We are all looking for an edge - a source of differentiation to stand out... Just think about all the different messages you are exposed to every single day - all trying to catch your attention.

Personalization is the key to success.; personalised communication, experiences and moments making customers feel connected with your brand.

But how do we create such powerful and personalized experiences and moments? These magic and memorable moments that matter and impact, so customers remember them far into the future.

One organization excelling this task is the New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich (UK). Here the message is clear: “Our customers need to be at the centre of everything we do!”

In this interview Sarah Holmes, Chief Executive, shares her insights about the transformation New Wolsey has been going through to discover and create magic moments to enhance customer loyalty.

**A case for change: When 75% of your first-timers do not return**

“The number of new audiences was growing, but our overall audience numbers were not. Mainly because the majority of first-timers did not return (75% in 2014-2015). We needed to change this”, explains Sarah.

Being presented for these numbers after working with TRG Arts on pricing and demand management, New Wolsey realized the potential of pursuing a more strategic approach to customer communications and customer moments.

**Defining the data and framework and taking it to the organization**

In order to define the framework, New Wolsey analyzed their customers’ booking behaviour: How frequently and recently do they attend? How much do they spend? How is their level of engagement via memberships, donations, and season tickets?

“Breaking down our audiences’ behavior eased the process of determining the most important actions for each audience member and convert our learnings into practical plans and initiatives that made sense in the wider context of the theatre.”

New Wolsey also reshaped their business model and restructured their Communications Team. In that connection they set up a dedicated relationships team to ensure that the plans were executed, and that change was driven across the entire organization to create a strong focus on building and maintaining relationships with key loyal audiences. The team also joined a wider communications department, which also consisted of Marketing, Sales and Front of House Functions.
The organizational restructuring was well received and New Wolsey experienced a very quick buy-in from the members of the Communications Team. The challenging task was to convert internal and external stakeholders to the new way of working and thinking; including board members and staff.

“Keeping everyone on board continues to be an ongoing and vital task. Customer relationships and loyalty is on the agenda in all our staff meetings allowing us to constantly deliver the message that it is everyone’s responsibility to increase customer loyalty.”

**Creating impact that matters: Increasing revenue with 153%**

Only 1 in 12 of new customers returned for a second visit within the same season when New Wolsey started their customer loyalty journey.

Prudent sales drives such as inviting audiences back for a second visit had been tested, but two major factors became an obstacle: New Wolsey did not manage to offer the right discounts, and they restricted the option of shows that would not be sellouts in a bid to protect revenue.

“Our consultancy with TRG Arts gave us the courage to be bolder. We now invite every new customer to come back and visit us within the same season receiving 50% off their next booking. Whilst we suggest shows we think they may enjoy, the discount is no longer restricted to certain shows.”

The result is impressive: After the first year, New Wolsey has increased the number of returning first-timers to 1 in 6.

Furthermore, New Wolsey has generated an increase of 153% in revenue the first year by relaunching their membership scheme. By analyzing the current benefits New Wolsey was offering, they created a new scheme with more enticing benefits that fell into one of four new categories: access, discounts, free items or recognition.

“Our old scheme consisted of just three levels - £25, £50 and £250. We quickly identified two key areas we needed to address when relaunching the jumps in membership price and the driver benefits of each level. We bridged the gap between the £50 and £250 membership by offering a new £100 option, that proved very popular as an option for our current members to upgrade to.” Likewise, New Wolsey extended their ask and created an exclusive Director’s Circle with a £500 and £1000 option - within the first year they had 10 members.

“We now have a membership scheme that is growing its membership base yearly and granting members more rewards, and member-only insight than ever before.”

**Setting up initiatives on individual customer level**

As customers we have different needs and expectations. However, previously, New Wolsey viewed their audiences as a homogeneous group who, despite their level of engagement, were all treated the same.

“We started communicating based on segmentation, reinforcing our loyalty focus. Whilst the initiative had a shared overall aim of gaining personal relationships with our most loyal customers, our approach on an individual customer level varied. For some it was light touch with personalised letters, emails or phone calls. For others it was meeting for coffee/ drinks before a performance.”

The biggest success was the introduction of an idea called ‘Magic Moments’ - memorable moments of above and beyond customer care. The Relationship Team offers these moments to the more loyal bookers as part of a customer lifecycle. This includes initiatives such as birthday cards signed by staff members, thank you notes to renewing Season Ticket holders (left on their seat prior to their first show of a season) and welcome cards to new members.

These moments can also be spontaneous. Frontline Staff is encouraged to engage in conversations with all customers and listen out for clues for any particular moments that might enhance their visit. “We now often leave notes on customers’ seats in the auditorium wishing them a Happy Birthday or Anniversary and...”
offering them some complimentary refreshments during the interval as a result of a Ticket Sales Assistant making a note of a comment the booker has flippantly made as part of the booking process."

All first-time visitors are also warmly welcomed. They receive welcome notes on their seat, explaining that New Wolsey is at hand if they need anything. These moments have allowed New Wolsey to build genuine, personal connections with customers creating lasting memories and deliver the strong message: ‘We care about you!’ By planning for these moments, and training the team to deliver them, New Wolsey has created a scalable model for recognizing and rewarding the value they place of each and every customer.

Pursuing a customer-oriented approach: New Wolsey’s best recommendations

It has been nearly three years, since New Wolsey changed their business model to put their customers at the heart of their Communications Team and widened the responsibility for contributing to the customer loyalty journey to the whole organisation.

“This would not have been possible if we had not ensured that every team member felt equipped with the knowledge and confidence to participate in the upgrading and re-engaging of customers. Our training centres on coaching as a focus rather than telling, and as such our teams work together to set targets, which feel achievable for everyone, and share a sense of ownership and pride in our work. This is also crucial in order for our volunteer ushers to ensure the reception and welcome, that audiences feel when they are with us is second to none every single time they visit, no matter who our audiences are interacting with."

Developing a vision and live by it: The ROI of working with customer experience

Sceptical. This is how New Wolsey felt when they decided to pursue a more customer-oriented approach. Ipswich is a small market town with a laid back and rather complacent approach and outlook. “We had been schooled to think that there was no money to be had in the town. But early signs were proving us wrong, and that in fact the reason we were not seeing a huge return on our customer generated income was, that we simply were not asking!”

New Wolsey’s new motto is: ‘The Power of AND’. But what does that mean in practice? “There is always something more each of our customers can do to further their engagement with us – seeing a show AND having a pre-show meal, AND booking for a second show, AND holding a membership, AND making a donation.” These ‘ANDS’ will vary for every customer and it is the Frontline Staff’s responsibility to make these suggestions, based on clear next step guides that the relationship team strategically plan. This rationale is not simply to increase revenue. “It allows us to be the best hosts possible and ensure that all audiences are getting the most out of their experiences with us.”

This work has not only allowed New Wolsey to build meaningful relationships with their customers. Also sponsors, visiting companies and key stakeholders now recognise New Wolsey as one of the friendliest and welcoming theatres. “This is affording us greater business opportunities in terms of sponsorship deals, and collaborative work with local and national organizations. We are quickly becoming an organization that is deeply involved across the town and industry in a number of high-profile sector and locality projects.”

New Wolsey is a theatre with high targets and ambitions. After years of relying on public investment, which is rapidly diminishing, there is now a real pressure as well as potential to grow bringing customer engagement and loyalty to the next level. “Celebrating the small wins along the way is really important. It is a long journey and relatively speaking we have just set off,” concludes Sarah.