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Book Section:

Walmsley, B and Franks, A (2011) *The audience experience: changing roles and relationships*. In: Walmsley, B, (ed.) *Key Issues in the Arts and Entertainment Industry*. Goodfellow . ISBN 978-1-906884-20-8

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Chapter 1

The audience experience: changing roles and relationships

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Introduction

This chapter will focus on the changing role of the modern-day consumer and audience member and explore the implications of this development for arts and entertainment organisations. It will begin with an exploration of the ‘experience economy’ (Pine & Gilmore, 1999), demonstrating how the changing needs, abilities and expectations of audiences and consumers are effecting a revolutionary shift in behaviour from the traditional push from producers towards a creative dialogue, where consumers have at least a voice and sometimes even an equal role as artist and co-producer.

The chapter will go on to discuss the rise of what we’ll call ‘creative interaction’, the intermediary space where professional artists, producers, venues and content providers join their audiences and consumers to create or experience something new together. This discussion will be underpinned by a focus on the changing role and mission of arts and entertainment organisations from privileged gatekeepers to facilitators. It will also discuss the various factors and developments that are effecting this change.

The evolving role of audiences will then be explored in detail through a review of the theory and practice of audience development. The changing focus and practice of audience development will be illustrated by case studies on Audiences Central’s Big Picture project and York Theatre Royal’s TakeOver Festival.

The Experience Economy

The term ‘experience economy’ was famously coined by Pine and Gilmore (1999: 2) to describe the new environment of customer focus where ‘experiences are a fourth economic offering, as distinct from services as services are from goods’. Pine and Gilmore trace product development from basic commodities through goods and services to the complex modern realm of the experience. This development is illustrated in Figure 2.1 below.

Figure 2.1: Economic Distinctions

Economic Offering	Commodities	Goods	Services	Experiences
Economy	Agrarian	Industrial	Service	Experience
Economic function	Extract	Make	Deliver	Stage
Nature of offering	Fungible	Tangible	Intangible	Memorable

Key attribute	Natural	Standardized	Customized	Personal
Method of supply	Stored in bulk	Inventoried after production	Delivered on demand	Revealed over a duration
Seller	Trader	Manufacturer	Provider	Stager
Buyer	Market	User	Client	Guest
Factors of demand	Characteristics	Features	Benefits	Sensations

Source: (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 6).

The terminology employed in this table illustrates the different expectations demanded of organisations by consumers in the experience economy. Notable developments from services to experiences include a focus on the personal, an expansion of distribution from short-term to long-term and a shift in demand from benefits to sensations. The implications of this semantic shift are far reaching and they highlight the need for today's organisations to create long-term, personal relationships with their 'guests' by appealing to their senses and creating a sense of occasion.

Developing their thesis that successful products must also be memorable and meaningful experiences, Pine and Gilmore (1999: 20) urge organisations to 'draw the consumer into the process' of designing, producing and delivering their products to maximise the impact of their experience, claiming that consumers enjoy the acquisition process as much as the end result. They also highlight the need to enrich the consumer experience, evoking the concept of the 'sweet spot' to denote the holy grail of the experiential product, the 'distinctive place' where the realms of aesthetics, escapism, education and entertainment overlap (Pine and Gilmore, 1999: 43). In this ideal experience, the consumer is fully immersed and becomes an active participant.

Pine and Gilmore use theatre as an exemplar for the staged experience required of businesses in the new economy, and it seems therefore that the arts and entertainment industry is ideally placed to excel in this new experience economy. According to some commentators, this is essentially because the industry has always functioned in a constant state of creative flux: "Having thrived as a permanent 'industry' with inherently temporary arrangements, in a dynamic, multicultural and project-oriented environment, the arts context is the epitome of organisation for the 'new economy'" (Butler, 2000, p.343). Touring arts organisations are perfect examples of these dynamic, project-based initiatives. We will move on to consider how organisations' types and models are changing in the next chapter; what we are interested in here is how they can better connect with their guests to deliver more memorable and sensational experiences.

Imagineering

One technique which can help organisations to deliver such experiences is Imagineering. Imagineering is a blend of the words 'imagination' and 'engineering' and the term was first coined by Alcoa (the Aluminium Company of America) in the 1940s as part of an internal programme to drive up demand for the public use of aluminium by encouraging imaginative

uses for the product. According to Alcoa (1942: 59), Imagineering is about ‘letting your imagination soar, and then engineering it down to earth’.

