

theatr ardudwy

AudienceEngagement Toolkit

Having an Audience Engagement Toolkit is not the only way to create an audience focused organisation, but it helps us to have a toolkit as a guide for the whole creative team to develop new pathways to engage with our audience collaboratively. From marketing staff to volunteers, to the cleaner to the technician, everyone has to be involved in the creative process of finding out how to engage our audience to turn out on a cold and dark night in the middle of winter. We find that some of the best audience enagagement practises happen in just this inclusive way.

It’s both an exhilarating and terrifying way to work, and here are some of the things we have learned in the past year, during our Lle Ni /Our Space Audience Engagement project.

1. **To be passionate about our product:**

It might be a story we love, a local issue, an injustice that enrages us (example:the ongoing closure of our local bridge) or a question we can’t stop asking – It is important to make sure we have chosen a starting point that engages us. This kind of openness and curiosity will keep us alive to new possibilities, make us fearless when things get tough, and ensure that we are always digging deeper. If we don’t care, why should our audience?

1. **Do our research well:**

The more we know about our starting point, the freer our imagination will be. Research nourishes good creative solutions and provides a huge wealth of material from which to begin, and gives authenticity to our final production or project. The latter is important; if an audience questions the world we create, it’s almost impossible for them to relax into the fantasies we weave. Of course, if we are creating a clowning show or a Panto we can ignore all of the above; as ignorance will be bliss.

1. **Get our information out there as soon as possible:**

Nothing makes us work harder than the prospect of public humiliation. Without the pressure of a public reading or work-in-progress night, we might not create anything. Early previews will stop us from over-thinking, get us doing, allow us to test our material and (hopefully) build a buzz for the show. If premature exposure sounds too terrifying, we can always invite supportive friends into our rehearsals. ( We have done this with Tanja Råman, and most recetnly with Mair Tomos Ifan’s ‘Y Ladis’ and Kapow Dance, and we are currently busy preparing the launch/premier of a new film release with our Off Y Grid project screening Ate de Jong’s new film ‘Love is Thicker than Water’).

1. **Unite the whole team around a common purpose:**

We have learned that it is important to set aside some time early on to explore everyones objectives for working on a particluar project. Then, as a team, we write a unified mission statement for the project/show/venue. This might range from complex international collaborations to simply wanting to create a joyous evening of fun – it might even change as the project moves forward. This provides us with an essential framework against which we can judge every decision we make and it also helps to ensure that everyone is travelling in the same direction.

1. **Keeping an open mind:**

Few things choke creativity more than our own clever ideas about what we think will work. It is good to sometimes admit that we know nothing. We try to keep an open mind and listen attentively to the talented artists and people with whom we are priviledged to be working. The smallest comments can spark Eureka moments, and we have learned that there really is no such thing as a bad idea. We must remember that as long as we are venturing into the unknown, there is no such thing as failure. Everything at Theatr Ardudwy has been new and untested so far, and as we have moved forward, we have had to deal with a new crisis after another crisis, which has taught us to keep an open mind to new possibilities and unusual solutions.

1. **The importance of story is relative:**

Some people swear that story is everything, but it really depends on the project/show. If we are adapting a pre-existing narrative, the story will undoubtedly be high on our priorities. But sometimes it will only emerge once we start connecting the material we have created, to a specific location or aimed at a particular audience group. It is important to stay flexible, and adapt the story if necessary.

1. **Always look for counterpoints:**

If our subject matter is serious, we try and look for the moments of humour (example: The Chickenshed Survivors Domestic Abuse Project). If our subject matter is easy, we try and look for the complex. Juxtaposition is always desirable, and makes everyting more interesting. There is no comedy without tragedy.

1. **Everyone works differently:**

We don’t want to be prescriptive. We want to make room for people to create material in whichever way works best for them. Some of the best work will come when people are just given time to think, create, write and work on an idea for a period of time. (example: Fragments of Journeys Towards the Horizon, with Audience Development Sculpture project w/artist Tim Pugh).

