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Dr. Linda Wilks, The Open University

The special challenges of marketing the arts festival

Introduction

Arts festivals encompass a wide range of genres and time scales and are situated in locations across the world in towns and villages, cities and rural greenfield spaces. According to Arts Council England (2012), art forms include dance, literature, music, theatre and visual arts. Multiple art forms may also be brought together or combined into multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary work under the umbrella of festivals. Arts festivals therefore vary substantially in content, although all are anchored to one or more of these art forms.

In Europe, at the time of writing, the festival market as a whole is said to be mature in countries such as France, Germany and Belgium, rapidly developing in countries such as Poland, and emerging in the Baltic countries (Drury 2010). However there have also been signs that festival markets in the UK and Australia in particular may be overheating, and commentators have suggested that niche festivals that know their market are most likely to gain success in future years. In Canada, the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport identified cultural tourism as one of the fastest growing segments of the tourism market, investing \$20m in festival and event programming and activities in 2011 (Ontario Ministry of Tourism Culture and Sport 2012). Consideration of arts festival marketing, including understanding the festival participant in particular, is therefore vital.

An arts festival relies for its success on attracting participants. These participants include everyone from the festival audience and the artists, through festival staff and volunteers, to the sponsors and other funders. The people involved in local businesses and participating businesses will also be key players who should be considered within the marketing planning process, as should others, such as tourism officials and local authority policy makers. This chapter will highlight marketing concepts relating to attracting this range of participants to arts festivals.

Underpinning the practical issues of attracting such a wide range of people to participate in arts festivals, it is also important to gain a deeper understanding of the processes which make marketing arts festivals so challenging. Long *et al* (2004: 4) suggest, under a marketing heading, that it is important to understand the 'personal, shared, conflicting and social meanings that people attribute to their experiences of and participation in festivals', as well as to understand their motivations for attendance. This chapter will therefore highlight relevant theory which will help to explain these processes.

There is a role for marketing management school theory, such as Kotler *et al*'s (2005) market segmentation, targeting and positioning, when considering arts festivals. However, in order to take account of the special features of events, classic approaches need to be

developed and extended through an understanding of an experience marketing perspective, according to Getz (2012). Experience marketing acknowledges that attending an event is about being touched by dreams, emotions and pleasure, rather than focusing on the functional features and benefits of a product (Pine and Gilmore 1999).

Devising effective arts festival marketing strategies requires knowledge of the special nature of the festival, as well as the special nature of the festival participant. This chapter will highlight theories and concepts which will help in understanding both of these elements.

The special nature of arts festivals

The marketing of arts festivals brings special challenges and a range of issues to consider. Falassi (1987) emphasises the role of the festival as a social phenomenon, confirming the notion that people are key to its operation. He acknowledges that the term festival may refer to a wide range of events, from religious ritual to profane feasting. Of particular relevance to this chapter, is Falassi's assertion that festivals may also be cultural events which facilitate the survival of the folk arts, as well as the celebration of the elite fine arts.

The scale of the arts festival should be considered when planning its marketing. Arts festivals may fall into each of the scale-related categories of events proposed by Allen *et al* (2008). The London 2012 Festival, which was the culmination of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, was a mega-event, which reverberated in the global media. A range of arts genres featured in this mega-event, including visual art, music, dance and theatre. The New Orleans Jazz Festival may be identified as a hallmark event, due to its identification with the ethos of the city; a 'major event' could be the Melbourne Festival, one of Australia's flagship international arts festivals; while local and community events, may be illustrated by events such as the annual Orkney Ceilidh Festival in Scotland.

