AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

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1. What is Audience Development

Since the first large-scale nationwide research to measure participation in the arts commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1986, attention has been focused on the relatively low numbers of people from particular groups in society who attend the arts and the pre-dominance of white middle class and middle aged people. Audience development is seen as a way of expanding and broadening audiences for the arts. Although the term is being used widely within the arts community, there is no shared idea of what it actually means.

A survey of the directors of the UK's audience development agencies resulted in the following definitions:

- More people more often

- It's the same as marketing

- Marketing is about size; audience development is about range

- Building audiences

This has presented difficulties for those engaged in audience development and the organisations funding it so the following inclusive definition was developed after extensive research commissioned by the Arts Council of England (ACE):

> *The term audience development describes activity which is undertaken specifically to meet the needs of existing and potential audiences and to help arts organisations to develop on-going relationships with audiences. It can include aspects of marketing, commissioning, programming, education, customer care and distribution.*
>
> *With 'audience' encompassing attenders, visitors, readers, listeners, viewers, participants and learners.*
>
> Phil Cave, Head of Audience Development, Arts Council England

Rick Rogers expands this definition and in so doing highlights the range of purposes and outcomes involved in this all-encompassing term:

> *Sustaining and expanding existing or regular audiences or visitors, creating new attenders and participants, and enhancing their enjoyment, understanding, skills and confidence across the art forms.[1]*

Like marketing, the purpose of audience development is to fulfil the organisation's objectives, whether they are artistic, financial or social or a combination of one or more.

1.1 Differences in approach

ACE commissioned research[2] identified that there were widely differing views among those involved in audience development, usually education workers, artists and marketers.

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[1] Rogers, Rick, *Audience Development: collaborations between education and marketing* (London: Arts Council of England, 1998), p. 1

[2] Maitland, Heather, *A Guide to Audience Development*, 2nd ed. (London: Arts Council of England, 2000)

- *Education workers* largely focus on the development of the individual and on the art form as a whole. Their work usually involves participation, although attendance at events may also be involved. When they evaluate projects, they tend to measure the quality of the individual participant's educational experience and the development of their understanding of the arts. The results they want do not necessarily involve the worker's own organisation but may benefit other arts organisations in the long term e.g. "creating the audience of tomorrow". Many people see these long term results as unmeasurable.

  Artists tend to focus on improving audiences' understanding of their work. They wish to bring more people into contact with the work but are often particularly concerned with finding "the right audience" who will best appreciate it. These projects often lack clear objectives and the results are not evaluated.

  Marketers look for results that directly benefit their arts organisation. They aim to affect a change in the attitudes, understanding and behaviour of both existing audiences and non-attenders. Their aims almost always involve attendance although this may be in five or even ten years' time. Their projects tend to be carefully targeted at specific groups of people and have clear objectives. Most marketers are aware of the need to monitor and evaluate audience development projects but research shows that many do not do so because of time pressures[3].

For each of these three types of arts worker, the intention, objectives, process and practice of audience development are different, and each has a different kind of experience to offer audiences and participants. All three approaches are regarded as equally valid and are not mutually exclusive but the differences do cause problems in the planning and evaluation of audience development. Different members of an organisation can have a fundamentally different understanding of what the same project is trying to achieve. The programmer of a visual arts organisation might, for example, see an audience development project as creating opportunities for developing artists to have an exhibition of their work. The marketer might take a longer term view of the organisation's work and see it as a means of creating a sustainable market for the work so that its creator can earn a reasonable living and similar exhibitions will gain a bigger audience in the future. Each is likely to define and measure the success of the project differently and will wish to prioritise the allocation of resources accordingly. This means that a formal planning process that involves all of these roles within an organisation is essential to identify and resolve these potential differences in perspective.

