

PROGRAM PLANNING GUIDE and Workbook

NOTES on this resource

This workbook forms parts of the CircuitWest Venue Manager's Toolkit as part of the CircuitWest Audience Development Project coordinated by Country Arts WA and funded by LotteryWest. It has been developed through various stages in response to requests for Program Planning workshops from WAPAC, APACA and individual clients organisations. It has now been adapted for the needs of CircuitWest Venue Managers.

Recommended pre-reading material: (click to download from Dropbox)

[Alan Brown: *Artistic Vibrancy + Creativity in Programming*](#)

[The Wallace Foundation: *Building Arts Organisations that Build Audiences*](#)

[Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance: Research into Action: *pathways to new opportunities*](#)

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INTRODUCTION: getting the most out of this Guide

What is 'programming'?

You might be wondering what we mean by 'programming' in this context. For managers of local community based arts centres or local government managed arts programs, 'programming' refers to the decisions you make about what events you will offer your community.

Some venue managers have a background in the arts sector, and are familiar with the types of events that are available on the various state and national touring circuits. Some have developed relationships with particular producing organisations (i.e. arts organisations that produce work and offer it through touring programs) that come each year or every couple of years to their community.

Other venue managers have come to the role from outside the arts sector and have to develop their knowledge of the types of arts events that are available and where to find them.

This guide aims to help venue managers both with and without arts backgrounds to work through the process of developing a Program Plan for their venues.

But do we really have a choice?

Some venue managers in remote Australia feel like they don't really have a choice when it comes to what they present in their annual program. They are offered an event 'because it's coming past the door', touring to towns on either side of them in a touring circuit, and their only decision is to have it, or not. Is there any point for venues in this situation having Program Plans? Certainly. Thinking about what is appropriate and what would be best for their local community, and then discussing that with venues around them, could create small 'tailored' tours for small groups of regional or remote venues. This has already happened in Western Australia and Victoria. Taking the initiative with a group of colleagues, and approaching producers who have shows you'd like to see in your area, could be one of the best ways to approach Program Planning for your community.

So what's a Program Plan, and why do I need one?

The best programming decisions are made within a framework that sets out the aims of the program over a multi year period (usually 3 to 5 years), outlining the types of events that will be programmed, and the different community segments for which those events are chosen. This framework is known as a Program Plan.

A Program Plan helps you grow your audience, because the process of developing the Plan encourages you to program events for the types of audiences you want to attract. If you have a significant segment of fairly conservative, older residents from Anglo-European

backgrounds, you will need to program events they will enjoy and find stimulating, at times that are convenient for them. This may be a matinee series of music programs: ‘Morning Melodies’ series are common in arts centres around Australia. If you have a significant population of recent arrivals from other cultures, and you want them to attend your events, you will need to program events from their cultures. If you want to engage your local indigenous population, you will need to program indigenous events.

Some arts centre managers are devising ways of involving local community groups in the program planning process, to ensure events are chosen that will appeal to them.

It is also important to ensure that your program plan supports and aligns with your LotteryWest grant application, and any other grant applications you intend to submit. Having a Program Plan is an excellent way to show grant makers how your program selections tie in with the rest of your strategic planning.

What’s an Artistic Plan or Policy?

Some arts centres have *artistic policies or plans*, which outline the types of arts events they will program based on arts-driven imperatives, and some have ‘Artistic Directors’ on staff. When this is the case, Program Planning usually starts with the Artistic Plan. ‘What are our artistic aims?’ is the first question asked in program planning discussions.

If you don’t have an artistic policy or plan, your first question might be ‘Who are we programming for?’ as suggested in this Guide.

Integrating Program and Marketing Plans

Whether your centre has an artistic imperative behind its programming or not, you will benefit from developing a Program Plan to guide your programming choices and to link in with your Marketing Plan. Developing a Program Plan that includes audience development aims, and then a Marketing Plan which focuses on Audience Development, can be one of the most powerful ways to grow your audience:

“Good marketing is absolutely strategic for the arts, and we can always do a better job of marketing and communications. But audience development is not a marketing problem. Drawing new people in to the arts and replenishing the constituencies for the artforms is, first and foremost, a programming challenge.” – Alan Brown, US arts market researcher

Helping producers and touring coordinators to help you

Developing a Program Plan and making a summary of it available on your website also helps producing companies and touring coordinators assess whether you will be interested in what they are touring. If there is no public indication of what types of events you are going to program, you will probably be contacted with all sorts of offers, which is a waste of time for both you and them.

Using this Guide

Like Marketing Planning, Program Planning works best as a 'team sport'. If you have a small team of staff, involve them all.

If you're a sole operator managing a venue or arts program on your own, consider involving one or two other sympathetic Council staff and some community representatives.

If you have a larger staff, limit involvement to those senior staff whose roles focus on programming, marketing and box office, and venue hire. Try not to have a group larger than 8 or 10 people, or the process can become slower and more difficult to manage.

Step 1. Who are we programming for?

You're probably programming for 'everyone'

If you're managing a local government owned arts centre or local government arts program in local venues, your community of interest is probably largely determined by the local government boundaries. Most local governments are keen to ensure their ratepayers are the principal beneficiaries of the services they provide. This means that your primary focus when you're making decisions on what to program will be your local community. Keep in mind, though, that not everyone will want to come to your events. Some people just don't think of themselves as the type of person who attends arts events. Don't waste your time trying to convert people who are really uninterested; focus on those who are open to the idea of attending.

Program what's not already available

Before you consider what you should program, take account of what is already available in the local area. Does one of the local pubs already offer rock bands? You should probably leave that to them, then, and look for events that aren't already locally available.

Using past attendance to guide future programming

Unless you're starting from scratch with a new centre or a new program, you will have historical records to use to build a picture of what events attract what types of audiences. You may already have established program streams for older people and families, and want to supplement them with streams for younger people and the indigenous community.

If you have a segment within your audience that has attended regularly over a number of years, they are probably a bit more adventurous in their tastes than people who come rarely or haven't been before. You'll need to program a bit more adventurously to keep them interested. You could also consider working with them to discover the types of events they're interested in, involving them in the selection process.

People who have attended music in the past will probably attend music in future, and so on within each art form or genre.

Responding to local interest

You might have a flourishing local arts scene, with artists who could be involved in your programs. What are they interested in, how could they be involved?

Are there local dance schools? Try to find dance events that come with workshops for dance students, and invite the local dance teachers to bring their students. Offer them special deals for tickets for the performances. Are there local children's choirs, or school choirs? Opera Australia has toured a production of *The Magic Flute* that involved local children as

performers. This type of involvement also usually guarantees parents, grandparents, siblings and friends will want to attend.

Get to know your local community and look for programming ideas that respond to local interests.

Step 2. Do we have an artistic vision?