It should also be remembered that arts festivals encompass a range of genres, from so-called 'high' art to 'low' or 'folk' art (Bunting 2005), providing another dimension which will interact with scale. So, although the Cannes Film Festival will attract more visitors than the Belfast Film Festival, for example; and the Salzburg Festival shows opera on a larger scale than the Buxton Opera Festival, similar issues will need to be considered when planning their marketing. Remembering Arts Council England's pinpointing of art forms, it is worth highlighting a range of contemporary festivals which feature each of these art forms. For example, the UK's Hay Festival features literature; dance is the focus of the International Ballet Festival of Miami and the Sónar Festivals in Spain, Tokyo, São Paulo and Buenos Aires; festivals featuring theatre include the Edinburgh International Festival; music festivals include the Glastonbury Festival of Contemporary Performing Arts, Australia's WOMADelaide, and Sidmouth Folk Week in the UK; and the Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art is a key visual arts festivals.

Festivals need to be experienced to be consumed, with delivery and consumption of an event being inseparable (Bowdin *et al*. 2011). This emphasis on the intangibility of event consumption means that experiences of events vary from person to person and from moment to moment, according to Bowdin. Berridge (2007) also reminds event experience designers that all stakeholders, not just the audience, will be receiving the experience, so a range of needs should be identified and taken into account. In line with traditional services marketing theory (Lovelock and Wirtz 2011), event experiences are said to have key characteristics which make their marketing and evaluation more challenging than product-

based marketing. Event demand and supply will be affected by perishability: that is, tickets not sold by the day of the event cannot be used. The delivery of events in real time means that, like other services, their quality may also be affected by variables such as the weather and the health of the performers. These services characteristics bring special challenges to marketing the experience of arts festivals (Bowdin *et al.* 2011).

A further key feature of the event experience which will affect marketing, is that an event is often short-term and 'pulsating' (Van der Wagen 2007), with staffing levels exploding at the point of the delivery of the event. As well as also experiencing the event, being stakeholders or actors themselves, volunteers and staff members, are responsible for the experience of other actors, often with very little training. Thus arts festivals need to attract a large number of temporary staff or volunteers, as well as to manage the expectations of the other actors, particularly members of the festival audience. Some arts festivals are enduring events which have been running regularly for many years, such as Verona's opera festival, started in 1936, while others are relatively new, such as the Fiddle Festival of Britain, which started in 2012. Still others are one-off festivals or clusters of special events, such as the celebrations which will take place in 's-Hertogenbosch in 2016 to mark the 500 year anniversary of the death of Dutch painter Jheronimus Bosch, or the Benjamin Britten Centenary, planned for Aldeburgh in 2013. These different situations also affect marketing planning: enduring festivals may have a set of faithful dedicated attendees and other stakeholders, although retaining this dedication is still a challenge. Newer, or one-off arts festivals, will have the challenge of building audience and supporters from scratch or targeting other sets of event consumers to encourage the transfer of allegiance.

A sense of cultural events being a space where people can escape from their day-to-day life has been identified in several studies as a feature of festivals and a reason for attendance (Schofield and Thompson 2007). Falassi (1987) suggests that festivals can be classified as rituals or rites, which may help arts marketers to understand and make use of this insight into motivation. Examination of Van Gennep's (1960 [1908]) theory of ritual or rites, which was further developed by (Turner 1969), is useful in this respect. Van Gennep identifies the middle or liminal phase of the rite of passage, as a phase when everyday life is suspended, *communitas*, or community feeling, is intensified and attendees seem homogenised. Also of potential relevance to attendance at arts festivals is Turner's highlighting of the third phase of the rite of passage, that of reincorporation to the previous cultural environment with elevated status. Hackley *et al's* (2012) application of Turner's notion of liminality to the X Factor television talent show and its associated events is a useful demonstration of the usefulness of this theoretical concept within the context of events. The authors identify the possibility of transformation to a new status as underpinning the attendance of the contestants, linking this to the reassimilation phase which occurs after the liminoid phase. They also further highlight Turner's three types of *communitas*, identifying existential *communitas*, or liminoid experiences, as the most appropriate for application to the X Factor, due to its characteristically fleeting, 'happening' feel. Although the X Factor show is acknowledged to be at the 'popular' or 'low-brow' end of the event spectrum, Hackley *et al's* analysis demonstrates aptly the application of Turner's and Van Gennep's theories and it is possible to see how these same theories could underpin analysis of all types of arts festival.