1.2 The relationship between marketing, education work, programming and audience development

Arts workers and funders are currently engaged in a debate about the differences between audience development and education or audience development and marketing that seem destined never to come to a resolution. Perhaps these attempts to find the perfect working definition are unhelpful. There is general agreement that programming, education and marketing each have particular experiences, techniques and processes that can make a unique contribution to audience development. Not all education work, however, is audience development and not all audience development is education work and, likewise, not all marketing is audience development and not all audience development is marketing. We can summarise the interaction between these different 'toolkits' of experiences, techniques and processes like this:

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[3] Maitland, p. 5

Artistic

Education

Audience Development
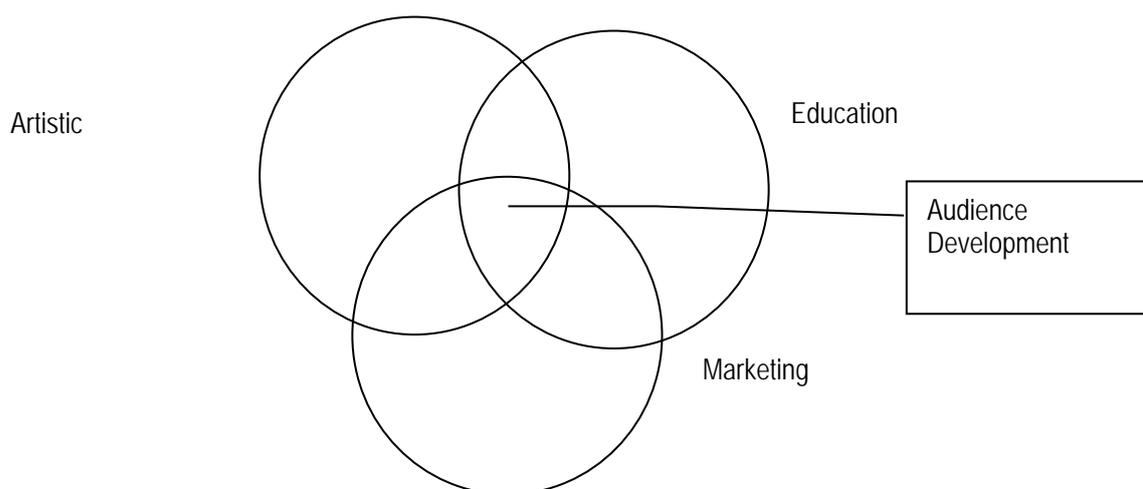
Marketing

The relationship of the marketing and education toolkit can be represented as follows:[4]

Marketing

High   High

Numbers of appropriate people   Quality of experience (interactivity)

