The valued customer: investigating Brisbane audiences

Rebecca Scollen is currently conducting an audience reception study for La Boite Theatre Company. The primary aim is to expose participants’ perceptions of La Boite’s productions and discover their attitudes to theatre in general. Initial results have been valuable and it is expected that the complete study may aid the company in responding positively to the group discussion sessions and their understanding and appreciation of theatre has grown.

In order to know your audience and to understand what they think and feel about your productions it is undoubtedly a worthwhile exercise for theatre companies to actively seek this information. The plausible results are increased patronage and improved audience appreciation. Under customary theatre audiences are people spending hard earned money on a commodity they hope will be satisfying. How can theatre companies best serve the public if they have very little knowledge of who their audiences are or are not, and their reactions to the theatrical event?

This is the role of audience reception studies: a field of research which places great importance on theatre audiences and their role in theatre. The question of who experiences and assesses throughout the study. Audience information.

To friends discussion is an excellent way they seek. Open interviews are an worthwhile exercise for theatre companies to actively seek their help. A number of methods have been used to gain information from audiences after the event, including questionnaires and interviews. Closed or semicontrolled interviews allow the researcher to ask direct questions to gain the information she or he seeks. Open interviews are an attempt to allow the audience to speak freely about any topic or aspect of the performance they want. Single interviews are a good way of clarifying what individuals experience, however, they limit the number of people the researcher can speak to at any given moment after the event. Group interviews allow many spectators to discuss the performance together as a group.

Group Interviews

Depending upon the aims of the group discussion, the researcher can play a strong moderator role asking direct questions of the group, or can play a limited role allowing the audience to raise issues and questions for themselves. The group interview allows the researcher to hear a number of perceptions in a short period of time, and become more aware of the differences between various sections of the community when comparing responses. The discussion encourages individuals to rethink their ideas as they come in contact with others, and to question the opinions of other people in the group. A greater depth of thought then arises as individuals have to defend their perceptions and consider the opinions of others that they may have never considered before the interaction.

The primary model utilised in the 1997 Pilot Study (discussed below) was directly influenced by the research of Sauter (and associates) conducted in 1986 in Stockholm. Sauter incorporated Theatre Talks as a method for retrieving the experiences of theatrical performances from small groups of audience members. His aim was to create an environment and interviewing style that was not unlike the situations audiences would normally be placed in after a performance. In order to achieve this ambition, audiences were taken to a study of a similar nature in the future, and would now actively look for advertisements of future productions of such companies. Most group members were encouraged to attend productions in the future and to encourage others to do so as well.

The post performance group discussion is an excellent way to uncover information about theatre companies in their artistic and marketing decisions, and ensures the opportunity for audiences (or potential audiences) to meet and share their experiences with other theatre-goers. These meetings provide audiences with an environment that encourages them to learn about theatre and to become more confident and critical in their thinking about performances. Their awareness in turn leads to a wave of interest and informed theatre-goers eager to attend quality productions. If theatre companies listen to the thoughts and feelings of their audiences, and if audiences believe that their thoughts and feelings are of value to theatre companies, then a strong bond can be developed and this two way communication can lead to exciting new prospects for our theatre industry’s future.

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1997 Pilot Study

As part of a MA research degree at Queensland University of Technology I conducted a pilot study aiming to:

1) expose audience perceptions of five professional theatre productions in Brisbane.

2) test the methodology applied to gather and analyse the data relevant to the first inquiry.

In order to do this, questionnaires, individual interviews, diaries, and focus group discussion sessions were incorporated. The success of each method of data collection, in relation to popularity, validity and high collection rate, was recognized and assessed throughout the study. Some perceptions were gauged via the responses of a small, non-representative sample that made up the audience component for the research. Of the six individuals consisted of three men and three women; one of each gender placed into three age categories of 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s. All members were currently living in Brisbane, had diverse occupational backgrounds, and varying degrees of previous theatre-going experience.

Their responses were recorded primarily through the use of focus group discussions. An adaptation of Lidstone’s (1996) Synergetic Model for group interviewing was adopted with the researcher facilitator playing a supportive, yet passive role.

The proposed outcomes of the research were to give insight into the thoughts and feelings of six Brisbane theatre members about five professional theatre productions, and evaluate the methodology used to gain such responses. The results of the pilot study would then be interpreted and define future theatre research to ensure that further exploration into the reception of theatre audiences in Brisbane continued.

Overall, the study was successful in gaining the perceptions of each group member to the five professional productions attended. The study also demonstrated several important issues needed to be made to refine the data retrieval methods to lead to even more successful future studies. These changes have been made for the 1998 audience reception study I am currently conducting at La Boite Theatre Company.

The pilot study suggests that discussing performances in a group after the event, in an environment where individuals can meet new people and are encouraged to share opinions and perceptions with others, has the following effects: Participants are more confident when expressing their thoughts and feelings about performances; participants become more aware of other ways of understanding performances (via the comments of other participants); participants become more critical of, and more open to, new experiences; have fun with a group of people similar to themselves in a relaxed and safe environment.

Early evidence from the pilot study suggests that the initial attending group will generate further subgroups, thus building a substantial network of new attendees on the basis of developing familiarity, confidence, and self-confidence.

The questionnaire helped many of the group members to order their thoughts and refresh their memories before speaking as a group. Diaries were poorly received by the majority of the group because it believed it had said everything it needed to say at the group discussion. The follow-up interviews demonstrated that all members were willing to take part in a study of a similar nature in the future, and would encourage others to do so. All members had spoken to friends and family of their involvement in the study, and of the performances they had attended. The group would now look for advertisements of future productions of such companies, and were encouraged to attend productions in the future and to encourage others to do so as well.

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