

# Knowing me, knowing you

## Chief Executive of Audiences UK, David Brownlee, on why knowing your audiences makes all the difference



David Brownlee  
Image: Audiences UK

How should arts organisations demonstrate the value of the public funding they receive in increasingly challenging times? I think the answer is in the question: demonstrate your impact on the public. We can argue until we're blue in the face about whether local and national government should fund 'art for art's sake', but if we want to hold onto (or even increase) the sector's share of a radically decreasing pot of public service funding, we need to be able to show individually as organisations and collectively how the public are engaging with and valuing what we do.

To keep creating great art, organisations need to be able to credibly demonstrate two things: Who is (and who isn't) using the services I provide? And what impact is engaging with my organisation having on those individuals?

The first question is fairly easy, although I am still shocked at the number of cultural organisations who can tell you the numbers of people they have had through the door but little else. You should be able to articulate where your customers come from, how often they have come, what is their age profile, what is their income, what is the mix of cultural diversity, and so on.

Just being able to give this detailed overview of who is using your services does two things: it makes you look professional and it shows you are a public focused organisation. It is unlikely to show that your organisation is principally serving the most deprived segments of the population in your area.

But don't lie about your audiences: at some point you will be found out. Do tell a nuanced story about who is engaging with you that reflects the priorities of your audience. If you haven't already, grab a large cup of strong coffee and read the Sustainable Communities Strategy of your Local Strategic Partnership. How do their priorities align with the people you are reaching?

If your audience includes a significant proportion of over 50s, have a hunt to see if there is an Older People's Strategy on your Council's website. How could you be seen to be delivering some of these priorities?

And if 70 percent of your audiences are coming from beyond Local Authority's boundaries, how can you use this to demonstrate that you are having an impact on priorities around economic development, tourism or positioning of the area?

The second question – what impact are we having? – is harder to answer. But not impossible. I'm afraid the days when saying that '95 percent of people enjoyed their visit' is enough to ensure significant public funding in perpetuity are probably over. But there are some excellent tools out there that could give you some powerful evidence of the impact you are having.

The MLA's Generic Social Outcomes framework may not have the snappiest of titles, but it very helpfully guides you through how to gather evidence, capture impact and then use this to make the case for what you do. You can find framework at:

<http://www.inspiringlearningforall.gov.uk/>

Also very impressive is the New Economics Foundation designed 'Capturing the audience experience: a handbook for the theatre', commissioned by the Independent Theatre Council, the Society of London Theatre and the Theatrical Management Association, available at: <http://www.itc-arts.org>

It takes an extremely rounded and robust approach to evaluation of the impact of a theatre experience and should provide you with some really rich information for advocacy and could help you improve your practice.