Low   Low
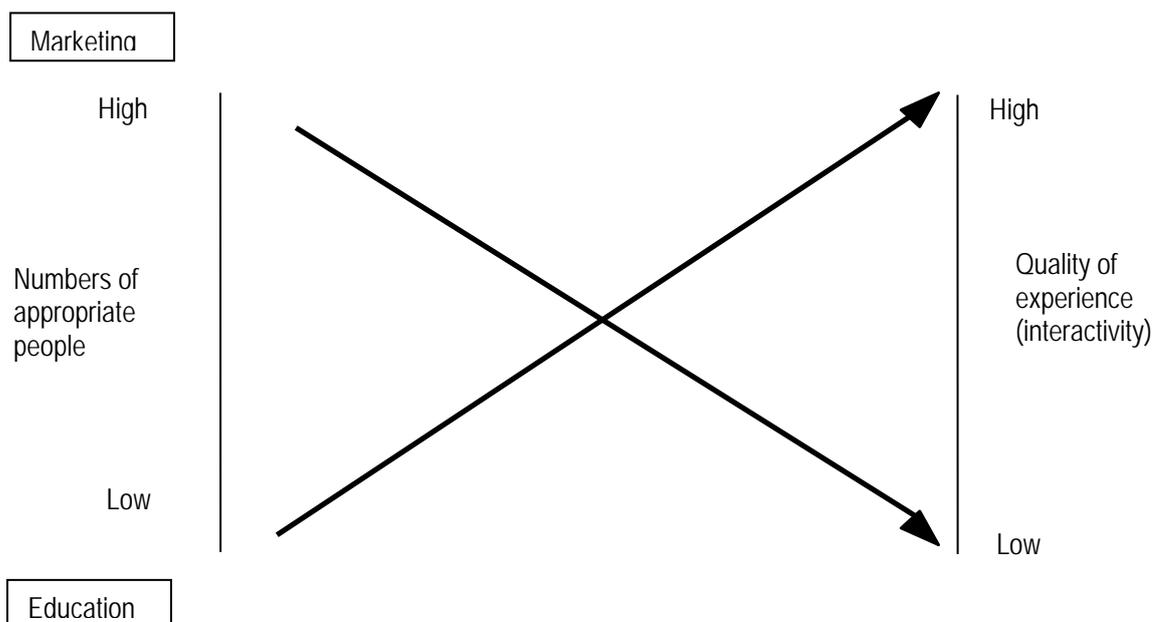
Education

The education toolkit can offer a highly personal, in-depth experience of the arts to relatively small numbers of people (an interactive process). The marketing toolkit can persuade very large numbers of people to get involved in the arts but can't usually offer that depth of experience (a communicative process). Both approaches are necessary to make a significant impact in a community.

The Arts Council of England funded research into audience development found that effective projects were always part of a long term strategy developed jointly by the artistic, education and marketing functions of an organisation even though an individual project might be run by just one of those functions.[5] This means that to develop audiences effectively, an organisation needs also to be engaged in effective marketing as the

[4] Roberts, Anne, *Nothing by Chance: qualitative research into attendance at new and contemporary film and theatre at Warwick Arts Centre*, (Coventry: Warwick Arts Centre, 1997)

[5] Maitland, p. 6

same 'toolkit' of processes and techniques are applied to both. Similarly, the education function of an organisation needs to have an effective education 'toolkit'.

2. Types of Audience Development

Arts and cultural organisations carry out audience development for different reasons. Overall, though, they see developing audiences as a way of achieving their objectives, whether these are artistic, financial, social or all three.

Nobuko Kawashima identified four types of audience development by analysing the groups of people projects are aimed at and the kind of things they are being encouraged to do.[6].

1. **Cultural Inclusion** aimed at the people least likely to attend the arts to fulfil social objectives.

2. **Extended Marketing** aimed at potential and lapsed attenders to achieve financial and artistic objectives.

3. **Crossover** (taste cultivation) to persuade the existing audience to try something new to achieve artistic, financial and educational objectives.

4. **Audience Education** aimed at increasing the knowledge and appreciation of the arts by existing audiences.

These categories illustrate the multitude of intentions, objectives, processes and practices included under the catch-all banner of audience development. They also highlight the two possible approaches to increasing involvement in the arts. The first type of audience development (Cultural Inclusion) is most effective when approached via a framework in which the starting point is not the cultural product but the needs, interests, experiences and levels of knowledge of the participants themselves. The final three are products of the desire to make culture more widely available where the product is seen as inherently good in itself.

There is a fundamental difference between these two approaches. Cultural Inclusion projects require significantly more investment of time, energy and money and have a far lower return on that investment than those that aim to develop existing audiences and those with a predisposition to attend. Their focus is the individual not the art.

The term audience development is problematic because it encourages arts organisations and funding bodies to prescribe and apply a single undifferentiated approach and a single set of benchmarks for the assessment and evaluation of audience development projects. This is why we need to take a rigorous approach to planning audience development projects – only then can we be clear what we are trying to achieve, who we want to get involved and how they will benefit.

2.1 Who should be involved?

Audience development projects only work if they are part of a long term strategy for audience development which is developed jointly by the artistic, education and marketing functions of an organisation.

