

Edinburgh festival fringe management infrastructure level

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This report will critically investigate the Edinburgh festival fringe, in Scotland, and will give a full evaluation of the management infrastructure and propose potential areas for improvement from a project management point of view. The report will study the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, investigating the project management issues that the organisers faced and offer suggestions for areas of improvements.

The Edinburgh festival fringe, herein referred to as fringe festival, is an arts festival hosted every august in the capital of Scotland, Edinburgh. The Fringe festival began in 1974 off the back of the Edinburgh International Festival. The International Festival was a post-war festival of arts which brought performers from around the world to Scotland, focussing on classical music and drama performances. However in august 1974 “ eight theatre groups turned up uninvited to perform at the Edinburgh International Festival” Edfringe. com, 2014.

The performers whom turned up were not part of the official programme and as such were not advertised to the public. Despite this they went ahead and performed their shows, this led to more theatre groups and performers turning up each year to perform uninvited. Finally in 1958 the Festival Fringe Society was created in order to enhance the success of the performers. The society led to the acceptance of the performers and gave advice to the performers travelling to Edinburgh. The society created an official Fringe programme and opened a box office to allow the public to attain tickets to see the performances and shows.

The fringe festival has grown year on year with a reported “ 2871 shows performed by 24, 107 artists in 273 venues” (Edfringe. com, 2014) in 2013. It has also vastly expanded its repertoire of acts and performers which now range from their traditional theatre and drama to children and comedy shows. This expansion has led to the fringe festival, according to the Ian Youngs of the BBC (2014), becoming the “ world’s biggest arts festival”. The expansion however, has not come without its problems some of which this report will highlight later, and the festival over recent years has gained criticism from some of their top performers as well as attendees.

The Fringe Society, when it formed in 1958, produced a mission statement which they call their constitution. In project management it is imperative to create a mission statement as it allows stakeholders and shareholders alike to see the exact aims of the company. Entrepreneur, says that a mission statement is one or two short and pithy sentences which effectively define the “ the essence of your business’s goals and the philosophies underlying them”. The Edinburgh Fringe Festival’s mission statement is as follows;

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society is the company that organises the structure that underpins the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and it exists to:

- advise, support and encourage all participants at the Festival Fringe
- provide comprehensive information services, including ticketing, to its participants and the public
- promote the entire Fringe as a festival in the context of Edinburgh and other festivals

- maintain a sustainable business through fund-raising and commercial activities (Edfringe. com, 2014)

The mission statement has recently been called into question by some of the performers and artists of the fringe. Their problem lies within the commercialisation of the festival. Comedian Stewart Lee (2012), who has performed at the Festival for over 25 years, says that once the fringe was “utopia” for upcoming artists “but now profit-obsessed promoters are tearing it to pieces” (Lee, 2014) claims that the four biggest venues; Pleasance, Underbelly, Gilded Balloon and Assembly, are monopolising the advertising and promotion of comedy at the festival.

The comments from Lee would suggest that they are failing to deliver on their mission statement. In particular the part of the statement which states that they exist to support and encourage all participants at the fringe. This criticism is potentially dangerous for the festival as it could cause factions between lesser known performers and the big four venues.

The fringe society, therefore has to do something to combat the problem. However they must keep both sides of the argument content. The fringe society weren't seen to actually do anything to appease either party and instead chose to ignore the problem. However this problem could have been easily solved. The following should have been put into place to ensure that all performers got the recognition they deserved;

- Advertising space offered to Venues under 500 tickets for a lower price
- Literature handed out to public with details of the venues

- Transliort between venue locations

Doing the above would allow the big four venues to still compete at the same level they are currently at but also allow the lesser known venues and performers to bring in bigger and more diverse audiences. To do this would show customers and performers alike that they are supporting the smaller acts, whilst also keeping the big venues content.

The Edinburgh Fringe does not carry out much of its own marketing and advertising. It instead, relies on word of mouth selling. The Fringe festival is now big enough for this to actually work. It is also helped by performers launching their own marketing campaigns for their shows. They will often mention the fringe festival in the months leading up to the festival.

The festival society is aware that the majority of its marketing will come from the performers and as such offer advice and consultation services. They also conducted an audience survey in 2011 and they offer the results to performers to assist them. This survey cites that “ 60% cited word of mouth as an influencing” Edinburgh Festival Fringe - Audience Survey 2011, 2014, p. 1, in choosing which shows to attend. This survey however, has not been updated since 2011 so its reliability is dwindling.

