

# GROWING AND DIVERSIFYING YOUR AUDIENCE: HOW TO MARKET YOUR COMMUNITY CINEMA



## Overview

This article aims to:

- Help new Community Cinemas (CCs) formulate a start-up marketing strategy and help existing ones to review the tools they use.
- Provide a range of ideas suitable for all budgets.
- Help you learn from interesting examples from across the CC sector.

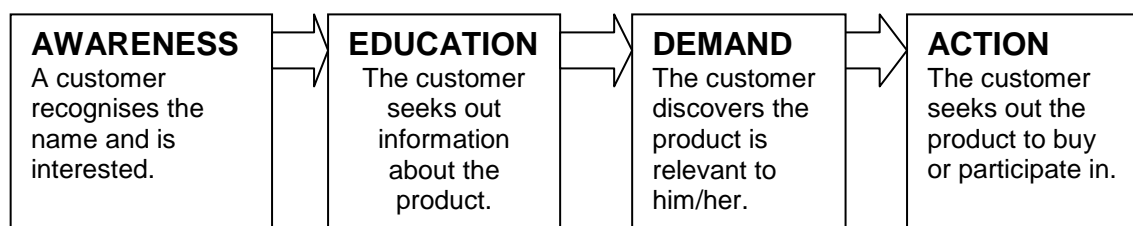
Programming, education and marketing work together in an audience development plan to grow and diversify the appetites and numbers of people seeing your films. You are, therefore, advised to read this article alongside those on Programming and Film Education.

### What's the point of marketing?

In plain words, the success of your CC is measured by the number of bums on seats. It shows if you are providing a desirable, relevant and accessible community resource. If the membership or audience is too small, there won't be enough income, volunteers or local interest to sustain it. But even if there are enough paying customers to keep the project alive, why settle for surviving when you could be thriving?

For a number of reasons the 'film society' movement has developed a 'senior' image – and while this may not be the case for all, it is true that many CCs have a predominantly 50+ audience. That doesn't mean that a 15-year-old won't enjoy the films you are showing, but it probably means the pitch of the marketing is wrong for this age group. A CC's target market is simply made up of people who share its values, want what it has to offer, and/or want to contribute to it. All marketing does, therefore, is make people aware of what's on offer and present it in a way that's attractive to them. If you do this well, your core audience should cut across age, gender and ethnicity.

Marketing is about taking a customer on a journey:



Only the first two stages are within your control. You need to create a clear identity and then make sure you provide as many ways for your customer to learn about you as possible. It's the quality of that information that will lead to demand and action.

### Marketing principles

To facilitate the customer journey described above, it is worth keeping in mind the following:

#### Be unique:

Don't rely on community goodwill to sustain your CC. Give your customers something special to talk to their friends about.

**Be honest:**

Don't try to be or claim to be something you're not. Trust is the cornerstone of any seller/buyer relationship.

**Avoid the hard sell:**

Don't push it down people's throats. The information should be available, useful and designed to make the customer's decision easy.

**For the people, by the people:**

The seller/buyer relationship is a two-way exchange. Your CC should be genuinely inclusive and its volunteers and audience should feel a sense of ownership. One of the most powerful buy-ins is that of membership of an organisation. Membership schemes create a sense of belonging and loyalty that will boost both your doing-power and your audiences.

**Getting started**

Devising and delivering a marketing plan will be difficult and limited if it is left up to one person. So, before you begin, create a small steering group of three or four volunteers who are clear about the task in hand and the schedule.

There should, however, be one person who leads the planning and is responsible for managing the on-going marketing effort. This person will be the internal point of contact for other sub-groups and the management committee but should also be the contact for the public and press. Publicise your commitment to responding to enquiries within two working days, because a lack of access to information may become a barrier that stops people taking up what you have to offer. This person will require a deputy who can fulfil this commitment when he/she is unable to deliver to it.

**Marketing task 1- Develop a product****Selling more than a ticket**

You are selling more than a ticket to see a film. As a community and/or membership organisation, you want people to associate themselves with you. You need, therefore, to start by identifying all the things that will appeal to your audiences: the things you will draw attention to in your marketing; the things that make you stand out from your competitors; the things that will make you newsworthy.

The following list may help kick-start the discussion, but remember to bring your Programming and Film Education teams into these discussions.

**Your values and 'brand'**

Remember: Your target market is made up of people who share your values, want what you have to offer and/or want to contribute to it. So, tell people what you are about.

Every CC needs:

**A Vision**

Think of this as your destination; a description of the place your CC wants to get to. This will probably relate to filling a gap (see below).

**A Mission**

Continuing the travel analogy, this is a description of your journey; the direction you are taking.

**Objectives**

These are the vehicles you are using; all the activities you will undertake to deliver the mission and reach the vision.