The Imagineering Academy (2010) defines the concept as ‘value creation and value innovation from the experience perspective’. This essentially means creating (or co-creating) novel experiences which tangibly increase guests’ satisfaction. The Imagineering Academy is a Holland-based community of academics and practitioners who strive to ‘energise and transform the process of value creation’ by applying the key Imagineering principles of ‘experience, co-creation, inspiration and transformation’ to a whole range of organisations in what they call the ‘creative knowledge economy’. These principles lie at the heart of the audience experience and we will revisit them time and again in this book to explore how the relationship between producers and consumers is evolving on an almost daily basis.

The Imagineering Academy uses Cirque de Soleil as a prime example of world-class providers of creative content. Its mission is to encourage other businesses and industries (and even entire towns and cities) to emulate the imagination and creativity of established experience providers like Cirque de Soleil and apply it to their own context (or ‘bring it down to earth’, as Alcoa would have said). Imagineering has most successfully been adopted and employed by Walt Disney Imagineering – Disney’s world-leading research and development (R&D) arm. The employees of this department are referred to as ‘Imagineers’ and they are renowned for their ability to blend creativity, expertise, and technological advancements.

One of the earliest examples of Disney’s use of Imagineering can be found in its 1940 film *Fantasia*, which ‘exemplifies the combination of science and creativity, engineering and imagination that Disney’s term represents. *Fantasia* is literally an imagineering of music. Its images and stories introduce layers of signification to sound that add meaning to and comment on music.’ (Clague, 2004: 96). What’s interesting here is Clague’s assertion that Imagineering can ‘add meaning’ and ‘layers of significance’: this again highlights the importance of the audience experience and indicates how producers can transform a cultural good into a significant and memorable experience. One of Disney’s other achievements in *Fantasia* was to introduce Classical music to a mainstream cinema audience via a familiar and accessible platform. The film therefore provides a good case study of how Imagineering can be used to successfully grow and develop a market.

Creative Interaction

At the beginning of this chapter, we defined creative interaction as the intermediary space where professional artists, producers, venues and content providers join their audiences and consumers to create or experience something new together. We also discussed how consumers and audience members can become fully immersed and actively participate in an experience by being drawn into the creative process.

In order to appreciate how the producer-audience relationship is changing, we should first remind ourselves how the arts and entertainment industry traditionally operates. Despite the recent social inclusion, arts education and audience development agendas, whose communal aim is partly to open up the creative process; and despite the increasing popularity of the academic discipline of arts and entertainment management, the creative process itself often remains a mystery. There are various reasons for this. Firstly, many artists, producers and

audiences would contend that the mystery behind the process is precisely what gives arts and entertainment experiences their overriding appeal. The powerful image and symbolism of a curtain slowly revealing a stage hints at a closed, mysterious and escapist world, which can briefly transport its audience from one side of the curtain to the other. Secondly, the creative process itself is inherently complex, requiring a diverse body of creative agents coming together to stage a new experience. This involves many intangibles such as human and artistic chemistry, which is forced into a crucible to produce an unknown new element for the audience. Finally, like many other professional activities, writing, composing, choreography, filming, rehearsals and other related creative activities generally take place behind closed doors so that writers, directors and artists can experiment, focus and work in a spirit of artistic freedom and confidentiality.

So traditionally, the arts and entertainment industry has functioned on a product-led model, pushing its products down to its audiences to entertain, challenge and educate them. However, in recent years, whether responding to evolving audience expectations, changing artistic processes or acting under pressure from funders and other stakeholders, many arts and entertainment organisations have gradually begun to open up their processes. The case studies at the end of this chapter will illustrate the challenges and benefits of this creative interaction, but even a brief survey of the industry soon reveals a burgeoning hive of audience interaction and involvement in the creative process. Some excellent examples here include the Royal Shakespeare Company and Mudlark's *Such Tweet Sorrow*, a real time adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* built on audience responses to current events and cast tweets; Contact Theatre's *Freestyle Mondays* and *Mixed Movement* nights, which offer young audiences unrivalled opportunities for spontaneous performance; Tate Modern's *Your Tate Track* competition, which invited non-signed musicians to compose a piece of music inspired by any painting in the gallery and submit it to a public vote; and Scottish Opera's *Baby O* – a new interactive commission aimed at babies and toddlers comprising puppetry, a tactile garden and singing (or gurgling) along (Musolife.com, 2010).