On a similar theme to Turner's (1969) concept of liminoid experiences, Bakhtin's (1968 1965) carnivalesque also emphasises escape. Bakhtin's focus on the ways in which the riotous carnival, with its revelling, dancing and music, inverts the patterns of everyday life,

also looks useful as key to highlighting the ways in which arts festivals might affect its social actors. Arts festival audiences look to these events to take them away from their day-to-day worries, sometimes, perhaps due to an event being under the festival umbrella, being encouraged to endure performances which challenge or disconcert them.

Arts festival marketing may draw on the concept of liminality in two ways. First: by understanding the need to emphasise the chance to 'get away from it all' at the festival; and secondly, by highlighting the opportunity to return to everyday life with the means to enhance status with talk of the festival experience. The carnivalesque emphasises the wild element of festivals, where people dress in ways which are unusual for them and arts festival marketers could hint at the chance for people to 'let themselves go' and abandon themselves to passionate sensations. Hackley *et al* (2012) hint, however, that the experience of existential liminality at events such as 'secret' rock festivals, may only be 'supposedly' transgressive or unpredictable. In current times, health and safety regulations prevent arts festival organisers from encouraging lewd or law-breaking behaviour.

Also worth noting alongside these themes, are Lefebvre's (1991 [1947]) theoretical conclusions that, as well as inverting everyday life, festivals also magnify and intensify people's views and perspectives. They are an opportunity to tighten social links and people 'in one fell swoop drew all that was energetic, pleasurable and possible from nature, food, social life and his own body and mind' (Lefebvre 1991 [1947]: 202). Taking Lefebvre's view, arts festivals could therefore be said to encourage people to amplify their identities and cultural tastes, as well as to let themselves go. Brown and Chappel's (2007) discussion of the role of the ritualistic Robbie Burns day celebrations in Australia in maintaining the identity of Scottish-Australians is interesting in this respect, for example. The authors remark that, although the festival is not as excessive in terms of inversions as the carnival in Rio or Trinidad, it does provide the attendees with an opportunity to suspend their daily routines and take part in rituals and festivities.

The special nature of the arts festival participant

Arts festivals have special characteristics which should be considered as part of the marketing environment, as outlined above. The arts festival participant should also be considered using various theories. It should be remembered that arts festival participants are not only the members of the audience, but that all the social actors need to be considered when marketing the festival.

Segmenting arts festival participants

Market segmentation is one way of encouraging exploration of the nature of the arts festival participant. Market segmentation theory facilitates the grouping of consumers who share similar needs (McDonald and Wilson 2002). Once divided into homogeneous groups, consumers may be targeted in an economically effective way using different marketing mix strategies, according to McDonald and Wilson. Various ways of segmenting consumers have been suggested, including by socio-demographics or by consumer need (McDonald and Wilson 2002), by motivation (Bladen *et al.* 2012), by venue preference and attendance patterns (Clopton *et al.* 2006) or by geographical, psychographic or behavioural criteria (Visconti and Hughes 2012). McDonald and Wilson suggest that identifying key discriminating features of the sets of stakeholders, then establishing who buys what and why, are important steps along the way to segmentation, as well as remembering that

segments need constant review over time., Oakes (2003) suggests that applying conventional segmentation strategies to jazz and classical music festivals, for example, will be a useful way to provide cultural organisations and sponsors with a clearer picture of the consumer segment which is attracted to a particular festival.