## **Values**

The Highway Code; the rules you are committed to following on your journey.

The sum of all of these is your 'brand', i.e., how your CC is perceived by those outside the organisation. This theme runs throughout this article because it should influence everything the CC does, from programming to marketing to front of house, in order to achieve customer loyalty and build a profile. Many people associate 'branding' with large corporate marketing tactics but even the smallest organisation has a brand, although it may have developed unintentionally.

If you are an established CC with a constitution, you may already have identified your vision, mission and objectives, but they shouldn't just be confined to an official document. Reflect them in both your marketing and your programming in order to build the brand and ensure delivery to the widest, most diverse audience possible.

## **Vision**

You do not have to give an explicit list of your values to your audience. Instead, your audience should be able to connect with your values and overall brand through the marketing materials you produce and the type of programme you offer. For example, if one of your values is to be 'convivial', you need to use cheerful colours and a similar tone in your publications. Likewise, if you claim to be family friendly, your programme cannot be dominated by films with 15+ certificates.

All the big brands use logos, typefaces and colours that communicate their values and are designed to attract like-minded people. Think about the Disney Corporation, for example, which people know instinctively stands for family values, light-hearted escapism and glossy productions. This philosophy enables them to develop trust among audiences who are not interested in low-budget, serious, social-realist drama.

## **Uniqueness**

Your selling points should make you unique and help you compete in a crowded leisure marketplace.

## **Fill a gap**

CCs are set up as a response to a gap in the market resulting from a failure of the private and public sectors. Often the gap is sensed intuitively by a group of people who feel strongly enough to start a CC but others will also have recognised the gap and may be glad something is being done to fill it.

The gap may be primarily cultural, i.e., there is no access to independent or foreign language films or to any cinema, full stop. If the gap is cultural, you need to highlight your programming and make it sound as exciting as possible. Regional/National Screen Agencies and Arts Council England, whose job it is to fill cultural gaps, may provide promotional (and possibly financial) assistance.

The gap could be primarily social, i.e., there is no place for young people to hang out, adequate transport links to nearby cinemas are lacking, or there is a need to open up community facilities, like schools or churches, to wider public use. Local authorities have community, cultural and regeneration plans, produced by them or other development agencies to address poor provision. Can you address any of the gaps? If so, your marketing could take an 'active citizenship' and 'community cohesion' angle that may win you support from agencies with similar priorities.

However, despite being unique, you will never be short of rivals. You may be the only cinema in town but you won't be people's only leisure time option. As they say, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

### **Positive relationships**

If there is another cinema, build a positive relationship with the programmer and marketing manager and introduce cross-promotion. This will be relatively easy if you have an independent cinema or a local authority-run competitor but won't be impossible if you operate in the shadow of a multiplex.

- Keep an eye on the other cinema's programme and ensure what you offer is entirely different. Send the marketing manager a friendly email outlining your forthcoming programme.
- While striving to be different, look out for opportunities to be occasionally complementary. For example, if you know Spiderman 4 will be a big summer film, offer your audience the chance to catch up on 1, 2 or 3 in the run up to release.
- Think about showing the occasional film in their cinema. You may get a good deal if you convince the cinema that it is an audience development opportunity for them or a chance to show it supports the community.

Other local competitors include any place people choose to spend time and money, e.g., theatres, pubs and restaurants. Think about ways you might work with them on special promotions that may help keep your audiences loyal to you and bring in new patrons.

Then there is home entertainment – your biggest competitor by far. The only way to stop people watching a film at home and bring them into your CC is to create a communal experience that's as enjoyable, if not more so, than the film itself. If you can get the social aspect right, people will come along regardless of the film you are showing. A successful CC will be a social as well as a cultural hub.

### **Be a destination**

Chances are you can't compete with a multiplex's comfy seats and pick 'n' mix. But who wants identikit cinema when there's somewhere more unusual to hang out?

Obviously, it's easier for CCs that have their own space, as demonstrated beautifully by the historic Electric Palace Cinema in Harwich, Essex ([www.electricpalace.com](http://www.electricpalace.com)). But if you don't have a permanent venue and you have the kind of mobile kit you can set up anywhere, choose a special place for a publicity screening. Tyneside Cinema's mobile outreach cinema, for example, showed *Poseidon Adventure* on a pleasure boat, *The Thomas Crown Affair* in an art gallery and *Life of Brian* in a church (this was the vicar's choice...).

You might also trade off your venue's location to bring in tourists. You can see this reflected in the way Keswick Film Club's logo incorporates the hills and lake.