When discussing audience involvement, we need to distinguish between active and passive participation. Active participants are those who want to try out or join in arts activities themselves. A typical example of active participation is a community show, where local people act, dance, sing, make costumes and even direct and market the show. Passive participation refers to audience members who may be highly engaged and loyal, but prefer to spectate rather than take part. There is also a significant group of consumers who just want to turn up and be entertained. It should be noted that the majority of arts and entertainment consumers are passive participants. Organisations which strive to increase loyalty through active participation must therefore be wary of alienating people who are happy to leave the art to the artists.

In any case, for the reasons highlighted above, involving audiences in the creative process is a highly controversial proposition, and this is why it is an important contemporary issue in the arts and entertainment industry. It could even be argued that creative interaction is a passing trend, and certainly the recent debate on excellence initiated by Sir Brian McMaster in the arts seems to have tipped the funding agenda back towards quality from its recent focus on inclusion. Many artists, writers, directors, producers, choreographers and filmmakers still fervently believe in the product-led model and advocate an audience-focused over an audience-led approach. They argue that they are the professionals and that funders and

audiences should therefore trust them and give them the time and space to create work of the highest quality.

Audience Development

The arts and entertainment industry can be divided into two main sectors: commercial and non-profit. While both these sectors face the constant challenge of growing their audience base, non-profit organisations generally have quite specific demands placed on them to reach out to new and diverse groups. There are several reasons for this. One of the main drivers of audience development is the fact that many art forms are subsidised by taxpayers, especially in European cultures. In the UK, they are funded via local councils and through the national Arts Councils, who function as non-governmental quangos of the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). So the general public has the right to feel a sense of ownership of subsidised music, opera, dance, theatre and visual art. The problem is that the majority of the population still don't take part in these activities, and there remain significant barriers to attendance, both financial and psychological, which are still putting people off attending artistic events.

Another reason why funders are increasingly encouraging the general public to take part in the arts is because research has clearly established direct links between participation in the arts (both active and passive) and improved health, wellbeing and community or social capital. The personal and social value of the arts and entertainment will be discussed in detail in Chapter 6, but the link between tangible benefits and audience development initiatives is an important one in this context, which is currently shaping local and national government agendas.

The audience experience: changing roles and relationships

So far, we have explored how arts and entertainment organisations can better connect with their guests to deliver more memorable and sensational experiences. But before organisations can truly unpack the changing roles and relationships that are shaping the audience experience, it is essential to understand what relevance the term 'experience' has within the sector.

Individuals experience many things on a daily basis in the course of their work lives, home lives, interests and hobbies. For centuries, arts and culture have been built on creating an experience that consumers will want to engage with. This engagement takes place on many levels: physical, social, intellectual, emotional, sensual and even spiritual. It is infinitely complex, rich and multi-dimensional.

Audience development, co-creation, audience engagement, participation, public engagement (or whatever the favoured term may be) are increasingly becoming part and parcel of creating a great arts experience. However, none of these approaches will work unless the whole organisation is committed to putting the audience at the heart of the experience.

There is much debate at the moment about co-creation and audience development and it is important to consider these different processes separately in order to understand the way roles and relationships with audiences can form and evolve.

Co-creation, audience development or wanting a day out?

Co-creation is one of the most in-depth ways an audience member can engage with an organisation. Louise Govier (2009: 3) describes co-creation as follows: ‘For me, this means working with our audiences (both existing and new) to create something together: it could be meaning or interpretation; a space or exhibition; an online resource or collective response – there are many possibilities. I prefer “co-creation” to “co-production”, as the former implies slightly more openness about where the collaborative journey might take all of the participants: rather than producing something that may be relatively defined, we are creating something new.’

Co-creation, however, is a process – it does not automatically turn an organisation into being audience-focused. It certainly opens the doors of trust and collaboration and develops a deeper relationship with some audience members. But it is only one way of doing this and it is important to reiterate here that not every audience member wants to be so actively or heavily involved.

