



The **BIG** conversation

The graphic features the word 'The' in green inside a white speech bubble, 'BIG' in white inside a large orange speech bubble, and 'conversation' in blue inside another white speech bubble. The bubbles are arranged in a line, with the orange one being the largest and most central.



Talking about our art. Listening to our audiences.

**It's good to talk. But it's even better to listen, to converse, to connect and engage.**

*Artists have been stimulating big conversations with and within their audiences since art began. And it's in those exchanges that the meaning and value of art can be found.*

*But the rise, some thirty-odd years ago, of Orthodox Arts Marketing has interrupted, stifled, controlled, channelled and stylised that vital free-flowing conversation. And in its place we've had... copywriting.*

This paper is published by Creative New Zealand, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre and The Audience Connection as a reader for The Big Conversation 2014. The reader is intended to enrich a debate about the future of the sector and the conversation between art and audiences.

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Creative New Zealand is the national arts development agency: developing, investing in and advocating for the arts.

## The curse of Copywriting

*Orthodox Arts Marketing holds that artists are great people but that they're not that great at talking to the audience. This, the argument goes, is a task best left to professionals. Copywriting's purple prose is surely required to entice the notoriously ticket-shy audience to the box office and to frequent our museums and galleries.*

Copywriting claims that it's just like our own words, only better, in a different order and with cooler adjectives. It's more eloquent than us, wittier, more self-assured and far more persuasive. Copywriting always knows the right words to say, and when. It finishes every sentence before starting a new one. It anticipates the next question and answers it without missing a beat.

No wonder, then, that it sounds nothing like a real conversation.

Now, don't get me wrong. I love a bit of copywriting. It's like an Olympic sport with marks awarded for style; spin; and technical virtuosity. But, be honest. It all sounds, well, just so generic.

It's got so bad that I've been receiving versions of the same, tired old direct mail letter for the past 20 years. Delete opera, insert ballet. Rinse and repeat. Why am I no longer surprised that the New Zealand Herald or Otago Daily Times loved it so much that the type for their quote suddenly triples in size? But if snail mail is looking tired, if anything, those templated MailChimp emails seem even more cloned.

And we all know what we mean by 'brochure copy'. Heck, we could all write it on auto-pilot. It's a style that's become its own genre. Upbeat, perky, ever so-slightly breathless, packed with nods and references to previous triumphs and relying on a central list of hackneyed phrases. Why is it that dance is always so exhilarating?

Of course, even though Orthodox Arts Marketing is still perpetuating the old idea that the audience is a mass of fickle, would-be non-bookers who might just be won over by a compelling headline and a smart turn-of-phrase, the reality is somewhat different.

The audience is far, far smarter than that. Many have given up reading our re-worked, over-polished but thinly-disguised sales pitches altogether. Our brochures go straight to recycling and our emails are routinely trashed or sit unopened. Those who do read our heavily copy-written offerings do so with their 'bulls\*\*t detectors' on full alert.

Think about it. We're all audience members ourselves. We all get sent these same-old, same-old brochures and emails. And we don't believe a word of them. We know the game and we read between the lines. Why would our intelligent, media-literate, clever audiences not be doing exactly the same?

It's time we recognised that audiences don't want to receive a letter signed by a Marketing Manager, no one wants to read anything that sounds even vaguely like it's been written by one. I know this. That used to be my job title.

If the task is to bring artists and audiences closer together, then Orthodox Arts Marketing's copywriting experiment has certainly failed. If anything, it's actually created an opaque layer between the creatives that make the work and the audience they'd love to engage.

So, if we are to have any hope of dialogue with our audience, if we want them to engage with us, then the clichéd copywriting really has to stop.

The time is right to call it a day and vow never to send another one of those emails or write any more of that brochure copy. You'll feel better for it, and the audience will be thankful. Filtering the bulls\*\*t is a soul-destroying task when all you crave is a genuine, meaningful personal connection with someone who has made, curated, loves or has breathed life into the work.

## Communities not customers

*Every time we send a sales message, it reinforces Orthodox Arts Marketing's insistence that the audience member is a 'customer' and that the relationship we are seeking is primarily transactional.*

Audiences get that message loud and clear and it keeps them firmly in their place: at arm's length. And it's really hard to embrace at arms length.