### **Generate local pride**

One of the main advantages CCs have over their commercial counterparts is the ability to be locally specific. People love to see where they live on screen (past and present) and they also like to support creative people who can go out and represent their city, town or village. Find out from your Regional Screen Agency who is producing films, or has produced films, in your area. This is a promotional win for both exhibitor and filmmaker.

The Oxen Park Cinema Club (winner of the BFFS Community Award in 2008) provides a local focus and contributes to civic pride via its Filmmaking Unit. It produces local news items, adverts for sponsors of the monthly film shows, children's filmmaking workshops, and short documentaries about local people, settlements and businesses that can be shown as short 'starters' at the monthly film shows. ([www.oxenparkcinemaclub.org.uk](http://www.oxenparkcinemaclub.org.uk))

Your CC could also support small businesses. Is there a local microbrewery that might supply your bar? Is there a local cake, sweet shop or confectioner that might supply your concession stand?

## Marketing task 2 – Pitching

In creating or redesigning your marketing materials, you should convey an identity that highlights your uniqueness and clearly sets you apart from your competitors.

### What's in a name?

At this point, you may need to go right back to basics and think about the name of your CC and whether it says something about you.

The independent, theatrical cinema sector does this well:

- The Showroom in Sheffield is a former car showroom.
- The Cornerhouse in Manchester is on a street corner.
- The Watershed in Bristol is located in the old harbour area.

In the last example, the name 'The Bristol Independent Cinema' wouldn't match the venue's uniqueness or be catchy enough to be memorable or easy to create a logo out of.

You could still refer to yourself as a 'film society' internally, but the public may get the impression you are too exclusive or, in the case of 'community cinema', too worthy.

Here are some creative examples from the CC sector:

- CinéGuernsey
- Star & Shadow Cinema
- Guerilla Cinema Project
- Flix
- IFF! (Inverness Film Fans)

### Strands

Think of the Disney Corporation again: when it gets involved in more adult, dramatic content it does so through Buena Vista International, an independent sub-brand that shares some of Disney's key corporate values but also has a set of its own.

If calling yourself a 'film society' works for your long-standing members but you also need something to attract a new audience, you could try creating a new strand of programming and marketing – perhaps a specific youth or family strand of your programme.

For example, the Star & Shadow Cinema was formerly known as the Side Cinema, so called because it was located on The Side, a street in Newcastle's Quayside area.

The cinema's programme had four strands:

- The A-Side: artist film and video
- Cineside: classic and avant-garde films
- The Other Side: lesbian and gay cinema
- The Radical Side: political, anarchist film

Although the 'Four Sides' appeared together on the programme and were often interconnected, it allowed the four programming groups to do their own audience development. Crucially, it was a way of organising a very eclectic programme into clear units that the public could identify with.

### Targeting your audience

Having defined your CC, you need to pitch it to people to whom it may appeal. This may be approached in a number of ways.

### **Advertising tools**

Develop a marketing plan that uses as many of the following advertising tools as possible:

- A printed programme
- A website
- Flyers/posters in the community
- Press adverts/listings
- Direct or e-list mailing
- A social networking page (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Meetup, etc.)
- Word of mouth

(See *Intellectual Property Rights* for potential licence restrictions on advertising).

### **Promotional tools**

In addition to the publicity you produce yourself, there are other free communication channels you can use to improve general awareness of your CC, including:

- Local area/school/community/society newsletters
- Local authority website and publications
- Tourism websites
- Local BBC website
- Myfilms.com or yourlocalcinema.com
- Regional or National Screen Agency publications

### **Community partnerships**

Align yourself with other community organisations and give them a reason to promote you.

*Word of caution:* Partners may help you gain local support and possibly some funding, but be honest and do not try to be something you're not just for the sake of some publicity. Community partnerships should fit your social values and your commitment to benefiting a diverse audience.

Invite community leaders and representatives to your screenings and ask how your CC might work with them. Their buy-in may help to:

- Raise awareness and build trust among communities to which you may not otherwise have access.
- Develop a better understanding of what the specific barriers to participation from members of the community might be.
- Understand what specific information is important to give them.

You might also support a local charity each year. Work with their communications manager to organise publicity stunts and fundraisers (you should be able to learn a lot from them in the process). Don't pick a charity at random; make the decision with all your volunteers, members and audiences. Most people have issues close to their hearts and many will be pleased to nominate a good cause.

Suitable partners might be found among other community arts organisations such as a local community theatre or library. Talk to the people responsible for marketing and explore working together. Consider offering discounts to members of other clubs and societies.

### **Outreach**

Be aware of forthcoming community events you could be part of. Organise a film-themed float for the carnival. Set up a stall at a village/school fete. Or put on a special film show to fit in with an arts or history festival.

If possible, take your cinema outdoors and have a free screening in a well-used public space. Your local authority arts officer should be able to help you with this.

