

Cultural Enterprises Podcast

Series 3, Episode 4 – The Future of Front of House

What will Front of House operations look like as we reopen in 2021? In the next 20 minutes we will look back at 3 lessons learned from 2020 and then look forward to how to implement those 3 learnings in 2021, as venues across the UK get ready to open their doors again.

So, what have we learned from 2020?

Many venues played the painful game of opening and closing several times in 2020 as the UK continually entered and left lockdown periods and implemented changes in restrictions levels. Some venues chose to, or had to, stay closed for the whole period. Some venues actually thrived in 2020, especially outdoor attractions which were able to stay open when everyone else had to close.

The point here is that there is no level playing field when it comes to experience in a COVID or post-COVID world. But luckily, through many organisations, such as the Association for Cultural Enterprises, we can learn from each other. And this is, by far, the single most valuable lesson for 2021: do not work in silos.

2020 has shown us that we need one another. May it be to have new ideas about how to operate in a new world, or maybe to simply validate that our way is indeed the right way, or in order to join forces to instil confidence in our audiences and visitors to come back to visit us.

2020 saw new schemes being launched, such as The 'We're Good To Go' industry standard mark from Visit Britain and the 'See It Safely' mark from SOLT and UK Theatre, just as examples.

Schemes like these are not just important for our visitors to know they are in safe hands when they come to our venues, but also really valuable tools for us to use, knowing that we are compliant, that we are not doing any less than the rest of the industry and also providing a safe networking space to seek out advice from in world where literally uncertainty prevails.

We all need to get better at networking, seeking out advice, benchmarking against our competitors and colleagues...these things are all incredibly positive, especially the benchmarking exercise.

Knowing what others are doing and taking inspiration and ideas from it is not competition, especially in our industry, and shouldn't be seen as such. Benchmarking is about survival

and about ensuring you are at the very least, doing the bare minimum. It is essential in 2021 to know what everyone else is doing. And 2020 has forced us to be better at this.

In specific for Front of House teams, I find this to be even more true. We get used to doing the same thing day in and day out, and although no day is ever the same, we learn how to deal with every possible situation under the sun. And that coupled with lack of non-operational time and often no money in the training pot, it means that front of house teams often operate in silos, in a bubble.

Something else to be mindful of here, is that if you work in visitor services, your role is probably not what it used to be. For instance, since March 2020 it's like I have started a new job. As a trend, I don't think anyone's roles will be exactly what they used to be, if not ever, probably not for the remainder of the 2021. We need to be flexible, be resilient but be kind on ourselves. Networking and speaking to others in the same position as us, is incredibly reassuring and the power of that should not be underestimated.

In summary so far, lesson learned number 1 and therefore 2021 trend number 1 is this: join industry membership groups, sign up to industry marks, network more! It is the only way to succeed in the times ahead and a much better way of working in the long-term. The benefits of joining memberships which provide a support network, a source of information, benchmarking stats, research data, training and resources far outweigh, especially in current climate, the financial cost of the membership itself.

What else have we learned from 2020? We have learned that Front of House has emerged from the shadows. Everyone of course understands the importance of Front of House but in my experience it wasn't until 2020 hit that all layers of an organisation truly had to stop and give front of house operations and front of house staff the attention they deserve. Front of house in venues like ours, being a theatre, a museum, a gallery, there are always changes needed to accommodate certain events, but on the whole, it happens on auto pilot. Taking a theatre, for example, which is my area, somehow we open our doors, we let in over two thousand people in the space of roughly 45 minutes, get everyone seated and quiet, then serve all these people with their drinks and ice creams in a space of 15 minutes, then get everyone out in roughly 15 minutes, clear everything and go home like it was nothing. We have been doing this for a long time, operations are tried and tested, there is always someone who knows what they are doing, and everything is fine.

But it wasn't until 2020 hit and we had to unpick every single detail of how we manage to get those 2000 people in, in 45 minutes, so we can then figure out how to do it socially distanced, using one-way-routes, getting people to test and trace, getting their temperatures checked, their bags checked etc etc, and then having to do that with half, or less of the staff we used to have, and then having to explain to others what kind of black magic we are going to use to be able to achieve this... not until that happened people truly appreciated what goes on front of house.

