

10

Research and Evaluation

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After reading this chapter you should:

- Understand the importance of a knowledge of research methodology to effective festival management
- Have a good understanding of the range of research and evaluation methods available
- Understand the various uses that the different methodologies can be put to
- Know how to create a viable questionnaire
- Have a good understanding on festival evaluation

Introduction

In this chapter we will demonstrate that research is at the heart of good festival management. Good festival management involves informed decision making, and research methodologies support this at all levels from planning and programming, through the marketing and the running of the festival, to event evaluation and audience development. Research is a key element of the iterative process through which festivals develop year on year via experience and feedback, not only from audiences, but also from artists, staff and volunteers; this information then feeds into the successful planning of the next event and so on and so forth.

The aims of this chapter are to introduce the research process as a whole, give advice and encouragement, discuss the key considerations in carrying out successful research, and identify and describe the main research methods that managers will encounter in running and evaluating their festival. Whilst we will focus on the most often used methodologies of questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observation, we will also offer some other complementary approaches and discuss the use of digital and online resources in festival research.

Carrying out research is all about making the right decisions. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages, and research can be time-consuming and expensive; this chapter will help you to make the right decisions about the methodologies and their use. Successful research is all about juggling a

number of key factors such as cost, time, sample size, response rates and reliability. Research does not have to be either costly or time consuming – indeed a great deal of what festival managers already do could be considered as research, and this chapter will help them sharpen up some of those practices.

Increasingly in the festivals and events sector, external stakeholders are imposing on managers and organisers the requirement to justify their funding through reporting and evaluation. Festival managers have thus had to become aware of the centrality of using research methodologies as part of their working lives.

The methodologies discussed here are also used by other agencies, such as governments, local authorities, professional organisations or universities, that may not be directly associated with a festival organisation but may be charged with examining areas of its impact, in particular cultural and economic impacts. An understanding of research methodology is important for festival managers even if they do not carry out their own research, in that they need to have a good understanding of how research results are arrived at by outside agencies or by consultants that the festival organisation itself may have employed. This knowledge saves managers from being misled by the statistics presented to them. Key questions of methodological validity, representativeness and accuracy should always be at the forefront of the festival managers' mind.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The first, 'Research and festival managers' looks at the wider considerations a festival manager must take into account when approaching research; the second is about getting started on research; the third takes you through the preparation for your research with crucial aspects such as sampling discussed; and the final area is about 'Methodologies and data collection' and examines the key methodologies themselves, as well as introducing some complementary ones.

Festivals, as we shall see, provide some unique challenges for research because of their transient nature. Many festivals are night events, or reach their climax late into the evening; and a special challenge is that one of the main objects of festival research, the audience, are only passing through, in a heightened state of being, and are likely to be unresponsive to appeals for help with research. This chapter, then, aims to help you develop and achieve effective research.

Research and festival managers

Research leads to information, knowledge and understanding, it provides usable evaluation results, supported applications, and crucially, informed decision making. The key questions in research have always been: Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How? These questions are at the heart of

the practice of all research as we shall see, however for the moment they can also help us in thinking about the festival managers' own research universe.

The **who** is important, in particular, who do we carry out research on? Clearly the audience are the major object of research, and all aspects of their experience need to be understood. However, the potential audience is also equally important, especially if a festival is looking to grow its audience. It needs to gain information on the people who are not attending and why they do not attend. Research on your product or the individual components of the festival is important in understanding what works well, what was well received and what needs improving. This could be everything from the programming through catering provision to toilets and parking arrangements. Research on your competitors both near and far is important – what are other festivals having success with, what is their pricing level, and what are the current trends coming through? Often overlooked in research are the performers and artists, understanding their experience is vital to the smooth running of the festival. Finally, never forget your own staff and volunteers. As they are 'at the coalface' (i.e. on the front lines of delivering the festival) they see and experience things you may not be aware of, so their opinions, feedback and suggestions should always be sought.

What kinds of information can festival research provide is also an important question. We can categorise research results three ways: descriptive, explanatory and evaluative. In gaining an understanding of which methods deliver which kinds of information, this can help us in our choice of research methodology.

- ◆ **Descriptive** research data provides an account of what has actually taken place and could be useful in writing reports or funding bids.
- ◆ **Explanatory** research data provides information useful in problem solving and thus ensuring the smooth running of the festival.
- ◆ **Evaluative** research data provides information which assists you in gauging the success or failure of any aspect of the festival and is part of the process of planning the next event. Evaluative information tends to be the most important for festival managers.

We will say more about these later in the chapter.

Where to carry out the research is an important decision for the festival manager. At the event is the obvious option, although not particularly favoured by audiences who are there to relax and have a good time, not to answer probing interview questions or fill out lengthy questionnaires. Indeed, much of the debate about which methodologies festival managers should use is often about which would cause least inconvenience to participants. After the audience member has returned to their home is an option, but this can affect response rates as people move on with their busy lives,