### **Patrons/endorsements**

If you're lucky, your locality may be the birthplace of, or home to, a well-known personality who is willing to be associated with you. The Electric Palace in Harwich, for example, has film actor Clive Owen as its patron. It is also important to get endorsements from members of your audience or from local supporters (such as the mayor, MP, well-known residents, etc.). Seek feedback from your audience regularly and get their permission to use their comments in your publicity.

### **Press contacts**

Build up a good list of all local and regional journalists to whom you can send press releases. Create a press release for your screenings, seasons and for every special event and send them out in good time. For special events, follow up the press release with a call to the relevant journalist. There is plenty of help online for writing a press release, but the most important thing is to do as much of the journalist's job as possible. That means writing something with a story, so you need to find or create an angle with your programming and education teams. Remember to include a press contact on the release and make images available on request.

## **Marketing task 3 - Finding resources**

Assessing your resources at the start of your marketing planning may only serve to limit the steering group's creativity. By now, however, you should have a slate of new marketing ideas – but what resources do you have to deliver them?

You want a long wish list that you can then prioritise with the easily achievable and affordable at the top. The items lower on the list will require more money, time and skills than you currently have but that doesn't mean you should discard them.

### **People (their skills and their time)**

People power is nearly always more important than money for a CC, but how well do you know your CC's members, volunteers and audience? Chances are they have skills and contacts that will be useful to you.

Find out (with respect to privacy) about your members' and volunteers' employment history and their pastimes. You will, hopefully, discover people with some experience of or interest in: website building and setting up social networking sites, art or graphic design, copywriting, journalism or press relations and so on. Whatever their level of experience, you can use them!

If there aren't the skills among your core volunteers and members, put out a call to your audience, perhaps offering a year's free films if they can help you deliver something on your marketing wish-list. Alternatively, you can do more discreet detective work by, for example, asking the audience to drop their business cards into a box on their way out of a screening for a free ticket prize draw. The skills you need might also be found within your partners' organisations, and they may be willing to help.

However, even skilled people are of no use to you if they don't have the time. Not everyone will want to attend a three-hour marketing meeting, but there will be other ways of getting people's input, so try to work around the individual.

### **Money**

If you are an established CC, you may already have a marketing budget that is based on your income projections. If you are a new CC, you may not have a budget yet. Either way, your wish list is likely to need an injection of cash. Continually gather information on pots of money for which your CC might be eligible.

In your research you might look at your:

- Regional or National Screen Agency website.
- Local authority website. Most have an external funding officer who has access to Funder Finder or equivalent software that identifies suitable grant-makers for your project.

- Local paper. Look out for local businesses that may consider advertising in or sponsoring your programme or website.

The work you have done in defining your CC's vision and values will help you make a case to a potential funder.

If you are applying for grants or sponsorship for another area of work such as your education programme, remember to include marketing as a proportion of the budget.

## **Marketing task 4 - Measure your success**

Having put so much work into your marketing plan, you'll want to know it's working. Collecting data about your audience will also help you build a case for funding, should you need to at any time.

As it builds, the data will show where the gaps are in your audience, and this information should prompt a review of the range of advertising tools you are using or the scope of your programme.

Decide what data are important to you, but unless you have an experienced statistician on your team, keep it simple and call it feedback rather than data-gathering:

- Age (children up to 12, teens 13-19, young adults 20-34, adults 35-49, mature adults 50+)
- Male/female
- Postcodes
- Ethnicity (avoid token categories; give your audiences an opportunity to tell you, if they choose)
- Disability (as above)
- How regular attendees get information about screenings
- How first-timers found out about you
- Satisfaction ratings: 1=terrible, 2=poor, 3=satisfactory, 4=good, 5=excellent for venue, the event, technical presentation, front of house and quality of the information available (i.e., the marketing materials, rather than any other information such as programme notes)

### **Data collection**

Create an initial baseline from your existing membership from which you can measure your progress. Then collect as much data as possible from new members when they join and ask new audience members to complete the feedback forms (so make sure forms are to hand at all times).

Try to collect the satisfaction ratings for every screening or event. Entering all responses into a free prize draw may be an incentive. The variable data (postcodes, age) can be collected once a year to feed into an annual review of the CC's performance. Keep a good record of the data and have it to hand for your marketing meetings or for funding bids.

You can also collect data from non-attendees by hitting the street or working through one of your community partners. Find out if people have heard of your CC and what would make them come. Give everyone you talk to a free ticket for a special screening to encourage them in through the door.

## **Marketing task 5 - Show your appreciation!**

And finally, when your marketing strategy is up and running and you can see the fruits of your labour, remember to thank your steering group and marketing volunteers. They too will feel good about the effect their input has, so share the data you collect about the success of the marketing efforts.

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