Even though one person may be undertaking most of the work on a particular audience development project, every member of staff and volunteer needs to be involved and fully briefed.

> *A repertory theatre aimed to increase the number of school parties attending performances by offering a bigger discount and expanding the teacher's mailing list. They doubled the number of school children at evening performances. Neither the theatre nor the school parties were happy with the result as other members of the audience complained about the children's behaviour and teachers were not made to feel welcome. A series of meetings between front of house staff, the box office, the marketing department and teachers resulted in school groups being offered seats in blocks which were easier to supervise than long rows; guidelines for teachers to discuss with pupils*

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[6] Kawashima, Nobuko, *Beyond the Division of Attenders vs Non-Attenders: a study into audience development in policy and practice (Coventry: University of Warwick, 2000)* p. 8

before the event; and a better understanding by the stewards of the needs of large numbers of young people.

2.2 Building cultural competence

We assume that everyone is a potential arts attender or participant and that if we remove the physical, financial, psychological and social barriers which stop people attending or participating in the arts then the sections of the community currently under-represented will start to attend or participate.

The concept of cultural competence is helpful in understanding why a different approach to audience development is needed for Cultural Inclusion projects as opposed to those that seek to target existing, lapsed and potential audiences.

There is a body of academic work, most notably by Bourdieu, which argues that people need to be trained to enjoy the arts because a set of unique skills are needed to decode the messages within cultural artefacts and events. Without an understanding of these messages, the arts experience is meaningless and alienating.

Those who already attend the arts have been handed down these consumption skills by their immediate family or have been taught them at school. Individuals belonging to social groups currently under-represented among audiences and participants are less likely to have access to these decoding skills and to information about arts events which existing attenders gain through their own social networks (i.e. word of mouth).

Taste Cultivation and Audience Education projects seek to extend the cultural competence of existing attenders but they are working with people who already have at least a basic level of competence. Some cultural products need more competence to decode than others so these audiences are able to understand and appreciate those that require a lower level but need support to enjoy others.

Programming therefore plays an important role as presenting arts events that require less competence to decode is an effective way of ensuring it is accessible to a broader audience. Ineffective arts marketing, however, can make even this kind of work inaccessible by communicating about the event in a way that still requires a high level of cultural competence.