1. **Don’t be precious:**

We aim to be brave and throw away our plans if they are not helping us to achieve what we wanted to achieve. That sometimes means giving away our best ideas to someone else. We may consider moving our final scene to the start, simplify the plot-line, or mercilessly edit our show to the shortest length possible. We must never regret any cuts or changes to a show; getting the rhythm right trumps everything. (We found this to be very true in both working with Sweetshop Revolution on the ‘ I Loved You and I Loved You’ piece and also on ‘Fragments of Journeys Towards the Horizon’). This is something we are very keen to try and adapt when we are working with local schools, dance groups and amateur dramatics societies as well.

1. **Stay optimistic and enjoy ourselves:**

We have learned the hard way that things will inevitably go wrong, but we must remember to keep looking for the joy and inspiration to keep on creating and sharing with our audience. Stuck in a hole, or on a bridge? Let’s play a silly game or get outside and do something fun. We have learned to hold our staff meetings as ‘Walk and Talk’ meetings on the beach below the theatre. We have been surprised how many good ideas come when we leave our building and use the space around us for inspiration. We have started to invite our collaborators and artists we work with on these journeys, and it has created a whole new work ethos for us.

1. **Experiment, challenge and ask questions:**

We believe that it is important to keep experimenting, challenging our assumptions and keep asking questions. We have learned to never stop gathering and evaluating our data, and never stop trying new things – especially if they scare us. Equally, we should never stop an idea in its tracks because someone utters the dreaded phrase: “we’ve tried that before and it didn’t work.” Instead, let’s assess why it didn’t work last time, revise our plans accordingly and get going. The most important thing is to never stop believing in the positive impact the arts can have on every single person in our community.

1. **Refining our skills:**

We have learned that it is important to keep our marketing skills and knowledge up to date. We try to keep an eye on current trends, good practice and learn from the successes and failures of other organisations, but only if enhanced by genuine new thinking and applications of that knowledge and experience which we can adapt to our own unique challenges and situations. We try not to think like others; we try to encourage our team to voice it’s own ideas. We believe this will enable us to come up with truly engaging campaigns, that help bring the unexpected, surprising and exciting to our audiences in new ways.

1. **Let’s be realistic - but not defeatist:**

We like to go with our heart and then use our heads to make it work practically. In the arts, we so often have to work within the boundaries of our limited resources. We like to think we can be realistic about what we want to achieve and then figure out what’s possible within the limited resources at our disposal. That said, we don’t wish to use the lack of resources as an excuse: we want to remain creative and experimental. We believe in following our instincts and seeing how we can make the plan work with the tools we have to hand. It’s not very uplifting to set ourselves unrealistic targets and feel like we have failed. Our message is - Be realistic, but don’t let reality dampen our spirits.

1. **Set aside time to read inspiring content:**

While there is plenty of good practice within audience engagement out there, we very often don’t have the time to find out about it, or if like us you are working in a rural and isolated community, you can find it difficult to access. We therefore believe that it is important to also keep an eye on what other sectors are up to. We might not always have the same budgets, but the core principles of audience development remain the same. We have been using tools such as TED Talks, FB, Twitter, Instagram and Pocket as a quick way to save links we find from marketing, comms, PR, copywriting, customer experience, design and digital change-makers. These are all useful tools that can help to spark new ideas and solutions which we have adapted and used in our own work.

1. **Know our own tone:**

Whether we are a robot telling the world about our new theatre on a distant comet, or an organisation raising local awareness, the right online identity can be the difference between our audience seeing us as real people or just a brand. Instead we have learned to engage with a real and personal voice to help build trust with our audience. It has been a great way of letting them feel like they are getting to know us and our organisation. There has been a huge increase in our on-line activity (up by 300%, since the appointment of the new Audience Engagement Officer) and social media engagement, as well as a major growth in on-line ticket booking on our newly re-designed audience friendly website.

1. **Don’t reinvent the wheel:**

We often find that we don’t need to know everything, but we need to know how we can find out about things. We have found that there’s no need to reinvent the wheel; we just need to look at our existing channels in new ways.

**The use of social media tools:**

**How digital platforms and social media impact on what we do.**

We have been careful not to treat our use of social media as separate to other marketing tools or think of it as some sort of dark art. As with our own personal lives, the new tools available to us have an impact on pretty much everything we do, but the most significant thing for us has been not how easy it is to contact other people, but how easy it is for them to share their thoughts and ideas with us.