Instead of building databases full of customer sales leads we need to build real communities of engagement and support around our institutions and our work. Sure, we might keep the register of those precious community members on a database – heck, we're not luddites – but it's the human relationships we're interested in, not the kilobytes of data.

*Cultural experiences are amongst the most personal, powerful and memorable we can have. So every encounter, real or virtual...is an opportunity to make a really powerful connection with an audience member.*

Relationships are not difficult, audiences are pre-disposed to them and we are, actually, naturally very good at them. Every time we welcome someone into a venue, every time they have a shared experience in a performance or a hosted moment in museum or gallery the bond is strengthened.

Cultural experiences are amongst the most personal, powerful and memorable we can have. So every encounter, real or virtual, with the artist, director, performer, curator or guide is an opportunity to make a really powerful connection with an audience member and deepen his/her sense of engagement.

All our communications need to evoke the experience of a one-to-one encounter with the creative fanatic behind the work. We need to share more than just the details of what's on. We need to convey our inspiration and our heartfelt desire to share the experience with them, personally. We need to share our humanity.

And when we ask audiences for their opinions, collect their feedback and listen to their stories it's like adding rocket fuel to the relationship, especially when we act on what we've heard. This dialogue is personal and our responses are personalised. All this is a long, long way from the one-way, downward push of Orthodox Arts Marketing.

Some cultural organisations have gone much further. They've invited their audiences to create, to produce and to co-create work. International Audience Atlas' data suggests six in ten audience members would like to co-create with us.

From the audience dramaturgy of theatre-in-development programmes like Toronto-based Theatre Passé Muraille's 'Buzz' and London-based Battersea Arts Centre's 'Scratch' to the increasing number of museums routinely using formative evaluation to pre-test exhibition concepts, plans, titles and prices, audiences are becoming stakeholders in the work.

*For a really clear overview and analysis of personalisation and interactivity, it's worth downloading Gerri Morris's This Time It's Personal, the reader for a previous Creative New Zealand conference:*



<http://bit.ly/TLaQvr>

<sup>1</sup> Audience Atlas is a comprehensive research study undertaken by Morris Hargreaves McIntyre.

## Segmentation offers ‘Mass Personalisation’

*Of course, while we should make the most of every real-world, face-to-face contact, no cultural organisation has the resources to truly personalise every communication and to deal with each individual on a one-to-one basis every time.*

That’s where Culture Segments comes in.

Segmentation is a good compromise between the incredibly ineffective one size fits all and the impossibly inefficient one-to-one. New Zealand Culture Segments classifies people into meaningful and practically useful groups within which people share deep-seated values, beliefs and propensities.



<http://bit.ly/1jl89Fy>

Understanding these Culture Segments, consciously targeting them and differentiating your messaging, presentation and the experience you’re offering makes every one of your communications far more relevant and valued.

By simply ‘tweaking’ the communication between versions for different segments, you can quickly build out a ‘mass personalisation’ campaign, increasing audience response and building brand trust.

You can differentiate your communications whether or not you have a direct marketing database. Even when using ‘broadcast’ channels such as posters and advertising, messages optimised and for specific Culture Segments will find their target far more reliably than messages optimised for no segment.

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And using Culture Segments media insights, those messages can be carefully placed in particular chosen titles and channels where your target segments are most likely to see them and have the greatest propensity to respond, forward, click or book.

Increasingly, organisations are ‘screening’ their database members on joining – and via updates – to collect answers to Culture Segments’ short ‘Golden Questions’ together with other ‘relationship’ data like Brand Equity that profiles an audience member’s levels of loyalty, trust, risk taking, sense of belonging and propensity to join, to donate or to volunteer.

A database holding this kind of rich relationship profiling is a very powerful tool indeed.

## Put down that Digital Megaphone

*The advent of digital communications should, by now, have revolutionised our audience relationships.*

Now that email campaigns to active, core audiences are so much cheaper than New Zealand Post, we could and should have spent more of our budgets targeting the infrequent, lapsed and lapsing audiences that make up such a huge and forgotten proportion of our databases. That hasn't happened.