Experienced → *Inexperienced*

Think & discuss

CORE

A 'real' experience

Live

Eat & drink

Comfort

Nearby

Well known

Best seats

Close to stage

An occasion

The work itself

Ease of booking

More than entertainment

Reviews

Dress up

The artists

Nice building

Good night out

Parking

Value for money
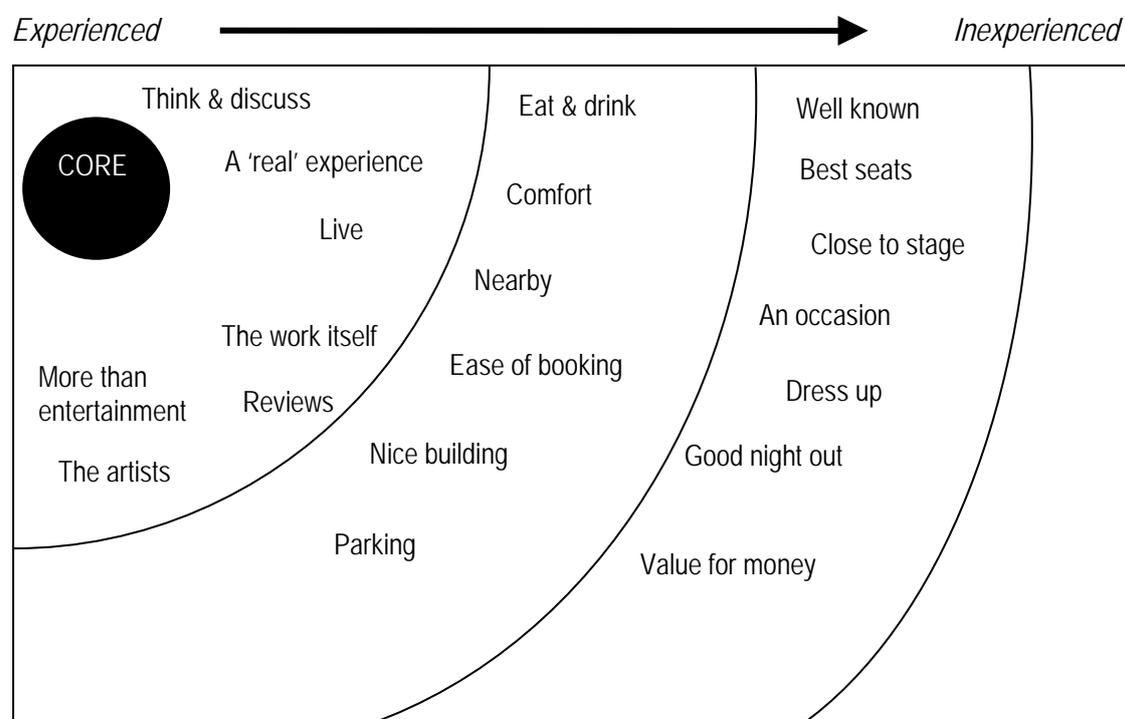
Millward Brown, Market Research Index for the Arts, (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1989)

The removal of the physical, psychological and social barriers to attendance by potential and lapsed attenders through Extended Marketing is relatively effective because the target groups already have the cultural competence to understand and appreciate the particular arts event on offer. In recent years, arts organisations and funders have focused on improving physical access to arts buildings, the geographic availability of arts activity, the way that they communicate with potential attenders and participants, the customer care that attenders or participants experience once they make contact with the organisation, and on providing discounts to disadvantaged groups. These initiatives have certainly improved the experience of existing attenders and encouraged people already pre-disposed to attend or participate to do so.

Unfortunately, audience development projects that focus on the removal of barriers have been much less successful in encouraging sustained attendance and participation by those groups which are traditionally under-represented.

> *'Many non-attenders of arts events have no understanding or familiarity with the arts. They fear that they will not understand, feel overawed, unintelligent and inferior and have no reason to believe that they are going to enjoy themselves'* [7]

An example is Sheffield Theatre's *How Much?* project which was based on the assumption that price was the primary barrier to attendance by young audiences and so made tickets available at £3.50, on a level with the price of cinema tickets. The team rapidly discovered that the primary barrier was the art itself . Attendance by young people could be increased from 7% to 32% of the audience by programming work that reflected their lives and interests and telling them about it in a way that sparked their imagination. The cost of tickets was a secondary barrier.

Audience development targeted at non-attenders who currently do not see the arts as relevant or meaningful must centre on developing cultural competence from a zero base. This requires a much bigger and consistent investment of resources over a much longer time. The formal education sector, in partnership with arts organisations, has the key role to play in achieving this with future generations. The arts infrastructure, however, has to take responsibility for those who are not currently in formal education through Cultural Inclusion.

Most audience development projects are relatively short term and organisations seek to target a wide range of communities in that time. This doesn't help the effective transmission of cultural competence to those involved in Cultural Inclusion projects.