Artistic Vision, Goals, Policy or Plan

As an arts venue, whether you are led by an artistic vision or goals or not can be up to your Board, your Council if you're local government managed, your community, and sometimes your own personal preference (depending upon the degree of interest expressed by the other stakeholders).

You may have an already articulated Artistic Vision or Artistic Policy, or you may employ someone in an Artistic Director position. (Sometimes the Director or Manager of a venue is acting as the Artistic Director without this being acknowledged in the position description.)

If you have none of these things in place, but have a core of frequent, loyal audience members who are culturally literate and really engaged in your program choices, you will probably have artistic goals, explicit or inherent, embedded in your historical programming decisions. You might want to think about the benefits of creating a written Artistic Policy if you don't have one; this process will help you think through the fundamentals of Programming in a new light. By considering what you want to achieve artistically, whether that's focusing on particular artforms or genres, exploring traditional and/or contemporary practices, perhaps taking existing community interests and developing them further, you will be laying a stronger foundation for your Program Plan.

Taking your board and your community with you

You may feel driven to see your community tread a more adventurous artistic path: you/your Board/Council may take pride in hosting higher profile artists or events; your frequent audience members may need something more interesting to maintain their interest and deepen their engagement; it may just be your personal mission. Whatever the impetus, be careful to plan your program to take your audience, your community and your Board and/or your Council with you on that journey.

Pathways to more challenging content

Planning pathways in to more unfamiliar, difficult, challenging, edgy or risky works is a good way to help your audience understand them and feel more comfortable widening the range of their artistic experience. This recommendation comes from personal experience working in and with many arts organisations, and from the landmark WolfBrown study, *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance* conducted by Alan Brown and Jennifer Novak, who write: "Overall, the data suggest that audiences with higher levels of context, *can* benefit

more from certain performances, at least in certain circumstances. We like to think of context as grease on the wheels of impact.”¹

One example of planning pathways in to more challenging content could be:

Working with a producer or a tour coordinator on a three-year series of annual visits to your centre, making YouTube interviews and excerpts of the work available in advance, offering introductory talks before each show, workshops for schools, Q&A sessions after the shows, and programming slightly more challenging shows each year. These could be theatre, dance or music events. Involving the artists in the community as much as possible, and providing opportunities for audience members to hear them speak about their work and ask questions, helps your audience develop a relationship with them and increase their understanding of the work.

Consider community interest

Your artistic goals will be unique to your situation, and should ideally reflect your community. Is there a particular interest in dance in your region? Or comedy, or jazz? Take this as a cue for developing one or more of your programming goals, relating to those artforms or genres, or taking a more exploratory approach within a particular genre.

NOTE: you may decide that before moving on to the next steps in developing a Program Plan, you first need to develop an Artistic Policy or Vision statement. If so, here is a guide. If not, feel free to skip to Section 3.

Developing an Artistic Vision or Policy statement

Questions you might ask yourself in developing an Artistic Vision statement or Policy:

- What are our artistic aspirations and challenges?
- How well are they articulated and communicated?
- How do we report achievements against our artistic policy/statement?
- Do board, management and staff members have a shared understanding of our artistic ambitions?

See more at: <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/selfevaluation/framework/artistic-aspirations-and-programme/artistic-policystatement/#sthash.lanLpEyg.dpuf>

You may wish to engage an experienced Artistic Director to help you work through the development of your Artistic Vision, or you may have a staff member with the ability to function in this role during the process. Whoever they are, they should have a good working knowledge of the artforms or genres you want to program, what is currently available in those artforms or genres that might be suitable for your program, and an understanding of

¹ http://wolfbrown.com/mups_downloads/Impact_Study_Final_Version_Summary_Only.pdf

how programming and marketing need to work together to achieve audience growth and development.

Step 3. So, what do we want to program?

By working through each of these questions, and considering how your answers might affect your programming choices, you'll be systematically building the picture of what you want to program. Make a note of your answers as you work through, so that you'll have notes to refer to later, when you come to writing up your Program Plan.

Are we exploring any artistic themes?

If we have an artistic policy, does it focus on particular artforms or genres? Are we specialising in particular types of art, or particular themes? Themes could relate to situations relevant to the local/regional community, or not. We could become known for particular types or events, genres or artforms, which might help define our brand and build an audience. What would be relevant to our situation, our community, our existing and potential audience?

If we have one, is our artistic vision/policy aimed at a particular audience?

Does our artistic vision have a particular audience in mind? Does it assume a context, background information, or familiarity by our audience? If we program work that assumes audiences have previous experiences in that artform, we'll need to offer opportunities for our audience to learn some of the background before they experience the work, like links to excerpts on YouTube, or interviews with the director or performers. Do our artistic policy and programming choices encourage or alienate particular potential audiences? If you are programming challenging work for an interested subgroup within your audience, try to target your communications for that subgroup. It's better to describe the experience accurately and attract a smaller more enthusiastic audience, than to pretend everyone will enjoy it and have half of them leave at interval, disappointed.

What are our longer-term artistic goals? – where are we heading?

What do we want to be programming in 5 and 10 years' time? Is there a longer-term vision?

What are our venue's physical limits: what is it inherently suited to, or not suited for?

What is our venue good at? What can we present well? What isn't suited to our venue?

What is the role of local artists or groups?

If we have an artistic policy, does it reach out to local artists or arts groups? Is there a place for involvement by local or regional artists?

What does our current program look like? What do we imagine future programs will look like?

How does our current program differ from what we'd like to be programming, or what we'd like to be programming in the future? Can we plan a path to the kind of programming we want to be doing, which will help us build the type of audience we want to attract?

Step 4. Who will our program attract?

By working through each of these questions, and considering your answers, as for Step 3, you'll be systematically building a picture of the type of audience your programming will probably attract. Make a note of your answers as you work through, so that you'll have notes to refer to later, when you come to writing up your Program Plan.

Are we looking for a new audience?

Will the type of programming we're considering attract audience not currently attending?

Are we looking to consolidate existing audience attendance?

Will the type of programming we're considering attract our existing audience, or alienate them?

Are we focussing on a local audience?

Will it help us attract a local audience? What do we define as 'local', and what do we define as 'regional'? Local might be from within say 1 hour's drive (this will depend upon where you are located), and regional might be from more than 1 hour's drive away.

Or are we looking to attract a regional audience?

Will it help us attract a regional audience? How far are people willing to come to attend our events, and are there events that attract more people beyond our local audience, from further away? (Analysis of your ticketing system by postcode or towns can help answer these questions.)

Are we looking for more people like our current audience, or different cultural/socio/economic profiles? Will it help us attract people from different backgrounds? Do we have target groups we'd like to attract? What are their cultural backgrounds? What are they interested in? Can we program for their interests?

Do we know what types of people it will attract?