Nowadays, it almost seems that any form of interaction is labelled ‘co-creation’ and many important questions remain about co-creation: Is co-creation merely the exchange of any value or should we stick to the idea of end users pooling their intellectual and creative assets in pursuit of a common goal? What is the reality behind the so-called best practices? Are these merely a cosmetic makeover of the traditional suggestion box? Do audiences really become part of a collective creative process? Are organisations genuinely ready and prepared to deliver their part of the co-creative bargain?

The philosophy of audience development seems to demand a less intensive commitment from the audience member. Arts Council England (2010) defines audience development as ‘[t]he 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.’ This definition gets closer to identifying how audience development needs to be at the heart of creating the experience when it concludes that: ‘As an ethos audience development places the audience at the heart of everything the organisation does.’ This widens the challenge for arts and entertainment organisations to commit to being truly audience-focused by ensuring that every touch point in a visitor’s experience is exceptional.

Finally, let’s not forget the audience groups who don’t distinguish between active and passive participation – they don’t think about the creative process, they are not highly engaged, not loyal to any particular venue or organisation, but are simply looking for a good night out. Their approach to cultural engagement is no less valuable but adds a purely social layer to the audience experiences.

Managing all these layers of engagement is challenging in a world where audiences are consumers, opinion-makers and creators of art. However, both the co-creation and audience development approaches enable audience members to decide how they want experience the cultural product on their own terms. Both approaches ultimately require strong leadership from the organisation; an understanding of audiences’ motivations and reasons for connecting in the first place; and the creation of opportunities to allow audiences to control their depth of engagement in the cultural experience.

Leading the change

The importance of leadership in cultural organisations is explored further in Chapter 11, but it is important to note here that the role of leadership in successful co-creation and audience development is vital. Educational, outreach and learning departments are often seen as the functions which participate most directly with their audiences. But there are many rewards to be gained by leaders taking a fundamental risk by approaching audience development as a holistic, company-wide ethos. Audience development is often seen as a challenging task that is under-estimated and under-resourced, and regarded as a cost rather than an investment. Worse, it is sometimes even regarded as a set of short-term publicity tactics rather than a long-term strategy to achieve fundamental artistic, financial or social objectives. This commitment from leadership is not an easy task because successful audience development requires a delicate combination of relationship building, skills development, leading by example and openness.

The challenges of changing these perceptions and creating a new generation of cultural leaders open to embracing the differing patterns of audience engagement are being met in a number of ways. As early as 2003, arts consultants Morton Smyth rolled out a programme called Not for the Likes of You. This programme reviewed how cultural organisations could become more accessible to a broader audience by changing their overall positioning and message, rather than just by implementing targeted audience development schemes or projects. It championed the development of a holistic approach to building relationships with audiences, starting from the top of the organisation and obtaining buy-in from everyone else within it.

In developing the programme, Morton Smyth worked with 32 organisations from across the cultural sector at a variety of levels, but always including, and led by, the chief executive. Having chief executives involved was absolutely key in changing the way organisations engaged with their audiences and developed meaningful experiences and relationships. The next stage of the programme focussed on harnessing the skills and understanding of every team member from the Cleaner to Box Office Manager, Curator to Outreach Co-ordinator, to achieve a truly memorable experience for the audience.

More recently, &Co, Yorkshire's cultural marketing agency, has been working on a cultural leadership programme project called 'Audience Influencers'. This has involved working with seven Yorkshire-based organisations that have either recently been through, or are currently going through, capital redevelopments. The participating organisations are focusing on a number of key management issues, such as financial models; governance; stakeholder engagement; programme diversity and audience engagement; buildings and operations management; and brand perceptions. The programme is distinctive because it approaches each of these issues with audience engagement as a key influence and its ultimate aim is to support a group of cultural leaders to develop as 'audience influencers', committed to focusing all areas of their organisations on impactful relationships with audiences.

Understandably, in advocating for true audience engagement, there is often concern from organisations about relinquishing control. According to Nadine Andrews of Culture Probe, who has evaluated many participatory museum projects: 'True co-production probably hasn't been attempted [...] the big issue is the control of meaning and how prepared museums are – or individuals within museums – to give up control [...]. A lot of museums haven't had the

internal conversation as to what co-production means to them. There may be individuals who have that aspiration but lack strategic support from the organisation as a whole' (Mulhearn, 2008: 22).

