

# Community Ambassadors Podcast

## Panel response to your questions June 08.

Thank you to [Mel Jennings](#); Liz Puddick at the [Imperial War Museum](#); and Glenis Williams from the [National Trust](#) for all their contributions.

- 1. Have you had any experience where the community ambassador has worked alongside marketing departments who usually target marketing at existing audiences? Has the marketing department had to change any of their practices / designs / image etc to be more suitable for the target communities? What sort of role has or could have the community ambassador and team to influence change?**

Mel: Over the last 3 years, MLA London has funded projects where a number of 'Young Consultants' were engaged to work with museums and archives. As part of the Creative Work Placements in 2008, young people worked with heritage staff to create new resources including posters, activity boxes and audio-trails. They also acted as ambassadors spreading the word to their peer groups. A Youth Programme report will be available from the end of May on the [MLA London website](#).

- 2. Do you think an ambassador scheme which simply asked people to spread the word within their communities about a particular place (like an historic house) and distribute marketing material as and when it was produced would work? If this were the function that your organisation required, would this be enough to get a scheme going?**

Mel: It would depend a lot on the location of the property, the type of target audience and the barriers to attendance perceived by the target audience. Encouraging people to take quick lunchtime detour in their town of residence to visit an historic property may be easier than asking people to drive for 30 minutes to a country house for example. Or it could be that ambassadors find through their conversations that certain target visitors are in fact more inclined to take a drive at the weekend. Ambassadors would certainly be able to find out what is stopping people from attending. If the target audience need an extra push then as well as conversations with ambassadors, incentives and special events may also be required.

- 3. What level of involvement does a community ambassador have within an organisation? Do they get involved with things that have only public facing outputs or is their role also to communicate organisational changes/activities to the volunteers and to the wider public?**

Mel: The level and direction of involvement is up to the 'host organisation' (initially at least!). In the arts sector there are examples of ambassador programmes where the ambassadors have gone on to become board members, advised on programming and acted as a roving box office

Liz: I think that in an ideal world this would be key to a community ambassador's work. Part of the point of ambassadors in my opinions is to have an impact on organisation, and communicating and those changes and impact would be key to their work.

**4. Have you got any examples of where a community ambassador scheme works well in a built heritage environment – i.e. access to historic properties rather than museums/art galleries?**

Mel: The National Trust has one such pilot scheme with several properties at the moment in the West Midlands as part of their 'Whose Story' programme.

[http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-global/w-localtoyou/w-west\\_midlands/w-west\\_midlands-news/w-west\\_midlands-whose-story.htm](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/main/w-global/w-localtoyou/w-west_midlands/w-west_midlands-news/w-west_midlands-whose-story.htm)

Glenis: As well as being building based, Whose Story works on many other facets of heritage to make connections – such as personal heritage. Also with a building you can look at the origins of the materials that make up the building and contents – where did they come from? Similarly with any planting – where have the seeds come from. This can make connections with different cultures from around the globe. You may want to bring the place to life with actors, story-telling etc.

**5. What sort of benefits package is suitable to put together for ambassadors/volunteers – free tickets/memberships? Are there any expectations?**

Mel: If they are very committed to your 'cause' then ambassadors may be happy to work on a voluntary basis, but this also depends on how much work you expect in return. The benefits that have been provided to ambassadors are quite varied; free beer and tickets (for students), marketing and sales training (young people and mothers returning to work), advance information, discounts, free membership, social events (general ambassadors). There are also other benefits that are very important to ambassadors, such as the chance to meet like-minded people, the opportunity to contribute, behind-the-scenes experience, work experience.

**6. What is the best way to define the boundaries of a community ambassador's role for your organisation? I would have thought that there is a danger that a BME focused group might become the sounding board for organisational policies on race and discrimination rather than just promotion? Or, any experience of where this is also the case and it works?**

Mel: If this is the first time an organisation has taken on developing BME audiences due to low representation previously, it is inevitable and appropriate that dialogue around the best way forward will arise. An organisation will need to be at least willing to look at how it operates in this area. However not all ambassadors will be qualified or confident enough to advise an organisation beyond a superficial level. One pioneering multi-partner programme aimed at developing Black and Asian audiences found after 3 years that it became necessary to provide equalities training for the host organisations as feedback from ambassadors alone was not enough to support the required development and it was unfair to expect the ambassadors to instigate and manage that change. Have a look at the case studies in the Guide\* for case studies on this area of work.