Market segmentation of this type can be problematic for arts festivals, however. Problems may arise due to the special nature of events, as explained above, as participants are not buying a tangible product, as is assumed in this traditional marketing theory. Further problems with segmentation are pointed out by Visconti and Hughes (2012) who object to the rooting of segmentation, targeting and positioning theory in an assumption that market phenomena are objective and knowable entities. They suggest that preferences are seldom completely homogeneous, nor are they totally fragmented into micro-segments. Rather than traditional segmentation approaches, Visconti and Hughes prefer cultural segmentation, where consumption is acknowledged as the means to express identity, establish social links, live unique experiences and indulge in hedonic moments. Segmentation is co-constructed with the consumer using a dialogic rather than a linear process. Emotional, social and expressive valences of the company's brand are leveraged for positioning. This approach is closer to the experience industry view of arts festivals. Bowen and Daniels (2005), in their study of a music festival in Virginia, USA, grouped attendees based on their motivation patterns, such as 'just being social', or 'the music matters', rather than demographics, for example. Crompton and McKay (1997) also grouped visitors to Fiesta San Antonio, Texas, into motive domains, such as 'novelty/regression', 'recover equilibrium' and 'gregariousness', again showing links to event experience concepts. Similarly, Schofield and Thompson (2007) found novelty and culture to be more important predictors of intention to return to the Naadam Festival in Mongolia than more traditional groupings of gender or age.

With a particular focus on the market segmentation of arts events, further complications are identified by Clopton *et al* (2006). They distinguish between arts events which are product-based, where the product comes first, with the audience identified subsequently, such as a chamber music ensemble; and those which are market focused and therefore start with a target market which may be segmented through traditional means, such as a Broadway production. Both approaches still demand a greater awareness of market segments, however.

Beyond segmentation: postmodern marketing

Towards the end of the twentieth century, marketing management school concepts started to be questioned by theorists with postmodern agendas. Firat and Shulz (1997) suggested that marketing management practitioners would need to reassess their assumptions about their marketing strategies. Postmodernism emphasises the role of consumption rather than production, as well as the propensity for everything to be experienced in the 'here and now', according to Firat and Shulz, both relevant perspectives for consideration of the arts festival experience. Fragmentation of everyday life and the loss of commitment to a single way of being, a 'bricolage' approach, rather an emphasis on multiple representations of selves and preferences is key to postmodernism, contrasting sharply with the assumptions at the base of segmentation theories. The momentary attachments and emphasis on the feel-good factor and the importance of the self-image of postmodernism could also be said to align with the experience of attending the arts festival.

Brown (1995) explains that postmodern marketing is not a new theory, rather a critique of modern marketing theory. Brown's (2006: 213) suggestion that the postmodern world is 'a world of ephemerality, instability, proliferation, hallucination and, above all, chaos', echoes Bakhtin's carnivalesque. Consumers will be loyal to images and symbols in a postmodern world, rather than brands, according to Firat (1995).

Research on arts participants which emphasises the postmodern perspective may be identified. Kershaw (1994) stresses that theatre audiences are not consumers of the art, but rather co-producers of the performance, giving them the chance to become a collective. Similarly, Frith (2000) suggests that in folk or world music the traditional segregation of audience and performer is broken down, reflecting the postmodern condition in the blurring of musical borders and histories.

Firmly rooted in a postmodern perspective, Maffesoli (1996 [1988]) suggests that consumers should be regarded as congregating in groups or 'tribes'. The parameters of tribes may include appearance, fashion, or even ideology, according to Maffesoli (1988: 145), with the emphasis being on 'empathetic sociality' rather than 'rationalized society'. The role of moods, sentiments and emotions, again hints at links to the experience view of marketing arts festivals. Maffesoli's view is that social life goes beyond individualism and is directed by successive feelings of belonging. Building on this approach, Cova and Cova (2002) suggest that community-based 'tribal marketing' is a better approach than a segmentation or a one-to-one approach to marketing.

Illustrating this approach, Matheson (2005) paid special attention to Maffesoli's tribe theories when studying festival producers and consumers of a Celtic music festival. Whilst questioning Maffesoli's dismissal of the relevance of class groupings, Matheson did, however, discover an emphasis on social groupings in the backstage region of festival social space. Willems-Braun (1994) also emphasises Canada's fringe festivals' role in providing the opportunity to express solidarity within social groups, as well as for social identities to be constructed.