3. What is an 'audience'?

Arts organisations have found that projects aimed at the under-represented sections of the community can be highly effective if they encourage people to experience creativity for themselves – to participate rather than attend. Peter Booth goes further:

> *for some sections of the community the whole notion of the arts as a 'paid for' experience taking place in designated arts buildings is a non-starter.* [8]

Many arts organisations seem confused about what they supposed to achieve with audience development. They say that they feel strong pressure to bring a broad cross-section of the community into the actual gallery or auditorium to experience the arts as attenders rather than as participants. Worse, many believe that the most value is placed on projects that seek to bring together the most difficult product and the most unlikely audience. Rick Rogers, however, is clear that this is not necessarily appropriate and that audience development goals are better served by a broader definition of 'audience':

[7] NOP Market Research, Report on Qualitative research into the public's attitudes to "the arts", (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1991)

[8] Booth, Peter, *Access to the Arts*, Discussion Document for the National Arts and Media Strategy (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1991), p. 8

It is essential for an organisation to define what it means by its "audience". Many people involved in educational events may never get to a performance or show. If the education work becomes too focused on developing audience in terms of people coming to the venue or main event, an organisation might ignore those unable to attend because of their economic, social or personal circumstances.[9]

Some Scottish arts organisations have resolved this question by targeting particular disadvantaged groups with tailored projects that only involve attendance at a conventional arts event if this is appropriate to their needs. This work uses the art form as a tool for personal development and is usually clearly separated from the organisation's core artistic product.

4. What makes successful audience development?

Research into audience development in 167 arts organisations in Scotland by Tim Baker and Heather Maitland in 2000 identified this checklist of key factors for success:

- ❐ Those involved in planning and delivering audience development are clear how the activity contributes to their organisation's overall objectives
- ❐ Projects are part of a long-term plan developed through dialogue between the artistic, education and marketing functions of the organisation
- ❐ Clear aims and measurable targets are set in advance
- ❐ Audience development activity is addressed at a distinct target group or groups and there is a close match between their needs and interests and the benefits the chosen arts event or activity has to offer
- ❐ Those involved collect and analyse information about the target group to use in decision making
- ❐ There is a process of consultation with the target group or groups
- ❐ The elements of the marketing mix are tailored to suit the needs , experiences and personal circumstances of the target group or groups, including the product surround and where appropriate, the core product.
- ❐ Activity is evaluated
- ❐ The organisation sustains their relationship with the target group or groups in the long term.

Notice how similar the basics principles of successful audience development are to those for effective marketing.

5. Audience development in practice

Step 1: Choosing who to work with

Too many audience development projects seem to involve organisations first of all thinking up exciting events or ways of working and only afterwards looking around for sections of the community to which to apply them. Audience development is about enhancing and broadening specific individuals' experiences of the arts and so we need to start with those individuals.

Ideally, identify the section of the community you want to work with first (the target group}. You need to identify a target group of people whose perceptions, behaviour and needs are sufficiently similar to allow you to talk to them effectively in the same way.

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[9] Rogers, Rick, *Audience Development: collaborations between education and marketing* (London: Arts Council of England, 1998), p. 3

Then create or choose the arts event that is most likely to interest them and to overcome the barriers which currently stop them attending.

You may be in a situation where the arts event has already been chosen. Find a target group whose needs and interests closely match the benefits the arts event has to offer. A close match is important - without it, you will not be able to persuade your target group to attend or participate. If you can't find this match then it is better not to use this event to develop audiences.

Step 2: Finding out about your target group

You need to collect the information that will help you plan an effective audience development project. Before you can choose your target group, you need to know what your existing audience and the local population are like. To overcome the barriers that stop people attending the arts, you need to know what they are. To help someone make an informed choice about attending or participating in an arts event, you need to know what information they need. You do not need limitless resources: your organisation will already have collected some useful information and much of what you need will be available through research published by other organisations.

Step 3: Making use of the information

You need to pull out the key facts from the information you have collected. These will help you shape your project. Also find out about audience development projects carried out by other organisations and aimed at similar target groups -whether these were successful or not.

Your knowledge and understanding of your target group is the single most important factor in making your planned audience development project a success.

Use the information you have collected about your existing audiences, attenders or participants and about your local population to:

- choose the right target group

- identify the barriers to attendance you need to overcome

- choose the right product for your target group

- give potential attenders or participants the information they need to make an informed choice

- work out what you are going to say to your target group, how you are going to say it and how you are going to get your message across.