How do we know who will be attracted by particular types of programming? The best indicator of future enjoyment is previous experience with similar events: those who have attended similar events are likely to enjoy similar future events. Those with the most previous arts experiences are likely to be the ones with the most adventurous tastes.

Developing trust

Over time, through repeated attendances, your audiences develop trust in your ability to choose programs they find rewarding, stimulating, engaging or enjoyable. This is one reason why consistent Programming is important. The more they experience pleasant surprises, enjoying events they weren't sure about, the more they'll trust your programming choices in the future. If you develop a Program Plan and stick to it, choosing slightly more adventurous works each year within the range you've identified as relevant to your

community (which could be a particular genre like Australian theatre, jazz, modern dance, etc), the more you will develop an audience for those events. In this way, over time, it is possible to take an audience on a wonderful journey through a range of quite adventurous experiences. How long does this process take? If your population is subject to high turnover, as is the case in some rural and remote communities, the segment you're focussing on to develop this trust may be smaller than in communities with more stable populations. For people who are shorter-term residents, say 3 to 5 years, you may only provide one or two experiences before they move on. If we assume that most longer-term residents attend only once or twice a year or less (which is most likely given our knowledge of ticketing databases), this process can probably take 2 or 3 years to begin to affect audience attendance decisions, and 5 to 7 years to really consolidate trust. It's a medium to longer-term outcome.

Step 5. Who else do we *want* to engage?

Your Wider Community

By considering the questions asked through steps 1 to 4, you will already be developing an idea of what you want to program. **The next step is to ask yourself, if you haven't before, who might be interested in these events you're planning? And who else do you want to see included in your audience? Are there any groups within your community missing, who you think should be catered for and encouraged to attend? These questions and their answers will form an *iterative loop** through the program planning process, between programming aims and audience development.**

So, who in your current audience and wider community is going to be interested in the events you're going to program?

Before we start zeroing in to look at who might attend future events, and who currently attends, it will be useful to consider the character of the wider community – those who don't currently attend, as well as those who do. Does your local government provide area population data from the last Census that you can access? Can you get information about who attends other arts venues and events?

When considering whom you want to engage with your programming, it's wise to take into account the trends affecting your local and regional population. (You may already have done this, but if not, it's a wise thing to do.) How is it changing? How fast is it changing? Will there be more or less of particular types of people in 5 or 10 years' time? Since it usually takes a minimum of around 3 to 5 years to grow a new audience, you need to be looking ahead to who will be around 3, 5 and 10 years from now. Are young families increasing? Are older people increasing? Are people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds increasing?

Which groups are you planning to target with your Program Plan? Jot down some of their characteristics here:

e.g. children, local artists, regional gallery visitors, older people, recent arrivals, CALD community, indigenous, first timers, regular attenders, etc

* an *iterative loop* in planning takes you through a process and around again as you consider different issues

Funding partners:

If you receive funding from your state government arts ministry or the Australia Council for some aspect of your program, it's probably not going to be for the most conservative events you present. Government funding is usually about encouraging organisations to do stuff that's more contemporary and likely to involve living creative artists. It's usually riskier, and less likely to attract big visitor numbers or earn big at the box office. It makes sense to look for ways to balance your budget by supporting riskier events with government investment. But you won't be programming these riskier and edgier events just for your government partners: it's also an important part of keeping your subscribers or more frequent attenders stimulated and invigorated, and a way of developing new (perhaps younger) audiences. Longer-term attenders are usually up for the challenge and adventure of something new, provided you balance the yearly program with several things they think they'll like.

Which funding partners have an interest in your Program Plan? List them here, with notes on how that might affect your Program planning:

e.g. grant from Australia Council = support for more contemporary programming

Your existing audience:

Audience research

Ideally you will undertake some audience research every couple of years to understand not only the socio-demographics of your audience, but also and perhaps more importantly, their responses to the experiences you offer them. How does it make them feel? What part does it play in their lives? What sort of emotional or intellectual impact does it have? How do they describe their experiences – what language do they use? This is not only valuable

information when considering future program choices, but also when writing copy for marketing materials and estimating box office revenue for future shows.

Ticketing database analysis

In the absence of any audience research information (although if you don't have any you may wish to plan some in the future), you can use analysis of your ticketing data to deepen your understanding of audience behaviour. Apparently, 80% of people on most performing arts ticketing databases have only attended once². How often, on average, do your audience members attend events? The average time between performing arts attendances is around 18 months. If you have a subscription or membership package which expects people to attend 3 or 4 times per year, how likely is the 'average attender' to think that's a great idea? Collected ticketing data also shows the following repeat attendance patterns: 14% of first timers go on to become second timers; 26% of second timers go on to become third timers; 34% of third timers go on to become fourth timers. And once someone has been four times, apparently 45% of them go on to attend 5 or more times.

Recency and frequency: predicting future attendance

Looking at attendances for past events is one of the best ways to predict future attendances: what shows can you program in the future, that are similar to events you programmed in the past? The audience for those past shows are the people most likely to attend future, similar shows. Recency and frequency are two of the best predictors of future attendance: the more recently someone has attended, and the more frequently they've attended, the more likely they are to attend in the future. (This principle is illustrated in the repeat attendance figures quoted above..)

Developing your audience by leading through programming

Remember the discussion about artistic policies or plans, and your more frequent attenders. Are we looking for an audience for particular programming, the kind of programming you want to achieve? Do you want to be proactive in your programming, not reactive? You can respond to existing community/audience interest where you need to, but you should aim to lead where you can. **Your community can't tell you they'd like to see what they don't know exists, so in order to keep them engaged you need to program one or two steps ahead of their developing interest. They need you to be out there finding what's available and surprising and delighting them with new experiences. There are a number of places to look for ideas on programming, some of which are available [here](#). (Include LINK to Sourcing Performing Arts Events – part of 'Other information' at the end of this document.)**

Programming for your community's changing needs and wants; audience gaps

If you're familiar with the current trends in population growth or change for your area, you'll have a sense of which segments of the community are likely to grow, stay the same, or decrease. This should be kept in mind when considering what type of audience you want to build for the future. This might be culturally and linguistically diverse communities, and/or recent arrivals; it might be local indigenous populations; it might be younger people, or older people. Community engagement principles might need to be followed for certain segments: you need to program events which will be relevant and of interest to them, invite them in, and reach out to make connections to their community networks. You might want

² Source for ticketing data quoted: Purple Seven

to identify gaps and try to fill them: your current audience may be dominated by older people, and by women (that's the performing arts cliché) – you might want to develop a program strand specifically aimed at men. If so, try comedy (ADVICE project data analysis showed the comedy audience was more likely to be male and to be younger, than music or theatre audiences). Who you target to build for future audiences should be determined by your particular local and regional circumstances, and take into account the requirements of the funding bodies to whom you apply for grants. *Whoever you're targeting, your program plan will be a key part of the strategy for engagement.*

What gaps in your audience do you want to fill? Who do you want to see in your future audience?

e.g. we don't have many younger men attending, could target them; local indigenous community could be engaged through indigenous programming, etc..

