

Taking the drama out of marketing theatre

A case study of the MANPAC Theatre Strategy

The Mandurah Performing Arts Centre is an icon for the performing and visual arts in the Peel Region with high quality facilities including the Boardwalk Theatre and the Fishtrap Theatre.

Each year, Manpac presents more than 300 performances across the categories of theatre, film, musical theatre, classical music, contemporary music, tribute music, dance, circus, amateur and community work and special events and more than 400 other events. It sees more than 80, 000 performance attendances per annum and more than 120,000 other attendances.

Known as the region's premier indoor live performance space, the venue programmes very high quality work that ranges from Australia's highest regarded theatre and dance companies, to international comedy and music, tribute performers on national tours as well as supporting the community's emerging arts talent. It often provides performances available nowhere else in Western Australia.

The Challenge

Like many venues, Manpac found theatre performance to be amongst its most challenging to market. High quality performances often saw small audiences and celebrated drama was often relocated from the main theatre to the small theatre. Despite a database of more than 10,000, audiences to acclaimed work often number less than 100 attendees. This is a common challenge for theatres, and one Manpac wishes to overcome.

Manpac decided to pursue a strategy to analyse the low attendances at theatre, understand the theatre audience and wider audience motivations, and better understand communication and product development to grow theatre numbers and develop a long-term theatre strategy.

The Project

Mandurah plans to identify, grow and nurture a theatre audience to increase attendance to quality theatre and reduce the pressure on marketing by looking to a new growth customer relationship management model.

To do this Mandurah agreed to take several steps

- Understand customers on the database and the level of like and dislike for theatre.



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- Identify were the profiles of the typical theatre fan.
- Understand what the inclined (likely to attend) audience know (or think they know) about theatre.
- Understand what the disinclined (unlikely to attend) audience know about theatre and how to influence this.
- Determine how theatre aligns with the likes and preferences in entertainment and leisure time.

The results

Preference

A cross sectional quantitative study* in May 2018 across the customer base of Manpac showed theatre with a clearly identifiable audience, being ranked in the top 3 preferences for performances against all categories. The most telling statistic showed around half of those surveyed had a predisposition to see theatre. This well exceeds national statistics (ABS reported 18% of Australians over 18 years saw theatre in the last census). In contrast, there were around 1500 ticket buyers registered on the ticket database (representing 2% of the immediate population of 80,000). This represents a large disparity between preferences and actions and this needed closer scrutiny.

The research challenge was to understand the disparity between preferences and actions in terms of interest in theatre vs propensity to purchase tickets.

*electronic research was sent to all database customers who provide permission to be contacted providing a 15% response from those who access the survey giving a margin of error of 5%. It should be noted the sampling method of electronic research would have skewed the sample towards middle aged and younger markets and away from seniors to some extent. The demographic age sampling showed an even mix of ages the area but it actually has a very high senior population.

Profile

Whilst there was a wide range of people who attended theatre research showed these as the typical traits of a Manpac Theatre attendee.

- Female
- Age – 50 + below retiring age to early retiring age
- She also likes musical theatre and comedy
- She is likely to be recently retired or if still working closing in on retirement
- Socialising is her number one past time
- She is most often a consumer of non-commercial tv
- If she had children they have grown up and moved on
- More than 50% of her information comes from traditional sources word of mouth, point of sale, printed press, referral although she is an active email user



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- She is not a big user of social media
- She wants choices on how to research and book – but will tend to favour on-line for both.

Analysis

To fully explore customer behaviour Manpac conducted 3 focus groups to provide in depth analysis on a number of things, namely;

- What does this audience know about theatre and Manpac—or what do they think they know?
- How do those perceptions align with the audience’s entertainment and purchasing priorities?
- Do our Manpac marketing materials attract attention to theatre? What messages do they send?

The groups were as follows:

Group1 - inclined customers (one group)

Objective: to understand what makes someone choose theatre at Manpac and what are preferences in the experience of the event.

Group 2 – disinclined customers (two groups)

Objective- What are the main things that prevent someone attending theatre at Manpac and what is it that makes them choose other genres.

Findings

Group 1

The inclined were strong venue loyal, frequent visitors who were part of the patron programme and predisposed to most types of theatre. The group produced no new findings but confirmed a theatre audience is engaged, diverse and motivated. The challenge is how does the venue grow this loyal target market.