*The web and the devices we carry have such rich relationship tools... While some cultural organisations are deeply digital, adoption rates in others are positively glacial.*

And while the rest of the internet is brim-full with authentic, opinionated, wonderfully idiosyncratic user-generated content (reviews, ratings and recommendations), most of our websites by comparison read like tightly controlled brochure marketing sites. They could be edited by Pravda. Why are we so afraid of giving the audience a platform?

The web and the devices we carry have such rich relationship tools: instant, always-on channels built for sharing thoughts and ideas; spaces for two-way and group discussions; the ability to text, tweet Facebook,

Instagram or Vine a response and see those of others. While some cultural organisations are deeply digital, adoption rates in others are positively glacial.

But, where we score really badly is in the use of email. It's never been easier to make all our messaging carefully differentiated and powerfully personalised. Yet most organisations choose to send undifferentiated, impersonal email 'blasts' wrapped in garish HTML graphic templates that scream 'generic web advert' not 'personal message'. Instead of using email to finesse our relationship messaging, we're using it like a cheap, one-size fits no-one, digital megaphone.

The danger is that instead of moving beyond old-fashioned Orthodox Arts Marketing into a new, post-marketing world of genuine audience engagement, we simply end up importing its flawed tenets, wrong-headed assumptions and discredited bad practice into our new digital relationships. Bad direct mail letters become bad email blasts.

**Right image:**  
Auckland Writers Festival.  
Photo: Gil Hanly.



## The impact of Digital Content

*But the world of digital communications offers us a myriad of ways to connect, engage and build communities around our institutions and our work.*

Digital content can be richer, more intimate and more readily available in real time than anything we've had before.

*Rather than cannibalise the 'live' audience, digital distribution both extends the market and creates a stronger desire to make a real-world visit.*

We can upload or stream our actual creative work to the web or even syndicate it to cinemas. Thousands now watch operas from the Met in New York, plays from the National Theatre in London or enjoy a personal tour of the latest British Museum exhibition with the Director as the guide. Rather than cannibalise the 'live' audience, digital distribution both extends the market and creates a stronger desire to make a real-world visit.

We can also share the process of making our work in ways that the audience find completely compelling – a peek backstage, a fly on the rehearsal room wall, conversations with the performer, artist, writer, curator, director or choreographer. All these ramp up anticipation and increase audience's readiness to receive.

But the ultimate impact of digital content can be found in user-generated content and in user-shared links to our content. It's like deputising half your audience as members of your communications team. Word of mouth has always been invaluable. Word of mouse is multiplying the effect.

**Right image:**  
Big Bang, New Zealand Festival 2014.  
Photo: Matt Grace.



## The power of Digital Insight

*All this remote digital activity is happening in a fully-connected network. Word of mouth has always been notoriously difficult to track, but word of mouse leaves digital tracks that can be followed, collated and analysed to give us unprecedented insight into audience responses.*

New Zealand has been blazing a trail with Creative New Zealand's Optimise online marketing capability building programme and the Optimiser online benchmarking project, led by The Audience Connection. Every time we throw a communications stone into the audience pond, these tools can help you to choose a better stone and track all the ripples it makes.

Rather than just broadcasting our messages and hoping that they find their mark, we can now trial different approaches and accurately track every response from opening an email, clicking on a content link, sharing on social media, forwarding to others and booking a ticket.

We know that the closer the contact with the work and its makers the more the audience lights up in response. We can now see and even measure that response by event, communication and segment.

## Now is the time

*We stand on the threshold of a completely new era. Change is afoot and there are so many examples of great new practice in our sector. And New Zealand is pushing its way to the front. Many of these examples are digital, but many are good old-fashioned analogue: face-to-face is still by far the most personally powerful medium of all.*

The Big Conversation gathering is about sharing that great practice with each other so that we can all start an even bigger conversation with our audiences.

*...building genuine audience relationships is not about digital technology. It relies much more on our desire to share our creative inspiration with the audience...*

What's clear is that building genuine audience relationships is not about digital technology. It relies much more on our desire to share our creative inspiration with the audience, our willingness to make our organisations personal, porous and transparent and our insistence that audience engagement is everyone's responsibility from the board room to the tea room. It's far too big and important a task to simply delegate to someone who happens to have 'marketing' in their job title.

Orthodox  
Arts  
Marketing  
is dead.

Long Live  
Audience  
Engagement!

