as many people as possible so they can



Lincoln Drill Hall audience © Phil Crow

check whether the views of participants in the customer circles are typical – difficult when questionnaires have been banned. Their shoestring solution is brilliant in its simplicity: to use Survey Monkey to invite ticket buyers and emailing list members to help create a word cloud about the Drill Hall by suggesting any five words they feel describe the experiences it offers. They will use the value and impact framework developed by Alan Brown and his colleagues at WolfBrown to help interpret the results.

Along with the customer circles, this will tell them how far they deliver on their promise to make people’s lives better. And this is a promise that is particularly important to their key stakeholder, City of Lincoln Council.

The Drill Hall team already produce an annual report on social return on investment, evaluating how they contribute to the Council’s social objectives. They measure attendance and footfall, the percentage of households who have bought tickets in the city and the surrounding area, particularly focusing on two deprived wards, the number of local people performing or sharing their creativity in other ways and engagement by young people and by disabled people. This evaluation is straightforward

because the five key aims for fulfilling Lincoln Drill Hall’s social responsibilities are so clearly written.

In the current economic climate, though, they want to look more closely at the Drill Hall’s impact on life in Lincoln and its surroundings. In the coming months, they will use Arts Council England’s toolkit to measure their economic impact and work with Design by Distraction to adapt website technology first developed for the public sector to allow local people to share their experiences of life in Lincoln in a fun, quirky way.

Respect goes to the team at the Drill Hall for daring to make big promises to the people of Lincoln. And even more respect for having the courage to find out for real if they are delivering on those promises. And all on a shoestring too ... ■



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