Step 6. What events will engage them?

How do we know what events will engage particular target audiences, or who will be attracted by particular programming streams?

One of the best ways to begin to understand the links between programming and audience engagement is through audience research and database analysis. Once you begin to understand the audience responses to what you've programmed in the past, you develop an appreciation for how your audience might respond to future events.

Audience research and database analysis:

What do we and don't we know about our audience?

The simplest measurement of audience engagement is ticket sales or attendances. The shows with the most ticket sales have the widest audience engagement, based on just numbers. But what about depth of engagement? And chances of future, repeat attendance? Which shows will result in more people wanting to attend again in the future, and more often? And which shows might attract people who don't currently attend?

Ticketing database analysis can help you answer the last question about shows that might attract new people. If you run your own box office, you can do a 'first timer' analysis on your

performing arts events using Purple Seven's Vital Statistics software: which shows have attracted the most 'first timers'? Programming more similar shows and tailoring your marketing to new attenders should increase first timers. But once you've got them in, what is going to make them want to come back? One of the keys to repeat audience attendance is the degree of individual **satisfaction** with the experience. Many different aspects of the experience can impact on satisfaction, including the friendliness and knowledge of your staff, and cleanliness of the venue. But one of the most important keys to repeat attendance is the **impact** the event itself has on your customers.

Impact analysis is one way of exploring how the arts experience affects people, and what contributes to a satisfying experience, which some of the better resourced and more advanced venues are doing. Alan Brown (US arts researcher) designed some groundbreaking research on impact in the US, released in 2007. This research explored aspects of the experience that were measured through a series of indexes. Among the indicators of **impact**, the **Captivation Index** was most highly correlated with all aspects of **satisfaction**. Alan is now making some of this research and information publicly available - see www.intrinsicimpact.org for more information on impact analysis studies by Alan Brown and his colleagues at WolfBrown.

Instrumental, Intrinsic and Institutional Benefits: It might also be important to you to ask, what does your programming say about your venue? Why is deep impact of audience experience important? What is the fundamental mission or purpose of your organisation: to provide cultural development for your community, or 'escapist entertainment'? or both? How do you balance program steams with differing aims like this? How can you brand and market such a diverse program? To help you contemplate and communicate the broader and deeper questions around the fundamental benefits of what you do, it can be useful to read people like John Holden <http://www.demos.co.uk/people/johnholden>, Diane Ragsdale (see her blog at <http://www.artsjournal.com/jumper/>) and Alan Brown (also quoted above).

Simpler audience research can be done very cost effectively using online questionnaires, provided you have a good cross section of your audience responding to online communication. It is advisable to engage an experienced researcher to design the questions, based on what you hope to find out, and to help you analyse and interpret the findings. (For example you need to check how representative your responses are of your whole attendance database, and weight the answers accordingly. Otherwise your picture of your audience could be skewed towards the profile of more frequent attenders, because more frequent attenders are more likely to answer the questionnaire.) Asking audience members through a questionnaire how likely they are to re-attend and to recommend the experience to others can be a good way to measure satisfaction.

A couple of focus groups run by an experienced focus group moderator can lead to significant insights into what your audience thinks and how they react to the experience of attending different shows. Together, focus groups and online questionnaires can deliver extremely valuable information, which is very useful when planning programs, designing marketing campaigns, and writing marketing copy. It is also possible to engage a research consultant on a shared basis between a number of venues, to run the same or similar questionnaires and compare results. This reduces the cost to each venue.

Take a moment to think about the audience data you have available. If you have existing audience research, what have you learned about your existing audience's program preferences? What shows have the greatest impact? OR What audience research could you do to help deepen your understanding of your audience and their programming preferences? Could your programming, marketing and audience development be made more effective by some fairly simple audience research? Could you analyse your ticketing database differently to provide more insights into customer buying behaviour?

Jot down some thoughts on how you could improve your understanding of your audience, and of the relationship between programming and audience attendance, using audience research and ticketing database analysis:

How often will they come?

From the average attendance frequency figures quoted earlier, we know that the average time between attendances for performing arts audiences is around 18 months, and that 14% of first timers go on to become second timers; 26% of second timers go on to become third timers, 34% of third timers go on to become fourth timers, and 45% of fourth timers go on to attend 5 or more times. So, how often can you expect people to attend when you program shows specifically designed to engage them? This will depend upon their previous attendance history. The more they have attended in the past (frequency), and the more recently they have attended (recency), the more likely they are to attend again. Once you attract someone the first time, you have an average 11% chance of them going on to become second timers. If you design personalised campaigns encouraging first timers to attend again, the more you can offer them a similar experience to the one they had the first time (assuming they enjoyed it), the more likely they are to attend again. You may achieve better than 11%. Given that the average length of time between attendances is 18 months, every time you encourage someone back within a year, you're doing better than average.

The implication for programming is, unsurprisingly, that if you want to increase your chances of having audience members attending 3 or 4 times a year, you'll need to program something they will want to attend, 3 or 4 times a year.

Which segments of your audience already attend 3-4 times per year or more, and which segments have the potential to increase their frequency of attendance? What programming will engage these segments? (See note on [Subscriptions, Subscribers and Programming](#))

Make some notes here on the types of shows you think will engage these more frequent attenders and potential frequent attenders:

“audience development = community engagement + creative, relevant, long term programming + good marketing”

Audience development and community engagement

Audience development can be focussed on encouraging existing audience members to attend more frequently, and to engage more deeply, and can also focus on identifying community segments not currently attending, and developing them as audience members. It's generally easier to get someone who's been once or twice to attend again, than it is to get someone who's never been to attend the first time. You will need to program accordingly. If you're aiming at a community segment not currently attending, you'll need to program shows which will interest them – perhaps involve them in the programming process - and depending upon the particular segment, also invest in community engagement activities. The whole audience development process should be incorporated as part of your Marketing Plan, and planned in conjunction with your Program Plan.

Successful audience development, of new audiences, requires good marketing and community engagement supported by creative and relevant long-term programming. It's a process that delivers results over the medium to long term, not so much the short term. Expect to think in 3 to 5 year periods, and program, and measure results, over that time frame too. Embarking on any program of Audience Development is a challenge, which requires careful planning, time and resources. The rewards are worth it, though, as the end result is a growing and more diverse, more loyal and more deeply engaged audience that is more representative of your community. You may even find your ticketing revenue increasing in the long term.

