

Audience Development and Theatre Communications

The best line of defense the theatre industry has in competing against entertainment mass communication is audience development- the effort to increase and maintain a steady population of performance spectators. However, there are challenges that come with developing a measurement tool in audience research. "Theatre Talks" is a communications-measurement model in understanding audiences, especially their perceptions of a performance.

Wilmar Sauters' "Theatre Talks" model was developed in the 1980s, and further developed in 2000. This research peered into audience experiences with theatrical performances. 180 total participants (divided into 25 groups) were chosen to represent the various social spheres and occupations that comprise Stockholm. The original methodology used to obtain results included a survey questionnaire that gained socio-cultural background information. The researchers examined seven factors in relation to experience: gender, age, education, social status, cultural activity, theatre preferences and theatre habits.

The standard operating procedure for the original experiment is as follows: a group of 7 spectators (all of whom know each other, for maximization of comfort) would view a performance together, and discuss their individual experiences immediately after the show. A group leader acted as a moderator to the discussion; not guiding the natural conversation but facilitating the discussion of the performance.

This approach to audience analysis is similar to the focus groups we find in traditional communications and social science research. While the author claims that focus groups are not an efficient method for audience development, they agree that such an approach allows for audience insights. Skjoldager-Nielsen (2019) describes the Theatre Talks experiment as, "a specific version of this tool (focus group) designed to focus on spectators' experiences and carried out without the pre-prepared scenario."

Although the experiments did not lead to quantifiable results, they provided the researchers with valuable consumer insights, proving the method as an effective tool for monitoring audience development. For example, this study found that gender does not affect an individual's experience with a performance. However, age can impact the experience for an audience member. Research findings also pointed to an audience's appreciation of a performance depending on the quality of the actors/performers.

Sauters' research led to him developing a three-level Theatre Communications Model measuring spectator-performance relationships. His three levels include a sensory level (the personal relationship between a spectator and performer,) the artistic level (the creative choices that distinguish the live performance from everyday life,) and the symbolic level (the artistic actions of the executioners of a production.) These levels take into consideration an audience member's emotions and cognition.

This "Theatre Talks" experiment has been modified and adapted by others investigating audience development. Rebecca Scollen's efforts include adding psychographic and observing participants who do not know each other. This method has also been applied in observing the democratic potential of theatre. This perspective views theatre and "Theatre Talks" as a public forum; with the discussion of theatre in a socio-political context as a means for citizens to exercise their right to debate and

inform themselves on the individual level. This concept aligns with James S. Fishkin's concept of deliberative democracy.

The author discusses the merits of this model across three audience development approaches: marketing, cultural policy, and audience development on the individual level. The author discusses each perspective: Marketing as a customer-product approach, Cultural Policy as the democratization of the arts, and the individual relationship between an artist and an audience member. The author notes that these individual practices are not mutually exclusive; suggesting the discussed model as a solution to integrating all of these perspectives to audience development.

Skjoldager-Nielsen affirms this "Theatre Talks" model as effective in that it places the spectator's perspective at the forefront, there are benefits for both a production/theater and its patrons, and it can decrease barriers by inviting non-theatergoers to experience a performance.

This was an interesting article as I've yet to find a communications model contextualized in theatre and the performing arts. The qualitative information gained in these surveys and focus groups are incredibly valuable in understanding how audiences receive and process a performance. Still, I'd be interested perhaps in developing surveys for theatre-audience research. Statistics and numbers can, at the least, affirm an organization of successful audience development (increase of sales, increase of new audience members, increased attendance rate.)

In practice, theatrical organizations can implement this method in their audience development efforts. While the research in this study establishes that income does not affect arts attendance, exposure and arts education do have an influence on audience interest (Scolten, 2007.) In providing opportunities (accessibility) for non-theatre goers to view a performance, producing entities can adapt their artistic and managing approach appropriately.

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Skjoldager-Nielsen, Daria. (2019). Theatre Talks – Audience Development in Three Perspectives: Marketing, Cultural Policy and Theatrical Communication. *Zarządzanie w Kulturyze*. 20. 397-409. 10.4467/20843976ZK.19.023.11129.