

The voice of the Voluntary Arts

LET'S CELEBRATE! – recognising and rewarding our worth

This is VAN's 100th briefing – a significant achievement in an ever-shifting cultural and political climate, where social and cultural policy, and funding opportunities and requirements, change from year to year. To mark the occasion we have decided to *celebrate!*

But just what does this mean? We automatically celebrate birthdays, religious festivals, passing exams, having a baby, getting married or securing a new job without pausing to think about why we are doing it – because deep down we know that it's an important part of being human.

This briefing takes a look at why we, as individuals, artists, managers, groups and organisations, should take time out to reflect on our activities, projects and work in general, recognise our milestones and successes, and reward all those involved in making these possible.

Why do we need to celebrate?

We all want to do our best to create things or experiences that touch our own and others' hearts and minds. Engaging in activity that we consider worthwhile makes us happy, and recognition of this effort increases our sense of self-worth and of being valued. It boosts our self-esteem, raises our confidence and our morale and helps give us a sense of purpose, which in turn increases our motivation, energy and output.

It stands to reason then that rewarded and motivated employees, volunteers, members and stakeholders are more likely to ensure you find positive, productive and innovative ways of achieving your vision and your aims. A celebratory event can be an effective way of doing this – but it's not the only way!

Celebration can happen at any time: at the beginning – the inception and the launch; in the middle – a reflection and

punctuation mark that can invigorate and energise; or at the end – the 'final night' party and the big 'thank you'. Taking time out to evaluate your progress is a useful way to gain perspective on your work. You can use a celebration to signify closure of a project, to mark a new direction, to harness momentum to plan the next stage or as an evaluative process for your funders and your annual report.

It is also a great way to get people involved. Meaningful communication and quality time together can lift your collective spirit and help you realise new potential – even the quietest person has an inbuilt need to connect with others, to learn and develop new ideas and to create. Has anyone been sidelined or had a bad time during the project? Carefully thought out recognition can be an opportunity to address this. Similarly, potential volunteers or members of your organisation may



'Out with a Bang' – a fire labyrinth on the beach in Swansea

See the case study on the back page



have been drawn in to your activities. Use a celebration to reward and deepen the connection with them.

Creative projects and organisations often involve hard work, intense activity and long hours. Celebrations and mini celebrations can help ease the way. Hierarchies and privileged communications are also often part of a process of getting something done – and a celebration can be a great leveller, breaking down such distinctions. It is also a good informal opportunity to get feedback and honest opinions from all involved.

What to celebrate?

Activities in the voluntary arts sector are a celebration in themselves! The arts provide the cultural fabric of any nation, from the smallest grass roots amateur community play to the big, national festival. Doing art for the love of it, and working with people who do the same, makes people happier and healthier. Happiness is increasingly being counted as an indicator of a good quality of life, and the arts are recognised as playing a major role in mental and physical well being. They help individuals develop skills and confidence and strengthen and energise communities.

The list of what to recognise and reward whilst engaged in creative work is endless! Here are some examples to boost your creative thinking:

Activities –

The completion of a project, the launch of a publication, a successful tour, raising funds, being mentioned in the press, running a good conference, achieving a record number of attendees, staging an exhibition, buying a new piano, effectively negotiating a contract...

Remember to recognise failures as well as successes. Often it takes an enormous amount of energy to develop an initiative or bring off a project. Highs and lows are part of the process and organisations and individuals alike grow through difficulty, setbacks and mistakes. These should be acknowledged, and effective methods of resolving them rewarded.

The day to day –

It's easier to celebrate the achievement of a specific goal, but it's just as important, if not more so, to recognise day to day effort. Recognising that things aren't always easy, and rewarding the effort that keeps your work alive in spite of the difficulties – personality clashes, loss of funding, things going astray, missed deadlines, small offices, lone working – is essential. It helps us remember what we are doing and why!

People –

Are a group's most important asset. Celebrate them!

Staff – take time to consider how each person, and each unique team, contributes to the organisation. Even highly motivated individuals can get frustrated, discouraged and tired, and they need to know their efforts are noticed and appreciated.

Remember though that everyone is different, and motivated and rewarded by different things – one method of recognition won't fit all. Individuals also have their own personal milestone of achievements. Find out what these are – people who feel heard and acknowledged individually are more positive about themselves and will contribute more.

Volunteers – remember too that volunteer helpers are often the lifeblood of many projects in the voluntary arts, and often undervalue their own contribution. Without them the good work would not have been possible. Make sure they are aware of this.

Friends and family – show them what you have been doing and help them understand and appreciate your work. Celebrate their support!

Members – do you acknowledge your members? A photo of them in your newsletter, a mention of their successes, a phone call or a friendly email goes a long way to building a good relationship and improving your services.

The wider community – build and strengthen your relationship with the community by getting people involved, then highlighting their involvement so they feel needed and respected. Get councilors on board too. They like to be seen to be involved in projects in their patch, especially at grass roots level.

Funders – are people too! Help them see the full scope of a project or your work in general, how well their money has been spent, what it's done and the achievements that couldn't have happened without them. Acknowledge and celebrate their assistance.

Who else? – would you like to thank and reward? Make a list of all your projects and activities and the people involved – stakeholders, partners, funders, hosts, volunteers, politicians. Sometimes it's rewarding to bring them all together to meet each other.

How to celebrate?

Keeping it low key –

Much effective recognition and reward is quiet and low key – a well timed thank you letter, a warm email, a quiet word over the



kettle, a small but well chosen gift, doughnuts for the office, flowers for a birthday, mentioning a name in your magazine, using a logo, show-casing a painting, printing a photo, crediting a writer, tickets to the theatre, a fun away-day. Eating together reinforces social bonds – an impromptu staff lunch that involves no preparation or cleaning up, a walk in the hills and a picnic, team drinks after a conference. Don't assume that the annual Christmas party will be seen as reward! Some people aren't party people so think of them when planning.