Slow touring – perhaps an idea to consider for the future

Slow touring describes the kind of touring designed to encourage community engagement and audience development. Rather than a one-or-two-night stand, members of the touring party spend longer (perhaps even advance visits) in each location, offering preparatory and participatory experiences with targeted segments of the community. This could include workshops in schools, rehearsals with community choirs, participatory set design, or question-and-answer sessions with the director, cast members or playwright ... limited only by your imagination, the willingness of the touring company, and your shared resources. Slow touring is in the early stages of development in Australia, being recommended in PATA's National Performing Arts Touring Action Plan 2013-2015 and the APACA Guide to Touring 2013, as one of the ways to encourage audience development in regional Australia. Which infrequently attending or non-attending community segments might respond to community engagement activities? Could 'slow touring' help with community engagement

in your situation? You might like to consider this in the longer term, if you don't think it's possible in the near future.

Make a note of some community engagement activities to consider, and how 'slow touring' could help ... think about some of your regular producing companies and whether you could talk to them about planning some 'slow touring' ..

Step 7. Do we have an artistic vision? If so, are our planned events consistent with it?

Time for that *iterative loop* again. Is what you're considering programming for particular audiences consistent with your artistic vision or policy? Are you programming as creatively as you can, or do you need to research more event possibilities, to meet both your artistic and audience development goals? This can take time – are you allowing enough time for your program planning cycle? Do you need to allow more lead-time between researching possible events and finalising the program? Do you need to seek alternative sources for program/event ideas? Most important of all, can you arrange to SEE the work you're considering, before making your decision to program it? (NOTE the Australia Council offers funding for presenter to go and see shows they're considering programming: check the GO SEE FUND at) * Can't find this on the new Australia Council site; have a question in to them and wait a response.

Step 8. Will our program help balance our budget?

Audience research, attendance analysis, and forecasting box office revenue:

Through analysis of past attendance patterns (based on program as well as time of year, competing events, ticket prices, marketing success, economic conditions, etc) you can, over time, develop a pretty sophisticated understanding of what impact your programming choices will have on your box office. If you've been in your current role/community a while, you're probably good at this already. Every time you put a box office estimate figure into your budget, you should be looking at past box office results for similar shows and asking yourself about other relevant conditions affecting sales.

Audience research can help deepen your understanding of the links between your programming choices and people's willingness to attend. Audience members' decisions involve a risk assessment, particularly if the show is unfamiliar to them: what's the risk I won't enjoy this show? If it's similar to something they've enjoyed before, they perceive less risk. They're more likely to attend. If it's something a friend has raved to them about, they're more likely to attend. If it's something involving someone (actor, musician) they've enjoyed before, they're more likely to attend. And if they're a more frequent attender (or

subscriber) their 'risk appetite' is likely to be higher than a less frequent attender. Frequent attenders usually develop more of a sense of adventure – they've seen more, are perhaps not so excited by stuff they've seen often before, and have probably experienced enjoying a show that surprised them, something they didn't expect to like so much. So they're more prepared to take risks on things that aren't familiar. This means if you have a larger contingent of frequent attenders, you can probably program more less-familiar, 'risky' shows, than someone with a smaller contingent of frequent attenders.

Popular programming and developmental programming:

Everyone's doing the juggle. Most performing arts venues have to balance their annual programming across shows with different audience appeal to achieve their box office targets. If they're planning a couple of more adventurous or unfamiliar shows, they'll try to balance them with a couple of sure-fire hits. Some venues need to program a certain proportion of shows with intervals, to ensure they make the bar sales revenue target. So how is this going to play out through your program plan? If you're programming for a subscription season, or multiple packages, you'll need a certain number of shows of particular types to suit your subscribers. If you're planning audience development of particular segments (younger men, the local Italian community, etc) you'll need to program some shows for them.

A matrix approach might work here: write your various criteria for program selection by genre, say, across the top, and by target community and by 'risk profile' across the side:

	theatre	visual arts	music
popular	2	1	1
'edgy'	1	2	1
Italian	1	1	1
indigenous	1	1	1

You might get lucky and find an Italian theatre piece that is also popular, or that is also adventurous ... it's possible some shows might fulfil several of your criteria.

Loss leaders and cash cows:

This is really just the financial flip side of popular and developmental programming: your popular shows should work as your cash cows; your developmental shows should work to develop your audience, engage target communities, and will not achieve the same box office revenue or venue capacity as your cash cows. Forecast and budget accordingly. Which brings us to:

Budget scenarios:

How do you currently work out your revenue forecasts? If you are, or have on your staff, an Excel spread sheet wiz, this is where you'll be glad of that skill. One of the best ways to test different programming choices against each other is to build different sets of budget scenarios, based on different programs. You can then also use them for price sensitivity testing, testing the impact of economic conditions, of increased concessions, lower subscriber pricing, etc. [Example revenue forecast spread sheet to be included.](#)

Fees, % box office deals, sharing the risk:

Between the two extremes of buying a show outright (and bearing all the risk), and just hiring the venue to the producer (who takes all the risk), there are ways of sharing the risk. You can offer a reduced fee with a % of box office; you can do a straight % of box office deal. Paired with the idea of curating your hires, developing a repertoire of 'shared risk' deals can be a good way of encouraging particular producers to develop a relationship with your venue. If you find that you are being approached by many producer/hirers with similar shows and you can't afford to do without the hire revenue, try approaching other producers offering the types of shows you'd like to see more of in your program, and offering them a 'deal' on hire fees. Reduce the hire fee in exchange for percentage of the box office, to try to entice them to your centre. Actively promote your venue to the types of producers you'd like to see more of as hire clients.

Why go for the adventurous stuff? Are you leading or following?

When you're in box office revenue forecast mode, it can be very tempting to leave out the more adventurous shows. They're not going to look good in your revenue forecasts, but that is the time to remind yourself of your audience development goals, and of your funding partners' aims. There are other very good reasons to program some edgier shows; how many and what type will depend very much upon your existing audience, your audience development goals, and your community. Remember it's about balance.

Think of the edgier shows as the spice in the meal you're assembling for your community: it would be less interesting without them. Forecast revenue for your more adventurous shows realistically; if anything, be pessimistic. If programmed carefully and aimed at your more frequent attenders, or audience development segment targets and marketed well, you might just meet or exceed your revenue target.

Alan Brown's US audience impact research³ showed that the best way to encourage people to try new or riskier work, is to program 'pathways' in to it. Try getting edgier step by step, over a 3-year period.

For example, in annual Australian theatre seasons, program traditional well-known works like David Williamson in the first year, something a little newer like Hanne Rayson or Joanna Murray-Smith in the second, and then something by a younger playwright like Tom Holloway's *Red Sky Morning* (Red Stitch Actors' Theatre). Try to make each of the events you choose relevant in some way to your local community, as *Red Sky Morning* explores the impact of depression and isolation in regional Australia.

'Slow touring' can help here, too: the more people know about a show in advance, the more opportunities they have to get to know the artists and explore the subject matter, the more engaged they can become.

Step 9. Writing up the Plan: let's start writing now.