Both of the examples above illustrate how ensuring that the audience experience is exceptional has to be a vision that everyone commits to and is a part of. It needs to start with a clear vision by the leader at the top about what makes the audience experience exceptional; it also needs to be supported by ongoing research with the audiences at the end of the consumer journey; and finally this intelligence and understanding needs to be shared across the whole organisation in order to create a truly audience-focused organisation.

Walking in your audiences' shoes

To truly understand the audience experience – from the first encounter right through to how it evolves into a loyal and inspiring relationship – research is absolutely essential. Many arts and entertainment organisations understand the power of audience research in helping to identify new audiences, inform what creates an excellent experience, and in some cases even determine what art or experience gets created in the first place. However, some organisations continue to develop their artistic processes and experiences internally and just hope that the audience will come. In these cases, the cultural conversation is more of a monologue and the art or experience is sometimes presented with no true engagement or understanding about the audience or visitor experience that brings it to life.

Research does not have to be expensive. The Sandwich Glass Museum in Cape Cod, USA, gets one of its staff members to pose as a tourist in its car park, asking people leaving the museum if it's worth a visit. This gives the museum first-hand insight into the experiences that their visitors have just had; getting the organisation out of the building and into the shoes and minds of their visitors. What is probably most significant about audience and visitor research is how it helps to develop an understanding about the relationship they want to have with your organisation, which will differ in many ways. As we have seen, some audience members want to be up close and personal, co-creating the work or participating behind the scenes. They want to feel part of the community. Other audience members just want a fun night out. Neither is wrong – but successful organisations need to understand which audiences want what type of experience in order to truly fulfil their expectations. And if you don't ask, how can you possibly know?

Levels of engagement

Understanding your audiences and consumers is the starting point for any successful engagement, and this involves empathising with the barriers they face in engaging with your offer as well as appreciating what motivates them. In *Culture, class, distinction*, Bennett (2009) explores the crossover between class and cultural engagement in great detail. Informed by over 200 depth interviews, this extensive mapping of British cultural practices and preferences provides a fascinating insight into the role of class in cultural engagement. Building on the work of Bourdieu, Bennett's research frequently refers to 'legitimate culture' (such as classical music and visual art), perhaps more commonly portrayed as 'high art' as opposed to 'popular culture'. This terminology raises an important point for arts and entertainment organisations to consider: the boundaries of artistic creation, engagement and

communication are blurring and organisations can therefore no longer restrict their focus to what has previously been considered ‘legitimate’ culture.

Chan and Goldthorpe’s (2007) work offers an interesting alternative to understanding cultural engagement by dividing cultural consumers into four groups: Univores, Omnivores, Paucivores and Inactives. In discussing the findings of their research, the authors claim they are ‘unable to identify any numerically significant group of cultural consumers whose consumption is essentially confined to high cultural forms and who reject, or at least do not participate in, more popular forms’ (Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007: 375). They also note that status counts rather than class, and that status is defined by income rather than culture: ‘Status is now attached to material consumption, not cultural consumption. People with status show who they are through expensive cars and houses rather than by going to museums and the like’. They conclude that people are ‘self-excluded’ rather than ‘socially excluded’ from culture.

Whichever camp you take, it seems that cultural experience is subjective and legitimate to each individual and should not be judged by any organisation. In fact, in the digital world, our traditional understanding of participation and engagement continues to be challenged. More and more ‘producers’ of art and entertainment are creating it in their own homes and engaging and participating in quite an isolated, but fulfilling way to them. Indeed Arts Council England (2009) has even assigned a whole new segment to this group, referring to them as ‘Bedroom DJs’. According to Arts Council England, Bedroom DJs express low levels of interest in the arts and do not currently attend any arts event. Instead, they engage with the arts by actively taking part in creative activities. The most popular activities among this group include computer art and animation, playing a musical instrument, painting and drawing, writing music, stories or poetry and dancing. Many of these activities are typically solitary and home-based.

Expert versus participant in the creative process

Andrew Keen’s book *The Cult of the Amateur* explores some similar challenges organisations face in becoming facilitators rather than gatekeepers of the cultural experience. With the rise of participation on Web 2.0, arts and entertainment organisations need to consider the impact of opening up their process and experience for public consumption and interaction. The ultimate endeavour may always remain the creation of great art and experiences, but with the flood of amateur, user-generated free content, we must ask ourselves what the repercussions will be on quality and artistic integrity.