Group 2 and 3

The first key observation is that despite the fact that these groups were disinclined to theatre and more likely to see other genres many had tried theatre, and only a small number were completely opposed to theatre. There was some terminology confusion between theatre and musical theatre but overall, despite being largely disinclined many showed great potential as a target market for theatre.

The second key observation was that most attendees were making safe choices when booking performances. The venue was meeting needs with a range of contemporary music and musical theatre choices as well as other performance types. It appeared that, as theatre marketing appears in the same collateral as



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all genres, it was not exerting much influence against the marketing focused mainstream entertainment show. Attendees were not disinclined as much as they were spoilt for choice and chose what was familiar to them. Theatre is competing poorly against familiar performance types. To succeed theatre needs to communicate better and not get lost amongst dozens of familiar genre messages

Lastly, there is an entrenched non-theatre market, and comments about theatre would suggest they do not make a strong market and would not have their perceptions changed easily.

Strategy

MANPAC resolved, based on this research, to commit to a long-term strategy to build theatre audiences.

The strategy would take into account three key learnings of the groups;

- 1) There is a potentially bigger audience for theatre and lower opposition to attending theatre than is often expected – and the job of any strategy is to reach out to this audience
- 2) Theatre can be lost in the familiarity and persuasiveness of the marketing of the two high preference genres, musical theatre and contemporary music.
- 3) The entrenched, inclined theatre loyal group needs growth. Marketing need to target reach beyond the database into those not visiting the venue.

The actions to be taken need to take in other learnings from research.

- 1) The key target audience is a female, middle aged to retired.
- 2) The product development needs to consider post show experiences
- 3) The pricing strategy needs to attract product trialling, reward loyalty and enable customers to be advocates.
- 4) The communications for theatre need to have a strong marketing element and be delivered as a singular product, not amongst competing entertainment choices.
- 5) The communication must reach inside and outside the database to attract theatre sales.

The strategy will proceed with these recommended elements and priorities

Element	Explanation	Considerations
Intelligence	Gather demographic and psychographic information on target market. Build a profile and maintain a dialogue with customer.	What other intelligence do we need? E.g. Non-users feedback





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Programming	This strategy needs to take place when there is sufficient theatre programmed to give it longevity and choice	Is the programme ready for the strategy
Branding	Create a branded solution for the strategy that will identify theatre goers as a specific group	Create a branded solution – working name only – <i>Take a walk on the wild side</i>
Reposition	Any identity needs to consider challenging the widely-held view that theatre is inaccessible and provide an identity that positions an attractive entertainment prospect	Is theatre the best terminology? How do we name this arts offering? Is drama a better descriptor than theatre?
Repackage	Communications on theatre need to look beyond marketing packs to fully address the unique selling proposition of each performance	How do we recraft the theatre communications for novice/new markets?
Loyalty	Initial communications and pricing will aim to confirm or reignite the loyalty of previous theatre goers in the MANPAC database	What records should be targeted?
Acquisition	Marketing strategy needs to aim to grow the base delivering targeted communications to non-theatre buyers beyond the channels already used	What acquisition channels do we use?
Cross selling	As musical theatre was a strong category for database theatre goers direct communication will be made to musical theatre audiences	How do we engage more musical theatre fans?
Upselling	Overall the strategy will aim to increase yield on existing and new theatre audiences – in multi show packaging	What season pricing can we offer? -
Referral	The strategy needs to incentivise theatre audiences to bring a friend – activating audiences as ambassadors	What referral pricing can we offer?
Network	The strategy is dependent on developing two way partnerships with organisations with like target markets - i.e. retirement homes/beauty industry	How do we engage partners?
Channelling	Target areas that have a high propensity to be customers	Can more targeting be achieved in high usage areas outside the venue general catchment? (e.g.



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Evaluation	The product will be evaluated on sales and yield in theatre shows in 2018/2109 with a target to be agreed	
Listening	Making use of programmed regular feedback to assist in developing the strategy	What is the tracking mechanism

Next steps

Once the programme is agreed, CircuitWest and the Manpac team will craft a database and acquisition strategy specific to theatre.

Timetable

This strategy will be rolled out in the first half of 2018/2019.