Taking a basic 'planning model' approach, the four sections of a Program Plan could be:

Section 1. Goals: what do you want to achieve through your Program?

- goals should be fairly high level, and limited to three or four at most
- for example, 3 or 4 of these could be considered as goals:
 - o to provide a range of high quality arts and entertainment experiences for the people of our community, while:
 - o increasing depth of audience engagement
 - o increasing frequency of attendance (this could be considered a measure of the above)
 - o build trust and loyalty
 - o engaging more younger audiences

³ http://wolfbrown.com/mups_downloads/Impact_Study_Final_Version_Summary_Only.pdf

- developing a community engagement program for CALD communities
- achieving budget box office revenue

(These goals will need to be consistent with your Marketing Goals.)

Section 2. Activities: what shows will your Program Plan result in each year?

- outline your approach to programming, derived from your artistic vision, research into your community, your audience and taking into account your goals above.
- for example, programming each year, to achieve the above goals, could include:
 - 3 or 4 plays by theatre companies X, Y and Z (or of type A, B or C)
 - 3 or 4 musical performances by X, Y and Z (or of type A, B or C)
 - “Slow Touring” model for 2 of each, with community engagement plan
 - 2 shows sourced through Kultour targeting local/regional Sudanese communities
 - 2 shows sourced from indigenous performance companies, targeting local indigenous community, with community engagement plan
- it might also be useful to include information about the size of shows you’re able to program, the amount of money you have available (annual programming budget) and the type of agreement you would like with each show’s producer: fee, % of box office, co-commission, subsidised hire, co-production, co-presentation, etc. For example:
 - majority of shows each year need to be producer hires
 - we will consider % box office deals for shows we want
 - Planning two split fee/% box office deals per year
 - \$X0,000 budget to purchase shows in 2014
 - Will not consider theatre with cast larger than 5
 - Maximum bump-in time 24 hours
- you may wish to prepare two versions of this part of the plan, one more detailed version for your internal use, and one for posting on your website and sharing with producers and touring co-ordinators.

Section 3. Outcomes: what outcomes will the Program Plan achieve?

NOTE: **Outcome evaluations** should examine the direct effects of the program and should provide insight into how to improve the program. Outcomes could be listed in terms of audience numbers, frequency of attendance, first timers attracted, target communities

attracted, revenue achieved, subscriptions sold/increased, etc. These would be linked in to your Marketing Plan and Budget.

- for example:
 - Total audience attendance: X
 - First timers attending: Y
 - Subscribers increased by: Z%
 - Audience numbers for Sudanese events: A
 - Audience numbers for indigenous events: B
 - Brand clarity/position
 - Community awareness levels of your program

Section 4. Impacts: what impacts are you anticipating: how will the program affect your community, your Council, your audience and your financial situation in the longer term?

NOTE: Impact evaluations seek to assess broad, long-term changes that occur as a result of the program. Impact evaluation could include such measures as:

- Audience/Community impacts:
 - Changes in diversity
 - Changes in depth of engagement
 - Longer term engagement of key targets (eg Sudanese + Indigenous communities)
 - Community well-being and tolerance
- Financial impacts:
 - More predictable box office revenue
 - Stronger support from Council
 - Strengthened partner/funding relationships

You might wish to tap in to some of the work that has been done on measuring impacts in areas such as Instrumental, Intrinsic and Institutional, as advocated by John Holden:

Intrinsic value

According to Holden, the public, first and foremost, care about the experience they have of the arts. This refers to spiritual impact, intellectual stimulation, emotional engagement, and transcendence. Intrinsic value does not refer to 'art for art's sake.' It's about the way an individual might experience art.

Instrumental value

This refers to the impacts that the arts might have for social or economic goals, such as reduced recidivism, social inclusion, health and wellbeing. According to Holden, these outcomes of the arts are of little interest to the public, although they may be of value to policy-makers

Institutional value

Institutional value is the way in which an organisation creates value for the public through the ways in which it works. An organisation can create value through how they engage with their public.

Institutional value can include:

“creating trust and mutual respect among citizens, enhancing the public realm, and providing a context for sociability and the enjoyment of shared experiences.” Arts organisations, as contributors to social capital, are “creators of value in their own right... Trust in the public realm, transparency and fairness, are all values that can be generated by the institution in its dealings with the public.”

See Holden, John, *Cultural value and the crisis of legitimacy*, Demos, London, 2006 and Holden, John, *Capturing Cultural Value: How culture has become a tool of cultural policy*, p.17

As quoted in *Meaningful measurement, a review of the literature about measuring artistic vibrancy*, by Jackie Bailey, published by the Australia Council for the Arts 2009

Some further resources on measurement and evaluation:

The Australia Council for the Arts, as part of the Artistic Reflection Kit, recommends arts organisations use Audience Impact Surveys to understand how their work is stimulating and engaging their audiences. The Australia Council teamed up with Alan Brown, principal of WolfBrown and an international leader in the measurement of audience impact, to develop an Audience Impact Survey for Australian performing arts organisations:

<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/resources/About-Artistic-Vibrancy/?a=102368>

Culture Counts is an intrinsic and instrumental value measurement platform that captures artist, peer and public feedback on the quality and reach of arts and cultural events. It provides value to artists by connecting them to peer and audience feedback; value to arts funders by measuring the artistic justification for funding; and value to the public by providing a structured forum for sharing views and opinions on arts and cultural events: <http://culturecounts.cc/>

A Suggested Template for your Plan

Now that you've worked through all of the considerations in developing a Program Plan, it's time to write it down. Gather up all the notes you made working through this Guide, review Step 9 in relation to Program Goals, and start thinking in detail about the Goals you want in your Program Plan.

What are you aiming to achieve in your Programming? What overall long-term goals will shape the decisions you make each year about what to program? These might be related to audience development, attracting more audience members from particular groups within your community, rounding out the program with a greater variety of genres, or aiming to increase audience attendance frequency (which would be a goal shared with your Marketing Plan).

This short template is provided to get you started:

The XYZ Arts Centre Program Plan

Introduction

Write an overview of your Program Plan aims here. Write it last, so it acts like an Executive Summary and sets up the reader for the details to come.

Artistic Vision or Policy

Quote the main points or goals of your Artistic Vision or Policy here if you have one.

Programming Goals: (see Goals, in Step 9, above)

Write your Program Plan goals here. You might want to include goals relating to community (perhaps from your Council Plan), artistic, audience development, and financial outcomes.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
4. (.. try to limit this to no more than 3 or 4, high-level goals)

Program Strategies:

You might want to develop a set of strategies to achieve your Program Goals, such as programming to encourage the purchase of packages of 3 events or more, or to link in with the school curriculum in various subject areas so that you can offer workshops with the performances. Developing partnerships with producers over several years, to ensure you can offer their work every year over a period, to help build an audience, would also be considered a strategy.