Step 4: Choosing the arts event

You need to choose or even create an event which is likely to interest the target group and to overcome the barriers which currently stop them attending. Some of the most exciting audience development projects have taken an imaginative approach to the arts event at their centre.

Do not choose events simply because you are finding it difficult to reach your attendance target. If your existing attenders or participants are staying away in droves, you are unlikely to persuade a non-attender to come along.

Step 5: Planning the project

For your project to be a success, everybody involved must know why they are doing it and what, exactly, they are trying to achieve. Arts organisations often invest heavily in audience development projects but most are unable to say whether they were worth the investment, whether they are worth doing again or even whether they worked at all. The solution is to make sure you plan effectively. Set clear aims and specific objectives, and work out beforehand how you are going to evaluate the results.

Step 6: Consultation

Before you carry out the project, you need to check that it stands a good chance of working. Try out your ideas on your own colleagues, your counterparts in other organisations and people with the relevant experience in your Regional Arts Board or local authority.

Consult the target group. There are a number of ways to do this:

- bring together a group of eight to ten individuals from the target group to talk informally about your ideas
- employ a professional to undertake more formal research
- talk to a number of community leaders or other key figures individually
- ask group leaders such as teachers or youth leaders to talk to small groups of their members
- visit a meeting of your target group in their usual gathering place
- try out your project on a small group of consenting "guinea pigs" from your target group.

Step 7: Implementing the project

Attention to detail is important at this stage. This will ensure that there are no unexpected problems that might prevent your target group attending or participating -or stop them coming back again.

There are seven areas you need to think about:

Product: this doesn't just mean the art that is on the walls or on stage -audiences and attenders see every aspect of their visit as part of the product you offer.

Price: many audiences see comparatively high prices as an indication of good quality, while several target groups find that they cannot afford normal ticket prices. A good way of balancing these two issues is to set top price tickets as high as the market will stand but then offer substantial discounts to the target groups who find that price is a barrier to attendance.

Place: where your event takes place can be a barrier to attendance by your target group. Many projects involve a special effort to make the first time attender feel more at home.

Promotion: describes how you communicate with your target group and the offer you are making them. It is essential that you take into account everything you have found out about your target group to make sure that you are telling them the things that will persuade them to attend or take part in your event. Ensure that you have chosen a communication method that will be effective and that you are using an appropriate tone of voice. People: many non-attenders feel alienated by theatres, concert halls, museums and galleries. Your front-line staff are the people who can make them feel at home. Some organisations have made sure that their youngest stewards are on duty to welcome participants in a project aimed at young people.

Process: you need to check every step of the process that your potential attenders or participants will have to follow to get involved in your event. Is it clear what they should do if they are interested? Will they be able to find the venue? Do all the box office staff know about any special offers?

Physical Evidence: arts organisations offer an experience rather than a tangible product. Our attenders and participants cannot be sure they will enjoy our event until after they have experienced it. This means we must make sure that everything we do or say reassures our target audience that we are offering something that is of good quality eg the quality of our printed material, the appearance of the foyer, the efficiency of the box office.

Step 8: Sustaining the relationship

Just because someone has been targeted by an audience development project does not mean that they have become an arts attender or participant. Becoming an arts attender involves a series of steps:

Regular attender or participant

⇧

Reattendance

⇧

Trial attendance

⇧

Awareness

We must actively persuade people to take the next step. This means keeping in touch so that we can develop our relationship with them.

Step 9: Evaluating the project

Evaluate the immediate aftermath of the project. Did your project achieve its targets? Was it an effective use of your resources? How did it contribute to your organisation's overall artistic, social and financial objectives? Did it achieve any unexpected results -'spin-offs'? What did your target group ting of their experience? Is there anything you would have changed? Is it worth doing again? You also need to work out what have been the medium and long-term effects on your target group's arts attendance or participation.