It is not about de-valuing what is created by amateurs and people wanting to engage in the creation of art and entertainment, but it is about the need to recognise that there is a skill in creating great art. Keen (2007) argues that we live in a ‘self-broadcasting culture’ which blurs the distinction between trained experts and uninformed amateurs. So in an era when anyone, unconstrained by professional standards or editorial filters, can present themselves as creators of art, it is important that arts and cultural organisations continue to place value on the artistic direction and skill that is required to produce a cultural product that leads to a meaningful experience.

Creating the superlative visitor experience

Simon (2010) argues that museum professionals need to focus on encouraging audience participation by creating an excellent visitor experience rather than promoting audience development or education. She notes that there is a lot to learn in this regard from performing arts organisations. One such example is York Theatre Royal, which recently developed its TakeOver Festival.

Case study 1 – York Theatre Royal’s TakeOver Festival

TakeOver Festival grew from the Labour Government funded initiative A Night Less Ordinary (ANLO), which distributed grants through Arts Council England enabling theatres to offer free tickets to under-26s. In order to engage with ANLO’s intended market as deeply as possible, York Theatre Royal decided to do something different. The theatre was already dedicated to working with young people through its large youth theatre programme. It was already selling £5 tickets to under-25s and had a vibrant outreach programme. But the TakeOver Festival took audience participation and co-creation to another level.

TakeOver was not only a first for York, but a groundbreaking festival for the theatre industry. With over fifty under-26-year-olds involved in the running of the theatre, this model had never been tried anywhere else in the country. TakeOver provided young people with the opportunity to work in a professional environment, supported by the staff of the theatre. The festival engaged audiences that wanted to take their relationship and role in the theatre to the next level – many going on to secure professional arts roles after the festival. However, it also had a huge impact for York Theatre Royal in building their under-26 audience.

Belt Up Theatre, which programmed some of the work in the festival, has now been granted an 18-month residency at York Theatre Royal. As one of Belt Up’s founding directors, Jethro Compton, reflected: ‘TakeOver09 has been all about taking a massive risk to try out something that could transform York Theatre Royal and make it an accessible venue to a wider demographic’ (Compton, 2010). Of course this example takes co-creation to the extreme, with audiences joining forces with professionals not just in the development of the artistic product itself but also across all the back office functions of the organisation.

Case study 2 – The Big Picture

Another case study illustrating the role of co-creation in developing audience engagement is The Big Picture project, which took place in Birmingham in 2008. This was a project funded by Arts Council England West Midlands, supported by the BBC and managed by Audiences Central. The aim of the project was to inspire and encourage people in the Midlands to engage with and experience art at a local and personal level, by taking, using, viewing and manipulating photographs. It was specifically designed to increase arts attendance and participation amongst people from the lower socio-economic groups in the region.

The project invited the general public to submit photographs to create a snapshot of the region and become part of an ambitious world record attempt. A winning photograph was chosen and then a huge mosaic of the winning image measuring 30 x 30 metres was created from the 112,896 submitted images and displayed outside the Think Tank Museum in Birmingham. All participants were given a Guinness Book of Records Certificate and during the project, 547,134 people from the West Midlands attended galleries involved in the project including Ikon, Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery, driving up attendance significantly.

Conclusion

Ultimately the audience experience can range from passive engagement through to co-creation of the product itself. Neither of these sits in isolation and neither is less valuable than the other. As we have seen, successful arts and cultural organisations embrace the opportunity to work with their audiences on whatever level they want to and offer different and varied points of engagement.

The role and relationship that audiences have with culture, arts and entertainment will continue to evolve. Creating a memorable and shared experience involves a two-way dialogue between professional creative teams on one side and their audiences, consumers and visitors on the other; a co-created experience goes one step further and unites these two sides under a common goal.

The key point here is that contemporary arts and entertainment organisations need to think not just about developing their audiences, but about listening, engaging, and opening up a variety of avenues to their audiences, so that everyone involved has an unforgettable experience. Everyone is the architect of their own experience, and at some stage in the creative relationship, responsibility and control have to be shared or handed over.

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