1. Where a few years ago marketing departments would talk “at” people, we now want to use this new technology to create more two-way dialogues. As part of our new website we would would like to create a news blog, where we could post articles and thought pieces from the community, as well as staff, artists, participants and visitors. Our aim would be for it to be an ever-changing collection of differing opinions, approaches and writing styles, which would make it come alive for people.
2. Something that constantly surprises us is that while people are desperately trying to find the next big thing, they forget what’s right under their noses. Analytics and insights may not be shiny new playthings, but they are incredibly useful and we have found that it can help make what we do so much better. We would like to be able to invest more time in understanding what Google Analytics can tell us about what’s working well or underperforming. We want to look at our Facebook Insights to see what people are interested in and pay specific attention to not just how many people are tweeting about us, but what they are actually saying. Not so long ago, people would have given their right arm for this sort of information, so we should definitely take advantage of it, where and how it is available to us.
3. While doing all of the above, we don’t want to forget about the traditional methods of marketing, which we find still hold a lot of value in today’s connected world of emails, because a large percentage of our audience are of the older generation and are not necessarily digitally connected. Also, our broadband and mobile networks in this area are not as efficient as in the cities (still no 3G everywhere), and not everyone has access to it. We have done our research and made the effort to understand whether the good old fashioned brochures still have a role to play – and we have concluded that they definitely do. We would not be able to operate without email, social networks or websites, but we believe that the physical, printed communications have a renewed feeling of being special and most importantly, make the recipient feel special too.
4. We have found that so many devices and platforms can come and go in the blink of an eye, and it can be a real red herring. The kinds of technology that interests us and that we would find the most useful are the ones that make things better, not just easier or faster. What’s really exciting is how we can become more tailored, targeted and personal in how we communicate with our audience. Technology is absolutely the way forward in this.
5. We believe that our most powerful audience engagement tool is our enthusiasm for what we do. In our industry, you are expected to work hard, learn fast and always maintain a passion for the projects or products you are promoting. It is worth noting that genuinely believing in the transformative power of the arts is a quality that cant be replaced by any fancy digital tool you may have access to.

**The use of YouTube:**

1. We have learned to plan ahead (and more than we think we have to): Like so many other arts organisations we have been going wrong by not being able to plan long-term enough. A lot of us will post a video related to an upcoming performance two weeks or less in advance, which we now know is simply not enough time to generate interest in the video or to maximise the potential long-term benefits of that piece of content within YouTube’s algorithms.
2. We need to build in time to our operation to make use of the tools that are available to us now. We have found that a few minutes of additional work can have a significant effect on the number of people who find our videos and who are more likely to watch them to the end.
3. **Our Objectives:** We want to think very carefully about the objectives we want to achieve for each piece of content we create. It can be difficult to create content that will tick every “opportunity box” but we believe that if we can begin to create a strong suite of regular content that individually targets certain objectives, then we will reap the rewards in the long run.
4. **Content is king:** We always have to try and put ourselves in the shoes of our audience and think about what we would want to see. Content is king and if the content doesn’t cut it then no matter how well we optimise it with end slates, metadata and the rest of it, we won’t see a great uplift. Of course, things change and we must carry on experimenting. The beauty of YouTube is that our subscribers will often let us know if something is good or bad.