Program Activities:

Include an overview of your season, describing the types of shows you've chosen and the rationale behind your choices. Then list each show for the coming year. This section, the activities, will change annually, but your goals will probably remain the same across 3 to 5 years. You should review your goals against your progress in achieving them, every couple of years, and adjust as required.

Outcomes: (see Outcomes, above)

Describe the outcomes you hope to achieve through this program of activities. Like the goals, try to limit the number of outcomes you're trying to achieve to higher-level things – these can work like KPIs for your goals, so you might match each goal with a specific outcome you're going to measure. Limit these outcomes to things that you can measure fairly easily, and that will be useful to you when assessing the achievements of your programming for any one year.

Impacts: (see Impacts, above)

Impacts are longer-term consequences, so you will only be measuring at this level every 3 to 5 years. It's important to consider how you're going to measure your impacts: if you're aiming for higher levels of engagement and more frequent attendance, can you commit to an audience questionnaire to measure engagement annually (to measure the increase), and analysing ticketing data to monitor frequency of attendance?

Measurement and Evaluation

How are we measuring the success of our Program Plan? Box Office revenue? Number of visitors? Number of first time audience or visitors? Audience from particular geographic areas? Depth of impact of the experience?

What measurement tools will we need: database analysis? Audience/visitor questionnaires?

However you choose to measure and evaluate the success of your Program Plan, remember that it has to be practical. The less tangible impacts can be difficult or expensive to measure. It can be better to keep it simple, and measure things that are relatively easy to measure, rather than dreaming up a very complex evaluation system that is too time consuming to manage.

OTHER USEFUL INFORMATION

Sourcing performing arts events

Long Paddock, www.cyberpaddock.net.au, Regional Performing Arts Touring Fund

Not every show you might want to program will present itself to you on a plate within a Long Paddock forum, complete with funding from the Playing Australia Regional Performing Arts Touring Fund. Not every show at Long Paddock is funded by RPATF, of course, and neither should they be. Not every tour needs that kind of government funding to be viable. You may program all or part of your season through Long Paddock or cyberpaddock, or none of it. These days there are many more places to find touring shows that might suit you and your audience development plans:

Direct Producer relationships

Many producers (theatre companies, music groups etc) are now developing or considering their own direct relationships with presenters/venues, targeting those who have either sold their shows successfully in the past, or those who have audiences they think are a good match for their work. Ask yourself whether there are any producers you might have a useful conversation with, along these lines. There are now opportunities for such conversations offered as part of the APACA Conference, and at Long Paddock. The WA Showcase organised by CircuitWest, and the Victorian Showcase is another opportunity

Showcases

Many state PACs are now developing their own annual Showcase events. You will know all about these, being part of the leading state for this initiative. You should consider attending other states' Showcases as they grow and develop.

Go See Fund

The Australia Council offers money for you to get on a plane and see an Australian show you'd like to consider programming. Go get it!

<http://2014.australiacouncil.gov.au/grants/2014/go-see>

6PAC (you don't have to do it all on your own ...)

6PAC is a Victorian initiative that delivers a low cost, non-funded touring model that supports a healthy network of small to medium sized council run performing arts centres throughout Victoria. 6PAC serves to compliment the vibrant touring program offered by Regional Arts Victoria (RAV) and does so without needing to add further pressure to the annual Arts Victoria 'Touring Victoria' funding program.

6PAC aims to promote the type of product that usually doesn't appear in suburban and regional venues. The diversity of the product toured by 6PAC plays a major role in the audience development strategies for the participating VAPAC venues.

6PAC sources the majority of their touring product from a number of avenues including La Mama, The Arts Centre's Full Tilt program, VAPAC Show Case, 3MBS Artists in Residence program and submissions from independent producers.

6PAC is not just about touring, but plays a major role in building capacity for performers, artists and producers by supporting, assisting and educating the performers on how to get the most out of their 6PAC tour. 6PAC takes no fee for coordinating the tours and each of the venues involved enter into their own contract with the performers. The buy-in fee is negotiated by 6PAC and only includes the presentation of the performance.

When involved in a 6PAC tour, the performers are entering a partnership that empowers them to take greater responsibility for their own future by understanding the processes required to undertake a tour through this network. This is achieved by the performers taking a lead role in their contract negotiations, which includes arranging marketing material and travel and accommodation costs with each venue coordinator. This is a great way for both parties to develop a relationship that paves the way to future opportunities and partnerships.

MetroWest

A group of three venues in Perth's outer suburbs got together to look at what their programming needs were and whether they could share events for 'mini' tours to their region. They agreed the events had to be low cost, low tech, and require low staff numbers. Robert Housley, Venue Manager at the Don Russell Performing Arts Centre in Gosnells, says *'it has to work for the least resourced venue in the group, but the show needs to be professional and reasonably high profile .. we looked for local producers first, and for actors who had already toured in another show, someone who our communities would already know.'*

APACA's Guide to Touring

<http://www.apaca.com.au/media/pdf/Guide%20to%20Touring%202013.pdf>

CHECK LINK is a useful resource containing all sorts of information relevant to presenters sourcing programming through touring. It also contains a list of **Tour Coordination** organisations.

powerPAC http://www.apaca.com.au/power_pac_intro

The Theatre Board of the Australia Council commissioned APACA to develop a set of guidelines to assist regional, outer metropolitan and suburban performing arts centres to nurture the development of theatre production and presentation within their venues. The aim of the powerPAC project is to create a set of practical national guidelines for nurturing, making and producing theatre work within Australian Performing Arts Centres countrywide. The **powerPAC guide** can be downloaded from the APACA website. The purpose of the guide is to:

- *provide venue owners with a greater understanding of creative processes, how to better support their programmers, performing arts managers and creative producers, and the added value this can bring to community and audience development.*

- *assist PAC managers, programmers and in-house producers to develop local theatre artists and produce work more effectively in their venues.*
- *develop confidence for co-commissioning and co-producing with other venues and artists beyond their communities.*

Tour Coordinators

You are probably already familiar with **Country Arts WA's [Shows on the Go](#)**. You may also already know about the [Blue Heelers](#), the group of Regional Arts Australia tour coordinators who have managed the [Long Paddock](#) face to face events and the online [Cyberpaddock](#) for many years. Other touring coordination organisations and networks that can help you identify touring shows appropriate for your audiences include (in alphabetical order):

Critical Stages <http://www.criticalstages.com.au>

“Critical Stages is Australia’s national professional organisation for the development, production and touring of outstanding independent theatre. We seek out the most promising and successful productions from the independent theatre hubs across Australia and help them find new audiences. Critical Stages works with presenters and venues of all scales, shapes and sizes to connect them to leading independent theatre makers and deliver high-quality productions. We work with independent theatre practitioners to develop and deliver their work to the touring circuit, including casting and creative engagement, management of remounts and rehearsal, and the delivery of high-quality productions to the venue. We manage all aspects of production and tour delivery including funding, employment, venue contracts, marketing and publicity and tour coordination. We aim to engage with venues and presenters to develop audiences for exciting new productions and support them with resources to reach their target markets.”