It is imperative that a festival as big as the Edinburgh festival fringe does send out surveys and carries out a post event evaluation. Cvent. com, 2014, say that a post event survey is a “ critical step for an accurate assessment of your event’s strengths and weaknesses”. It is vital that the survey is sent out to attendees to ensure that the Fringe festival is able to build further on the

successes of their event, based off the customers' needs and wants. The feedback they get will be vital in problem solving for the upcoming year, as it will allow them to see what worked with the customers the previous year.

Implementing the survey can be done easily online through email. All that is needed is the customers email address which they will be able to get through; memberships, merchandise and ticket sales, and also through mailing lists. The biggest problem is getting a large enough number of people to complete the survey to ensure the results are accurate and this can be done by offering incentives such as money off vouchers. Regardless of whether incentives are offered or not, it is essential to collect and collate the information as soon as possible after the festival. This is because the information is not only useful to the fringe society but also to the performers and sponsors who need to know whether it is worth their time for the next year.

Overall in terms of marketing the fringe is not offering much in the way of advertising, rather relying heavily on word of mouth. They base this off their event survey, however this survey is unreliable as it is now three years outdated. The main solution would be to hold a post event survey every year. This way they can cater the marketing based on the customer's needs.

The Fringe has launched many careers and theatre productions into the mainstream media, and due to this it has always attracted a large amount of performers. In fact in 2013 over 24, 000 performers assembled in Edinburgh to perform their acts. The fringe makes money from these artists by charging

a one off registration fee each year to perform. They also require each performer or group to take out a membership with the Fringe society which also contains a fee.

This model of payment is often criticised by performers and has even stopped performers from attending the festival. Artists and performers often get themselves into heavy debt when performing at the festival due to the rising cost of venue hire, production costs, accommodation and marketing.

The fringe festival, however, do not hide the fact that it is financially difficult to perform at the show. They state in their guide about doing a show that “Most performers consider themselves lucky to break even - losing money is more likely” (Fringe Society, 2014, p. 7). This warning is there to advise potential performers rather than discourage them. However despite this warning many performers were unhappy at the registration fees alongside having to pay for venue hire and other costs. This led to the Fringe society introducing the Free Fringe. The free fringe is a part of the fringe festival which is entirely free. The performers are allowed to perform at venues for free and audiences can attend for free. This is designed for the smaller acts to be able to attend and perform at the fringe.

The techniques applied the fringe festival to combat the rising costs to performers are adequate enough to settle the criticism afforded their way. However if they were to work with the venues they may be able to come up with better pricing structure. For the bigger venues such as Pleasance and The Underbelly the registration fee could be higher, whereas the smaller

venues could be lower. They could also incorporate the booking of the venue into the registration system. The downside to this would be that logistically it would be difficult to organise. Overall the fringe is doing enough to avoid massive criticism from performers and venues with the combative measures they put in place.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society is a registered charity and as such, outside of the festival month, rely heavily on grants and donations. They sell merchandise online all year round and also offer a membership package to the public which offers benefits such as 2 for 1 ticket offers. This combined with the money made from the actual festival month means that they make a small amount of profit, this can be seen in figure 1.

As can be seen in figure 1 the total income, for the year 2012, was £3, 399, 961. Their biggest income comes from Box office commitions and handling charges. They also bring in a substantial amount from the sales of publications and advertising space on their website.

Expenditure for the fringe is quite high, but is still low enough that the fringe can maintain a profit. As can be seen in figure 2 the amount of money going out is £3, 263, 050. There biggest expenditure being staffing and sallaries. The next biggest cost is the box office and website and publication creation. However both the box office and publications are bringing in the majority of the income, therefore it is a necessary cost.

Overall in 2012, the edinburgh fringe festival made a profit of £136, 911.

This is a relatively modest amount due to the size of the festival. However

the money that they generate allows them to expand the festival further each year. The only way in which they could bring the expenditure down is to reduce the number of staff. However as stated the modest profit being made leaves the fringe festival in good financial position to expand each year. To increase the income they could reach out for more sponsors who are willing to pay money for advertising space. This will effectively give them money for very little effort.

Overall the Edinburgh fringe is operating a huge level worldwide. It is the largest arts festival in the world and offers the chance for performers and customers to get a taste of world theatrical art. The Fringe is making a small profit which allows them to expand every year. However as they ever expand their festival, they gain more dissenters. The improvements offered in this report would go some way to appease these dissenters whilst continuing to offer a quality entertainment and arts festival.