**MakingTwitter work for us:**

1. **Continue to develop our audience, and focus on them:** It is no good tweeting about sector issues that aren not of interest to the people who matter – our audience. It is a great way to shed followers and never gain them in the first place. We have decided to keep it local, relevant and interesting.
2. **Our starting point for tweets**: It should always be about what is relevant to our audience, which might not always be what our organisation views as the most important. That is not to say that we can't turn the latter into something our audiences will enjoy and share; it just requires a bit of thought first.
3. **Finding time to tweet:** Due to our lack of capacity we have found that we simply can’t devote a lot of time to twitter, which is why we have developed a strategy of setting aside 10 minutes at the end of the day to check and reply to any messages. This works as long as our followers don't expect us to reply immediately. One thing we can do is to make it clearer in our Twitter biography section that the account is not constantly monitored. We will also look into how we can schedule tweets to go out at certain times. This has worked well for us with mailchimp, and we have started to use the same tools with both twitter and facebook.
4. **Tweeting audience reviews and comments:** It is important for us to retain our integrity when publishing comments, so we aim to publish a representative sample of tweets, including constructive criticism.
5. **Hashtags:** For each show we have been involved with, either as a producer or co-producer we have developed a hashtag (for example, #Aregularlittlehoudini or #stichtungjanvoos, or #Criwcelfbach) and we push content through this in the run up to get users used to seeing the tag. An area where we could do more is to promote hashtags internally (for example, on information screens around the building) and we are now looking into how to do this.
6. **Twitter as a marking tool:** We think Twitter has a dual role in the marketing of a theatre. Firstly, it makes a theatre more personable, which we think helps to engender a sense of loyalty within the audience. If they feel invested in the theatre and they have the opportunity to see the same play in two different locations and can only afford one, they are more likely to go to the one they feel a connection with.
7. **Twitter can act as another channel for our message;** some people may miss communications in other places, but we also think people expect Twitter to provide them with information and exciting additional 'marketing' content, such as rehearsal photos etc.
8. **Listening to our Twitter followers:** We need to be aware of what they are talking about and how we can plug into their current interests? Because it is in real-time, Twitter can feel really fast, so we have got to try and join conversations as they are happening. One week our audience might be interested in "What makes a good film score?" but the next week, the ship has sailed and they are not interested at all. It is all about getting the timing right.

Finally, here are a few of our golden rules, which we have learned about using Twitter:

* **Don't see Twitter as purely a promotional tool.**
* **Don't forget who we are talking to – tweet for our audience, not for ourselves.**
* **Don't tweet when we have nothing to say.**
* **Don't tweet about the weather (unless our venue has closed down because of snow – which is highly unlikely, but useful when we have closed due to circumstances beyond our control) (Although having said that, we do get a lot of likes, when we have tweeted some stunning sunsets).**
* **Don't retweet everything anyone says about us, once or twice is fine – and don't retweet lots of tweets from one person; our followers will follow them by choice if they are interested in what they have to say.**
* **Don't talk at people, talk with people.**
* **Don't mindlessly applaud productions or pieces – when Twitter is a trust-based network, it pays to be selective; when we say something is good, it means we think it is really worth taking note of.**
* **Don't just talk about ourselves – aim to create a conversation and a bit of a debate about the issues and productions that are touring around.**

**Making Facebook work for us:**

1. **Think audience, not brand:** People inevitably and instinctively care about how things relate to them, their lives, their vested interests and so on. We should always be thinking about our audience and not ourselves. It is good to have a personal touch, but it still has to be interesting to our customers.
2. **Facebook v Twitter:** We regard the two very differently and we shape the messages we deliver through each as a result. Our Facebook activity is very events-led, which reflects the interests of the communities who engage with us on the platform. Facebook Insights are also extremely useful. Our local audience tends to use more Facebook, and the sector engagement tends to be more Twitter, so the two have a very different remit for us.
3. Our Twitter account is more general, covering all aspects of our activity, from events to archive posts along with links of general interest and relevant retweets. Facebook and Twitter messages reach differing communities so we tailor posts specifically for each channel.
4. **Engaging young people:** Over the past 10 years, Facebook has built a strong core community whom are very loyal to it. The offer for younger people today is more varied around social media than it was a few years ago so they will want to shop around. That does not mean that young people won't use Facebook anymore, but they may want the offer to be different. This is something we must consider in moving forward in developing our social media strategy.
5. **The future of Facebook for the arts:** Online communication methods are going through some significant changes at the moment as the value of viral media is further understood, consolidated and reflected in the way that platforms like Facebook are programmed. We don't see the platform's usefulness diminishing right now, but we do see that other channels are geared more towards active participation rather than content sharing, which we think will increase in relative value for arts organisations in the future.

**Our golden rules about using Facebook:**

* **Let’s be social and not work in isolation: Like, share and comment on the work of other people whom we rate, and connect with those people and communities.**
* **One piece of content we create will not service all strands of our social media – Let’s make sure we engage with what people are saying.**
* **Experiment: Taking our time to try out ideas and experimenting – always looking to our audience to see how they want to interact with us as an organisation. A Facebook page is a two-way conversation.**

**Finally, let’s keep enjoying our work, and including people in it and keeping the creative conversations going.**