

Developing Family Audiences

Z-arts is a multi-art form venue based in Hulme, Manchester and since its rebrand in 2012 it has focused more on its work with children and families. **Laura Stevens** explains how this shift in direction has been achieved and the positive impact it's had on the development of family audiences.

Following the rebrand in 2012, Z-arts has gone from strength to strength. One of the successes of the rebrand was to assess the organisation's mission and aims, which has resulted in an increased focus on working with children and families. This change in direction has seen Z-arts' visitor figures rise from 31,000 in 2012 to 51,000 at end of the last financial year — a rise of 60% over three years.

How has Z-arts orchestrated such a successful campaign? There have been many key factors in Z-arts rise in popularity in becoming Manchester's dedicated venue for children and families. These include: our involvement in Big Imaginations, a region-wide group of 15 venues and promoters dedicated to bringing brilliant and affordable children's theatre to the North West; putting creative learning at the heart of our offer; and the launch of our new family membership scheme, Bright Sparks.

From grand auditoriums to rural village halls and everything in between, Big Imaginations' mission is to spark the imaginations of children aged 0-13 years of age with the wonder of theatre. It has brought together 15 venues, including Z-arts, to make the North West's children's theatre offer bigger, better and more affordable.

Family audiences in the North West have responded extremely positively to the theatre programme and since 2012 there have been shows that have included *Emergency Story Penguin* by Slung Low; a promenade performance that took the audience on a journey through frozen lands to rescue a penguin in a submarine. More recently many venues including Z-arts have

seen success with schools and public performances of *Macbeth: Blood will have Blood* by China Plate Theatre, which entertained children aged 9+ with an unforgettable introduction to Shakespeare's age old tale of greed and mystery.

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As well as Z-arts' jam-packed theatre programme, we have a year-round creative learning programme for babies to teenagers and their families including visual arts, dance, drama, digital, music and much more. The creative learning programme at Z-arts is at the heart of everything we do and has been one of our greatest achievements with many activities now over-subscribed and with attendance at over 95% for all activities — after-school, weekend and holidays.

Z-arts believe that the magic ingredient to our success has been the launch of the Bright Sparks family membership scheme. The scheme was put in place to give our free creative learning programme a value and to show the families that came to take part, that although activities had no cost to them that they were a key component of the Z-arts offer.

By developing a Bright Sparks brand with a logo, membership packs, cards, t-shirts, a website and social media presence, Z-arts audiences began to buy into the →



Bear Hunt Family Fun Day at Z-arts. Image courtesy of Kati Photography © Kati Photography

→ concept and the more members that joined the scheme the greater impact we saw on membership numbers, advance bookings for activities and a better attendance rate across all activities.

Membership in the first year cost just £10 per family, as the financial aspect of the membership was not the desired outcome for the organisation. Instead we wanted better relationships with customers, to grow our audience database and to ensure that we reached our targets for active participants.

Since the scheme launched in 2013 it has gone from 0 to 952 family memberships. The scheme has grown alongside the member numbers; there are now four levels of membership: Free, Basic, Bronze Comet and Silver Star, all with their own unique member benefits. These levels and their benefits were introduced by discussion and consultation with the Z-arts' friends and family steering group — The Sparklers. For example, Bronze Comets and Silver Star families can add their handprints that represent leaves to the Z-arts Tree, a real honour for children who spend much of their time at Z-arts, as well as discounted tickets to the Z-arts theatre programme.

In 2015 the brand was given a refresh and this has increased membership further and we are currently looking at how to improve the membership scheme and ensure that we continue to offer quality and value to our audiences.

All these elements have helped Z-arts to become a venue that families want to visit and keep returning to. ✓

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Key takeaways

- The Bright Sparks membership scheme has helped to grow loyal audiences and achieve a cross-over of audiences to Z-arts' year-round theatre programme.
- The Big Imaginations network of 15 venues in the North West has enabled affordable children's theatre to reach a wider audience, including small venues such as libraries and village halls.
- Creative learning is central to Z-arts' mission to inspire generations of young people to use creativity to maximise their potential. Placing it at the heart of the offer gives children access to a range of creative activities.

AMA Book Club

I'd love you to join me at the AMA's online book club to explore the themes in my new book, *The Art of Relevance*.

Whether you work in a theatre, museum, library, or other arts or cultural organisation, join me to discuss how mission-driven organisations can use relevance to matter more to more people.

At this online book club we'll take my book as a starting point and explore further the meaning of relevance. Relevance isn't about what's hot or #trending. It's about making meaningful connections with what's inside people's hearts. I've come across inspiring examples of organisations that have gone from rags to relevance and I'll share some of these with you. We'll have great conversation around engaging and empathising with your audiences' concerns and interests so you can matter to them, where and how it matters to them.

Join me to

- Get a useful definition of relevance and tools for assessing it.
- Feel inspired on ways to open your doors to a broader range of visitors and audiences.
- Gain perspective on your challenges in turning towards community relevance.
- Ask questions and share your knowledge.

See you there,

Nina Simon

Executive Director
Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History



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