

NEW WOLSEY THEATRE – IPSWICH, UNITED KINGDOM

Key words: place, building capacity, organisational change, leadership, economic sustainability, partnership, data, community rooted | by habit | by choice | digital

Synthetic data sheet

Full name	New Wolsey Theatre
Address	Ipswich, UNITED KINGDOM
Legal status	Company limited by guarantee
Year of establishment	The building opened on 1979, then reopened as the New Wolsey in 2001
Area of activities	Theatre
Kind of activities	In house and touring productions
Number of annual attendances	115.381
Total amount of budget	4.100.000 £
Number of employees	50 FTE

Data refer to 2015

Background information

New Wolsey Theatre is based in Ipswich and is an independent not-for-profit organisation. They are funded by Arts Council England as one of its National Portfolio Organisations and receive local funding from Ipswich Borough Council and Suffolk County Council as well as other project funding from a variety of sources.

New Wolsey Theatre is a mid-scale theatre with a mixed performance programme that combines in-house with touring productions. It has a diverse audience, a strong commitment to access and reaching parts of the community not normally engaged in the arts. This is complemented by a strong business model based on a policy of maximising earned income, especially through ticket sales, and innovative funding.

Ipswich is a town with 127.000 population, a mix of 'rural bliss', 'gentrified areas' new build family housing and older working class areas. Fans of the local football club Ipswich Town are known as the 'Tractor Boys' indicating how the town has historically been perceived (tractors are farm vehicles).

The theatre draws mainly from a greater area of Ipswich – 80% coming from up to 40 miles away – a broader reach than most arts organisations in the town.

AD was a key aim from the point of re-development in the 1990s (when it changed from The Wolsey to New Wolsey Theatre). The theatre has launched a new AD strategy relatively recently, pulling in external expert support from consultant analysts. This has helped them to move away from a campaign-by-campaign way of relating to their audiences, to a coherent long-term strategy to grow and retain audiences. This is still a relatively unusual step for theatres like this, and they have had considerable success in growing and diversifying their audience base.

The Chief Executive Officer oversees an operation, which includes the artistic director and has AD as one of her priorities.

They are a leading institution in the life of Ipswich and a key cultural player in the East of England. They influence national policy and practice and have an unusually high number of creative collaborations with other producing houses and touring companies and take part in or lead several initiatives.

What do they want? Goals and achievements

The New Wolsey has a strong sense of social purpose and external focus: 'We are here to serve'. They do so, however, by taking the lead, as activists and provocateurs¹⁴.

Confident balance of artistic, social and financial aims

They are a great example of an organisation that aims to manage the 'triple bottom line' achieving their ambitious creative and social aims through an entrepreneurial financial model. They do this expertly and without compromise: for example, they have found strategies to make diversity, access and equality compatible with their business aims in a virtuous circle. They have become adept at attracting local regeneration funding because it serves their civic purpose. Significantly they are proud to be "good at creativity *and* business.

Over the next few years, they aim to obtain more in earned income, using data as a basis to take more from those that can afford it whilst ensuring pricing remains accessible for those who are less wealthy.

Local Leadership

In addition to their own financial survival and creative renewal, they consciously play a key leadership role in the life of the city and its hinterland, with the aim of shaping the identity of the city, and contributing to a distinctive sense of community, and opportunity. This is reflected across their work: from choice of programming and commissioning, to the wide range of participation opportunities they offer. But that sense of responsibility has not led to a homogenous output, instead they take a leading role in introducing the new, bringing other and eye-opening perspectives on the world to Ipswich. Whether that is about reaching out to the new Lithuanian community, or commissioning original work from an emerging disabled or international artist.

Sector Leadership

Similarly, they also aim to take a lead in the development of British theatre, putting a strong emphasis on artist development, particularly working with those from a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds. Despite the apparent financial and audiences challenges, a significant part of their output is highly contemporary. They see a

¹⁴ See their mission: <https://www.wolseytheatre.co.uk/about/>

necessary correspondence between their sector leadership at national level and their local leadership in Ipswich. This is what brings real value to their audiences and community. Their Youth Theatre is, for example, enriched through its connection to developing artists – and vice versa.

Purpose or Policy?

They are motivated by organisational purpose rather than external policy. Indeed, rather than being led by policy, they are increasingly challenging policy frameworks, such as that of the Arts Council England's emphasis on 'new audiences' (rather than on retention of newly won audience relationships), and taking the lead in creating local cultural policy – such as writing the cultural strategy as part of regional regeneration policy.