Musica Viva ‘CountryWide’ program <http://www.musicaviva.com.au/whatson/regional-concerts>

“Musica Viva helps bring the best ensemble music to regional Australia through our CountryWide program which is supported by the Australia Council, Communities NSW and Arts Victoria. By partnering with a range of local presenters including professional venues, volunteer-run arts societies, festivals and regional music conservatoriums, Musica Viva enables audiences in regional towns and cities to experience the best classical, jazz, world music, early music, vocal, and percussion ensembles in Australia.”

Performing Lines <http://performinglines.org.au/>

“Performing Lines develops, produces and tours new and innovative Australian performing arts regionally, nationally and internationally. Performing Lines makes things happen. We nurture and recognize creativity, provide artists with access to broader audiences, and contribute to the enhancement of a distinctly Australian culture both in Australia and overseas. Performing Lines is present at every level of the Australian performing arts sector. We work with emerging independent artists to help increase their skills and sector awareness; we produce the work of these artists as well as that of more established artists and companies; we connect artists with national and international presenters; and broker and manage the tours that result. Performing Lines has producers in Perth and Hobart as well as Sydney, partners and collaborators in every state and territory, and an increasingly rich network of contacts overseas. In addition we manage a number of related but separately funded initiatives.”

Further touring coordinators are listed in the APACA Guide to Touring
see in particular, section 3, Mechanisms and Programs:

Curated Hires and Artistic Direction

Some venues are starting to take a more proactive role in relation to venue hires, and by curating their hires, are shaping their program across many more shows than they entrepreneur. Examples include Benalla www.bpacc.com.au and the Theatre Royal in Hobart <http://www.theatreroyal.com.au/>

Others, perhaps because they are producing theatre companies as well as venue managers, have Artistic Directors who program a season of events each year in addition to the works they create/produce. Examples include HotHouse Theatre in Wodonga <http://www.hothousetheatre.com.au/> managing the Butter Factory Theatre; Merrigong Theatre in Wollongong <http://www.merrigong.com.au> managing the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre and Wollongong Town Hall, and NORPA (Northern Rivers Performing Arts) in Lismore <http://norpa.org.au/> managing Lismore City Hall.

Co-commissions

If you are developing a good relationship with a few producers/theatre companies, and they're keen to talk about commissions, why not explore the idea of co-commissioning with other venues targeting similar audiences? There is often government funding available to assist with commissioning new work, and shared between five or six venues it might just be possible to get a new commission up and running.

Make a note here of some of the new ways to find appropriate events that you would like to explore for the future:

A note on subscriptions, subscribers and programming

Funeral arrangements are premature

The death of the subscriber has been forecast for over 20 years now, although within that time many organisations have been either disproving or bucking the trend. Yes it seems to be true that baby boomers are less loyal and more promiscuous than their parents in their entertainment choices, but there were always people who didn't like to subscribe. There are also more ways to engage with the arts now – online, in a cinema – and maybe some people want more participatory involvement. Perhaps there *are* more who resist subscribing now, but that doesn't mean there are no potential subscribers left.

It's about commitment? No, it's about discipline

The very essence of subscription, i.e. commitment in advance, is the thing that people either love or hate⁴. Non-subscribers hate the idea of committing in advance: they might get a better offer; they don't know what they'll be doing. But people who are subscribers use it as a form of self-discipline: subscribing 'makes them' do something they know they love, but fear they will miss if they don't 'get organised'. Recent research shows that we enjoy anticipated experiences more, which means that by purchasing in advance we're increasing our eventual enjoyment of the experience⁵. Traditionally in the performing arts we've given our deepest discounts to our subscribers, in return for that loyalty and pre-commitment. They love the savings, too, particularly those who attend most frequently. (And if you have a donor program, you'll probably get back way more than the subscriber discount in donations over time.)

Flexibility and subscription do mix

Organisations offering subscriptions have found that they do need to introduce some flexibility to maintain subscribers' commitment, however. The lump sum payment up front is not so attractive if you have less money to spend – so provide them with an instalment payment system. Spread the payments over the year. Some people may find the commitment to so many shows more difficult: they might travel more for work, or work longer hours, or otherwise find that their time is less flexible than before. Older retired subscribers are probably going for longer overseas holidays while the \$AU is strong. So provide them with options for fewer shows, not just the one big subscription package – three shows should be enough to qualify. And if you have repeats of the same show within a season, offer them the flexibility to swap dates where you have the capacity. Unless you're sold out, that should be possible. See the Theatre Royal Hobart's subscription packages for an example of flexibility: <http://www.theatreroyal.com.au/subscribe>

⁴ From focus groups with performing arts audiences

⁵ Waiting for Merlot: *Anticipatory Consumption of Experiential and Material Purchases*, Psychological Science, August 21, 2014

Financial advantages

There's no doubt that a subscription approach can save on your marketing budget. By encouraging audience members who find it convenient (for self-discipline as described above) to purchase in advance, you're also saving on marketing dollars. If you analyse how much it costs you via a subscription campaign, to sell each ticket sold, and compare that with the cost of sales for each single ticket sold, you'll see that it's much cheaper in terms of marketing cost, to sell tickets as part of a subscription. It also makes planning for your single ticket sales campaigns easier, as if you offer a flexible package, the subscription patterns will tell you in advance which shows are likely to sell better than others. Forewarned, you have more time to plan your extra marketing efforts, which will hopefully make them more effective, too.

Programming and subscriptions

When programming for subscription packages or memberships which reward repeat attendances, you need to keep in mind that what you're obviously trying to do is maximise the number of shows that the majority of your subscribers will want to attend. That doesn't mean they all need to be the same, but it does mean they shouldn't be 'all over the place'. If you've built up an audience that loves theatre, you need to give them enough theatre shows within the year to make it worth their while buying a subscription. You might have loyal theatre and music audiences, and be able to program both theatre and music streams within your year, allowing people to choose 3 theatre shows, or 3 music shows, a combination across both, or all 6 shows. For example, if you need to sell all 3 music shows to subscribers to make your revenue target, you won't want one of them to be an edgy contemporary music show. If it's a great show and you really want it, try to make that your 4th music show, so you still have a 3-show music package. Keep in mind that longer term subscribers are usually up for the odd challenge – but you need to work out how many 'challenges' you can program each year without eroding subscription sales. It might be one challenge out of 6 shows. If you offer a flexible subscription package, where people can choose from the whole program and still call it a subscription as long as they take a minimum of 3 shows, the less adventurous will drop what they see as the challenges. It's a balancing act. Challenging theatre with strong casting, or adventurous music repertoire with well-known performers, can be a good way to hedge your bets.