The celebratory event –

But if you do hold a big celebratory event, you might like to think through the following:

- consult with everyone as appropriate – asking others for contributions is reward in itself. Use it as a networking opportunity and invite as many potential stakeholders as possible;
- you'll probably invite key partners. Allocate an individual host or minder to these people to ensure they have a good time;
- consider whether your event might be an opportunity to partner and link with another event. This can boost your profile and make you seem more impressive;
- turn it into an arts event and make it a part of your project if it isn't already; involve more of the community;
- consider a theme – costumes and food that link in with your work, a film premier of the work in progress, or a dance or feast;
- if you have music – a local band, DJ or CD compilation – make sure it appeals to a range of participants;
- project leaders needn't necessarily be the party organisers. Share responsibilities around and encourage people to grow by taking on new roles. A few clear heads helps to keep things under control;
- choose your location carefully – restaurant, community hall, local authority building, civic centre (tag it onto a council meeting to get more people involved – they might even supply refreshments) or rural and outdoor;
- remember health and safety – do a risk assessment. Do you need a first aider?
- think about accessibility (stairs, parking, signs, hearing loops), translation, heating, rain cover;
- catering – does the venue come with a catering company? Will this cost more? Is there a kitchen you can use? Cater for all dietary requirements and remember that alcohol isn't always essential, or appropriate;
- is the event appropriate for children? Make sure parents and

guardians know they are responsible for their children, or organise a crèche. If it's a youth project ensure the workers are clear that the young people are their responsibility during the event;

- PR – get 'bigwigs' involved. This can give an event extra credibility and cachet. Record this – they'll find it difficult to say no next time when they have been seen to publicly support you. Use the press and local media. Use photos and display boards to illustrate the extent of the work for those who didn't participate. Take before and after photos and think of a way to illustrate 'distance travelled', what and how much has been achieved and when. If you did a consultation as part of the project, illustrate how many of these ideas you took on board, and credit people where appropriate.
- Consider getting extra sponsorship.

In conclusion –

So take time out to identify where you are, what you've achieved, who needs recognition and how you are going to reward them.

Further Information & Resources

The following publications are available through the VAN website – www.voluntaryarts.org

- **Health & Safety for Community Outdoor Events** – for those running small outdoor events to get to grips with the legalities, procedures... and everything else organisers need to know.
- **Child Protection** –VAN briefings 82 & 83.
- **The Protection of Children (Scotland) Act 2003** – VAScotland briefing.
- **Organising a Weekend Event** –VAN briefing 68.
- **Risk Assessment for Event Organisers** –VAN briefing 67.
- **So, what's so great about the voluntary arts?** – VAN briefing 32.
- **Eventful Planning – a practical checklist for use when planning arts events** –VAN briefing 28.

Other useful information:

- www.firekills.gov.uk – fire safety advice from the UK government.
- www.nspcc.org.uk/inform – the online child protection resource.

Thanks to Voluntary Arts Wales for their original idea and their assistance in compiling this briefing.



The following case study gives an example of an innovative and memorable celebratory event:

Out with a Bang

Arts for Us were a community arts team in Swansea working mainly with Communities First areas from 2003 to 2006. When their funding was coming to an end they decided they did not want to disappear quietly! 'Out with a Bang', a fire labyrinth on the beach in Swansea emerged as the celebratory marker of their work.

They wanted a celebration where they could enjoy themselves, so they employed a project manager to take charge of both the event and the publicity and they commissioned David Eveleigh, an experienced fire sculptor, to design a day that would involve all of the communities they had worked with and which would culminate in a spectacular fire show which would be open to the public.

Organising the event took several months and included negotiations with the RSPB to relocate the site so as not to disturb nesting sea birds, and getting it passed by the council's rather skeptical Safety Advisory Group.

The day began when the tide went out far enough to start marking out the giant labyrinth shape in the sand. A whole range of people that Arts for Us had worked with helped. Trenches were dug and excavated sand was piled up alongside these, creating a raised shape for the fire rope to lie on. Whilst some people dug, others created huge sand sculptures of sea creatures. At the top of the beach, fuel soaked fire rope, covered in a plastic sheath, was wired onto life-sized outlines of family

groups. These were to stand on the beach around the labyrinth.

It was a bright, sunny but cold day and the marquee set up above the beach offered a welcome place to warm up. The environment centre provided hot drinks and snacks and The Crowman, aka David Pitt, entertained the children. At 6 o'clock a local restaurant, Truffle, did their first outside catering event and supplied the volunteers with hot soup, bread, cheese and outstanding chocolate cake.

With just enough time for a last minute panic, the fuel-soaked fire rope was dragged along the top of the raised outline of the structure and everyone involved walked the labyrinth. At exactly 7 o'clock the beach was cleared and everyone stood along the promenade to watch.

The display was spectacular! All those involved with Arts for Us were very emotional and others who had volunteered on the day were amazed at what they had helped create. Fire art and fireworks! The labyrinth blazed, the family group sculptures stood sentry as they too blazed and let go of their clusters of 'Out with a Bang' balloons at the same time as the audience let go of theirs: one for each of the people Arts for Us had worked with over the years.

It was a wonderful event, beautifully managed by Sarah Griffin, and allowed the Arts for Us team to relax, enjoy and celebrate their achievements, and to recognise and reward all those involved!

Information contained here may go out of date and you are therefore advised to check its currency. Updated information may be available on the VAN website: www.voluntaryarts.org

Disclaimer: Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure the information in this document is accurate. However, it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith at the stated date but without accepting liability. We therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking action on any of the matters covered herein.

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