And not only that, for the rest of the organisation to then witness how front of house teams emerged from those difficulties and simply delivered on quite simply, an impossible task... that has made Front of House come out of the shadows. Not a place we should have ever been in, but nonetheless, it proved that our operation is incredibly complicated and it relies on people's skills and resilience, as well as an enormous passion for what we do.

As a side note here, visitor services staff need to feel safe. We have an obligation to deliver on this, not just from a government guidance point of view, but also from a perception point of view. If there are extra measures we can put in place, so everyone feels comfortable in their workplace, then we should try our best to implement those. Talk to your staff about how they feel and keep the dialogue open.

In summary so far, lesson learned number 2 and 2021 trend number 2 is this: Front of house has now earned a place at the table. Front of house is not a secondary, but it is a core element of any organisation's essence. Covid has highlighted this, and may we never forget! As a trend for 2021, if you don't work in Front of House, ensure they are plugged in conversations, ask for their input, allocate them non-operational time and, where possible, also allocate them some resources for networking, to join memberships, to go visit other places and benchmark. Value what they do and work together.

Also remember that staffing levels are lower. Unless you are in a very fortunate position where your department has not received many cuts, you are likely to be amongst the majority of organisations in our industry which will need to operate with less resources. Besides obvious implications on Health and Safety and customer service, which hopefully have been taken into consideration already, we need to be mindful of the artistic programme, the events schedule, the opening hours, things that Front of House teams are there to deliver on rather than helping making decisions on. With the best will in the world, some operational decisions will be made in a way that Front of House may not be able to deliver with reduced staffing levels. Organisations must give visitor services as much notice as possible of scheduling decisions and be mindful of the impact those will potentially have on them in 2021 and even in 2022.

What else have we learned from 2020? Well, a lot. So I will keep my third and final learning point and 2021 trend as a summary of visitor behaviour I have personally witnessed for far. I'm going to stress here that this is a summary of my personal experience. You can easily get hold of many consumer behaviour research pieces which are specific to your industry, so for the time that we have today, I want to get personal and share some of the trends I have experienced in real life. I'm sure you will have many more trends you would like to add from your personal experience and I would encourage you to share those with us at Cultural Enterprises.

Let's get started, with some brief FOH learnings and trends.

Visitors want to visit you. May I stress, again, this is my personal experience of both working in the Arts and being a visitor of the Arts. Even the older generations who at the

beginning we have assumed would take a while to return to the outside world, they really want to come and visit you. Your job is to reassure them that you really want to see them back too and that you will ensure their visit is safe and enjoyable. They will also need reassurance that their money is safe should they no longer be able, or feel comfortable, to attend.

People don't want half experiences. As much as I said people want to come and visit you, they will only come if they think it's worth it. They expect some aspects of their visit to be different and some outlets and experiences to be closed, but if the majority of their visit is going to be compromised, they will probably not be interested. I have experienced this at work with some of the initiatives we tried to implement also in personal life. Ask yourself: would you go to Paris if the Eiffel Tower was completely barricaded and you couldn't see it? Some will say yes, some will say they would rather wait until 2022 when it reopens. Ensure you are adding value to the visit, if you want people to come back in 2021.

Visitors are much more resilient to change, especially digital changes, than they have ever been. Many peers I've spoken to have reported very few complaints or remarks about moving some of our traditional visitor services into the digital sphere – things like e-tickets and QR codes for hand-outs and venue maps. Not everyone will be happy, but it is definitely a 2021 trend that visitors will be more open to incorporating digital experiences in their visits.

Overall, there are of course many more things that 2020 has taught and that will dictate the trends for 2021, and that's why it's important to connect with your peers in other organisations – this is trend number 1.

Trend number 2 is that Front of House is under the spotlight. It is a core department to the success of the operation, just as important as the offer itself. If front of house staff don't feel safe and engaged and if front of house do not offer a safe and secure visiting environment, audiences and visitors will not return in the same numbers. So ensure front of house remains under the spotlight and they are included in strategic conversations as far in advance as possible.

Trend number 3: visitor behaviour shows us that people want to come back to visit us, but we need to reassure them we are safe places and that their money is safe should they no longer be able to attend. They also don't want their visit compromised by too many closures with no "good-enough" alternatives. We also learned that now is the time to introduce digital solutions that improve their experience and make us more efficient organisations. 2021 could still end in a really good note. It will be hard work, but it will be worthwhile to reopen the doors, raise the curtains and let the magic begin again.