Taste classifies: a Marxist approach

Providing a bridge between modern segmentation and a postmodern emphasis on social values, Bourdieu's (1984 [1979]) theory of cultural capital may provide help to arts festival marketers who wish to understand a festival's social actors. Bourdieu's approach defines social spaces within which the actors take up positions relative to the amount of capital they possess. According to Bourdieu, a person's cultural capital is based on their level of cultural knowledge and competencies which enable them to interpret cultural activities and artefacts (Johnson 1993). Cultural capital may take several forms: an embodied state, termed the habitus, which is learned behaviour which has been acquired through transmission in early family life so that it seems instinctive (Bourdieu 2002 [1986]). So, in theory, social actors who grew up in families with a high level of cultural knowledge in evidence will also attain high levels of cultural capital. Bourdieu linked high levels of cultural capital with a taste for the 'high arts', such as opera and complex classical music, and linked it to being a member of the higher social classes. Supporting the development of a habitus, objectified cultural capital, that is the possession of works of art, books and recorded music, also plays its part in helping to socialise family members into a certain type of cultural taste, according to Bourdieu. The third form of cultural capital, educational qualifications and honours, is said to

indicate a taste for formal complexity and abstract representations. Furthermore, arts events are seen by Bourdieu as offering the chance for a select audience to demonstrate its 'distinction' or ability to decipher complex art, as well for its members to show that they are comfortable in such a social setting (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Bourdieu's cultural capital theory therefore suggests that arts festival marketers should tailor their targeting of festival consumers in line with the type of art on offer at the festival. So festivals which programme high art forms should target consumers of higher social class and with high education levels.

Some support for Bourdieu's theories may be found in studies of arts consumers. Waterman (1998b) discovered that the Kfar Blum Chamber Music Festival in Israel became a highly desirable event to attend due to its domination by an audience of elite groups. In another study, of the Salzburg Festival, Waterman (1998a) concluded that people used the arts as a way of establishing social distance between themselves and others. It was not the consumption culture which was important, according to Waterman: rather that attendance was a celebration of group values and shared mythologies. These two studies hint at the importance of social capital theories as another route to understanding the characteristics of arts festival audiences (Wilks 2011).

Keaney (2008), drawing on the UK government-commissioned 'Taking Part' survey of cultural participation, concluded, like Bourdieu, that social status and education were key predictors of attendance at arts events. Keaney also concludes that ethnicity, gender, age and health are important variables, providing a reminder that modern segmentation methods may still be useful in the arts festival sector. Hinting at links to habitus, Keaney (2008: 110) suggests that the data show that psychological barriers to attendance, a 'not for "people like me"', attitude, prevents some people from attending arts events due to the perceived risk involved.

However, Bourdieu's theories are based on data collected in France in the 1960s and more recent studies elsewhere suggest that his conclusions may need to be modified for the present day. Prieur *et al* (2008), for example, found that cultural capital in a contemporary Danish context seemed to be less related to traditional highbrow cultural consumption than in Bourdieu's studies, although the authors did still find that lifestyles had a strong social structuring, rather than a tendency towards individualism. Wilks' (2009) study of music festival audiences in the UK discovered that styling as culturally-competent cognoscenti was not exclusive to fans of high art: attendees of popular music festivals also found complexity in their chosen music and demonstrated high levels of cultural knowledge about that genre.

Beyond Bourdieu's taste classification: the omnivore

Peterson and Kern (1996) and Chan and Goldthorpe (2007) questioned Bourdieu's taste classifications, however, suggesting that higher status consumers tended to have tastes which ranged from high-brow culture to popular culture. Savage (2006) found that highly-educated middle class consumers had a taste for jazz and classical music, but also for rock music. Savage and Gayo (2011) deemed that Peterson and Kern's 'omnivore' therefore marked the demise of the exclusive 'snob' cultures defined by Bourdieu. Savage and Gayo suggest instead that 'expert' taste communities are a better way of understanding the arts consumer.