- [http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publication\\_detail.php?browse=title&id=371&page=17](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publication_detail.php?browse=title&id=371&page=17)

**7. What is your experience of volunteer turnover in a scheme? How long do people get involved and is would you advise any type of contract being drawn up or references taken?**

Mel: I did create a basic contract for a recent ambassador programme - it was a one-page agreement with a schedule of tasks/outcomes, hours of work per week and participation in conference calls and meetings. We all found it very useful, everyone knew what they were supposed to do, there was no confusion and it made the programme easier to manage.

Regarding turnover - It varies so much. Ultimately it will depend on the strength of your team-building skills and a pinch of good luck. Some programmes have had ambassadors stay for years, others only want to stay for the duration of one programme or a season of work. There will inevitably be some drop-out, especially when working with students and young people - who often volunteer for this kind of work - as their lives can be quite changeable. Its best to apply the Pareto's Law where you estimate that 80% of your results will come from 20% of your team. I am mostly pleasantly surprised by people's generosity: I am currently working on a programme where 5 out of 6 voluntary ambassadors who were originally engaged to work on a one-off project, have agreed at short notice to return to work on a second event.

**8. If an ambassador scheme is primarily set up for marketing and promotion is it like a pyramid selling structure where there are different levels; the community ambassador at the top, with a group of, say, ten ambassadors, and then each of those ten ambassadors each have a group of ten and so on? How does it work in practice? Any experience of this, and if so, how do you keep in manageable?**

Mel: This 'cascade' type model could work very well although it's important to make a distinction between pyramid selling (which is illegal) and ambassador programmes. Pyramid selling is flawed in that those at the bottom of the structure cannot earn an income without themselves recruiting more sales-people into the team, often trying to operate in an environment of diminishing returns. Ambassador programmes *can* be a bit like multi-level marketing programmes, used by companies such as Herbalife and Avon where participants sell to their own social circles, however, in an ambassador scheme, any personal income made by ambassadors is not directly related to sales performance.

The cascade model of management has worked: Birmingham Arts Marketing (now [Audiences Central](#)) created a model with a paid Ambassador Co-ordinator managing a team of p/t paid ambassadors each managing a voluntary panel of community advisors. From what I know of this programme, part of its strength was good recruitment and evaluation practices.

**9. Are there different types of ambassador schemes depending on the function you want them to have? Can you give advise on different structures that have been used in the past?**

Mel: There are many, many different types of programme structure and approach. One key distinction to make is whether you want to take a Promotion approach (generate more visits only and take mostly tactical action) or whether you want to take an Audience Development approach (a partnership with the ambassadors where the change in your organisation and your visitors can be holistic and far-reaching). See the Guide for some examples.

**10. Have you had any experience of where a community ambassador isn't fulfilling their role or engaging the community – how has this been managed seeing as they have lots of contacts in the community with whom you don't want to lose contact**

Mel: In my experience it's more often the case that the ambassadors are very enthusiastic and you have to say no to some very good (but unworkable) ideas. I have had the experience regarding an un-ticketed event of doubting how much a particular ambassador was achieving. I decided to trust the team and allow for their different strengths and weaknesses. In the end, some were clearly more effective than others although all of them made a difference in some way. Everyone was fully thanked for their contribution but only the most effective ambassadors were invited to take part the second phase of the project. This is where a contract, however informal, can help.

**11. If an ambassador scheme ends (perhaps because it was created for a particular project) how does an organisation ensure that links are maintained with the community – how can a scheme be sustainable if the community ambassador (who was key) no longer works for an organisation?**

Glenis: Do make sure that any databases developed stay with the host organisation. That contact details for gatekeepers to communities are kept and not lost with the ambassador leaving. Try and keep consistency. For example if you have set up an annual event (i.e. World Food day) then continue to do it.

**12. How do you evaluate and measure the success/weaknesses of a scheme – what indicators do you need to put in place at the start?**

Mel: See the 'Practical Guide to working with Arts Ambassadors' for some detailed guidance here - a key goal to think about would be, how many and what type of visitor you want your ambassadors to attract and at what cost. Try and measure the status quo in some way before you start, (visitor surveys, photographs) even anecdotal evidence is better than nothing at all as it's hard to think back once a project has finished. Also don't just evaluate from your point of view, ask your ambassadors and your new visitors too.

Other weblinks for projects mentioned in the original podcast

<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/documents/publications/885.pdf>

Practical Guide to working with Arts Ambassadors

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/africabeyond/>

<http://www.audienceslondon.org/>

Audiences London are currently managing a project called Generate! Which looks at the training needs of Arts Ambassadors

<http://www.tab.org.uk/>

The audience business based in Edinburgh ran the original frontliners project with taxi cab drivers/hairdressers etc.