Audience Objectives

They have clear audience objectives – compatible goals for sales, access, demographic diversity, and audience retention.

How do they do it? Making it happen

The New Wolsey has a demonstrably inclusive organisational culture and audience focus.

It has an excellent artistic reputation, a successful business model, in which audiences increasingly provide a high proportion of revenue, and provides valuable local leadership. We can trace the connection between that audience focus and facets of their success.

Audience Awareness

Senior staff have an unusual sensitivity to their audiences, which vitally combines qualitative and quantitative understanding. They seem confident combining intuition with hard evidence – or more correctly trusting intuition but testing and expanding it with evidence. It is noticeable that they really invest in this awareness – in their investment of time as well as hard cash in properly commissioned research and insight.

Data Driven Decision Making

As the theatre has developed a more strategic approach to audience development, data has become more important and valued. Sarah notes, "everyone seems to think data is mostly useful in advocacy, what I'm talking about is using it to change the way we do things, to be more effective". There are many examples of the way that have used data (sales, audience behaviour and profiles, audience feedback, population data) in this way: to increase ticket yield, target accessible pricing, retain new audiences, increase frequency, forecast the impact of programming decisions, make radical changes to promotion, use of digital, plan different customer journeys

They have learned valuable lessons in testing their hunches and assumptions.

'If you told me 2 years ago we could sell a ticket at £40 I wouldn't have believed you.'

'We were averaging 70% capacity and this has gone up to an average 85%'

'There was a 31% increase in Box Office revenue, generated by data-driven price increases'.

Catalogue – Case studies – Study on audience development - How to place audiences at the centre of cultural organisations

The use of data in a predictive way (to set income targets, length of fun, programme mix etc.) has, Sarah says, been liberating, “it gives us confidence to take risks”.

Different journeys for different audiences

As a browser to their website, you can tell that the New Wolsey start with you and your needs trying to serve your needs first <https://www.wolseytheatre.co.uk/>. Steven notes how much time and effort they spend on managing the customer journey, but also on segmenting their audiences and creating differentiated offers.

They recognise what is often forgotten: AD is about managing relationships, on the way that audiences are introduced and then retained. While they do target new audiences, including groups less likely to attend, they put real energy into maintaining those hard-won relationships over time. The whole AD strategy is a coherent, data-driven plan in which the whole organisation is clearly engaged.

Participation plays a large part

The New Wolsey has a comparatively large and very busy creative learning team, creating “over 20,000” opportunities to participate every year. Some of those distinctive offers are partly or exclusively about participation – which is not seen as a means to an end, but one of the routes through which the theatre offers access to creative inspiration.

Diversity, access, equality...

Is the New Wolsey’s motto, and it informs all aspects of their work, not just the work on stage, nor the design of the building. For example, Jamie Beddard leading disabled actor-director and activist is currently has been an associate working across the organisation as a creative change agent.

Audience Focused Leadership

These values are not just embraced by the leadership but are real drivers. Sarah as CEO is as committed to the practice as she is to the principle, and takes an active leadership role in the adoption and delivery AD strategy. There is a strong relationship between Sarah and the director of audiences, in this case Director of Communications. They are each unafraid, they say, of challenge or to do things differently from received wisdom.

The audience focused organisational culture is epitomised by the recent change of the structure of the team, which put all audience-facing functions into one flexible team: front of house, sales, catering, marketing, relationships (philanthropy), working in ‘a matrix way’. Everyone does front of house duties and answers the phone to bookings and enquiries. No one can forget the audience.

We all sell tickets, we are all responsible for loyalty and we are all on a mission to build audiences and give the best customer experience possible.

Their approach to partnership and co-operation is based on the belief that it adds huge value, despite the hidden costs. I also wonder whether learning to be collaborative is also boosted that sensitivity to other perspectives so essential to audience focus. The theatre has an unusual range of collaborations – from creative ones to regeneration projects. The organisation is now applying their collaborative muscle to AD, bringing some of their exemplary practice to a region-wide strategy.

Interviews: Sarah Holmes - Chief Executive Officer; Stephen Skrypec - Head of Communication

Interviewer: Anne Torreggiani & Jonathan Goodacre – The Audience Agency (UK)