This therefore contrasts with Bourdieu's conclusion that highly-educated consumers tend to favour 'high-brow' arts. Alongside Bourdieu's social class and education level indicators,

Savage also identified age and ethnicity as determinants of music taste, suggesting that Bourdieu's conclusions need to be modified and extended.

Focus on values

Bourdieu's approach to understanding arts consumers emphasised values, albeit with an orientation to social class. Key to marketing arts festivals could be said to be the aligning of the values of the festival with the values of the festival participant. A match of values is also vital when marketing to sponsors, volunteers and funders. The festival organiser will therefore need to first identify the desired values, then establish whether these values are being conveyed effectively to participants via the festival's symbols and practices. Woosnam *et al's* (2009) study of the Winnipeg Fringe Theatre Festival, for example, concluded that values significantly predict motivations for attending the festival.

Finkel (2010) notes, however, in her picture of the contemporary combined festival landscape, that many festivals appear to not have any strategy to implement the values of increasing audience accessibility or social inclusivity at which they say they are aiming. Finkel suggests that this could be due to apprehension about the possibility of alienating their current audience profile. This highlights the need for festival values to be carefully considered within the marketing process and decisions made about the most appropriate ways in which to position the festival. The smaller festivals in Finkel's study espouse aims and objectives around community inclusion and local identity as ways to attract sponsorship or council funding too. Sharpe's (2008) study of a community music festival also highlights the role of values in festival marketing. The festival was aiming to attract 'mainstream' attendees who might be inspired to adopt the alternative lifestyle practices which were promoted at the festival. However, it was found that, rather than attracting those who might be changed by the festival experience, instead it was dominated by attendees who already adhered to the values which were enacted at the festival.

In a similar vein, Waterman (1998a) explains that festivals often unintentionally communicate a message of who is or is not 'invited' to the festival through the ways in which its brochures and advertisements are designed or worded. It might also be held in isolated places with a lack of affordable accommodation, thus further limiting the type of consumer who can afford to attend. It should also however be remembered that sponsors may actually support this strategy: the usual motivation behind sponsoring an arts festival is to reach potential consumers of their own product. Similarly, Quinn (2003: 330) highlights the ways in which festivals 'carve out landscapes in their own likeness', using them to 'assert particular notions of identity'. Quinn identifies various previous studies of festivals which demonstrated that festivals symbols and myths were constructed in order to promote particular sets of values and practices.

Conclusion

The marketing of arts festivals encompasses many challenges. The arts festival itself has special features which distinguish it from a shelf-based product. Arts festival participants may be examined and theorised in a variety of ways: this field is continually being considered and re-considered. What is clear, however, is that arts festival marketers need to think carefully about their offering, their audience, and the variety of other stakeholders in order to present the festival effectively to the participants and potential participants.

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Recommended further reading

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Key work which analyses the aesthetic choices which people make in relation to the arts.
- Brown, S. (1995) *Postmodern marketing*. Oxford: Routledge.
Ground-breaking text which sets out the case, in an entertaining and readable style, for the incorporation of postmodern perspectives into marketing.
- Cova, B. and Cova, V. (2002) 'Tribal marketing: The tribalisation of society and its impact on the conduct of marketing', *European Journal of Marketing*. 36 (5/6) pp. 595 - 620.
Builds a marketing perspective upon Maffesoli's account of the role of new forms of social connectivity and lifestyle cultures in postmodern consumption.
- Oakes, S. (2003) 'Demographic and sponsorship considerations for jazz and classical music festivals', *The Service Industries Journal*. 23 (3) pp. 165-178.
A demonstration of the application of modern segmentation strategies to researching festival audiences.
- Pine, B. J. and Gilmore, J. H. (1999) *The experience economy: work is theatre & every business a stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
Leading text on the role of experience in the creation of memorable events.

Biographical note

Linda Wilks l.wilks@herts.ac.uk is a Senior Lecturer in Event Management at the University of Hertfordshire. She has published on social and cultural aspects of music festivals and events. She is co-editor of the book 'Exploring the social impacts of events' (Routledge, 2013).