
CASE STUDY: A Tale of Subscription – ‘Jump the Q’

The audience for the Queen’s Theatre in Hornchurch had dwindled to 35% of capacity in spring 1998. Although a new artistic director was now delivering product that was being enjoyed by the audience there were too few of them to achieve a critical mass to spread the word. In order to increase the percentage of capacity sold, the theatre adopted a subscription scheme, inspired by the Walnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia and their local Essex catchment, positioned around offering a bargain. The scheme was not designed to earn more income, although this would be a by-product of more people, but to bring more people into the theatre.

The idea was you could sit anywhere in the house, any night of the week, for any show in the season for just £5 a ticket. A one-month trial, to estimate the potential response, achieved double the 275 sales of the previous season’s subscriber scheme (which offered up to 20% savings). Consequently they decided to roll out the campaign and produced Jump the Q subscription print.

The autumn 1998 season subscription closed at 4,605 subscribers. The theatre was now achieving 40%+ of capacity sold in advance, had attracted 1,000 new people who had never been to the theatre before and reached an average capacity of 75% across the season.

They predicted that 80% of subscribers would renew for the spring season 1999 (Philadelphia worked on the basis of 70%). It was decided to include the pantomime in this offering (in order to build honesty and trust rather than starting to impose restrictions). This also enabled the subscription to be marketed as a Christmas present. In total, 6,156 people subscribed for the second season - an overall increase of 28% (including 91% renewing). There was now an advance capacity of 61% for each show across the run, with an eventual 89% capacity compared to 75% in autumn 1998 and 35% in spring 1998.

For the third subscription season (autumn 1999) a number of issues needed to be addressed:

- Box office income (although capacity was high they needed to increase income by increasing full price ticket sales);
- They were increasingly turning away potential full price bookers on Friday and Saturday nights because they were sold out with £5 seats;
- From a financial point of view, it was apparent that they needed to limit Jump the Q to avoid becoming victims of the success of the scheme.

If Jump the Q continued to grow at the same rate this would have delivered 7,500 subscribers, which would not be viable. They proposed to limit the scheme to 4,500. There were a number of ways that limits could have been delivered – quotas; increased prices; supplements on peak nights; hold seats back on peak nights; restrict the booking period; etc. After qualitative research the decision was taken to increase the price to £6.50 (£19.50 for three shows compared with the previous 4 for £20), a shorter booking period and no separate flyer (it was promoted in a more low key way via a newsletter). The result was 4,510 subscribers for autumn 1999, delivering £87,945 at a marketing spend of £1,600.

Based on the presentation 'Jumping the Q: A Tale of Subscription' given by Henrietta Duckworth & Emma Wallis, AMA Conference, 1999.

For more information on subscription see the briefing note [Tactics - Discounting for Frequency](#).