Making the Case – approaching venues and partners

**Defining What Makes You Special**

Developing a USP (unique selling proposition) is one tool to help clarify and communicate what it is about you or your work that makes you special/standout.

There are many ways to approach this, but we looked at the following questions:

* Who am I?
* What is my work about?
* Why is this important or compelling? (Is there anything unique about this worth highlighting?)

These don’t always need to follow formal language, but can be adapted to match the ‘voice’ of you as an artists or company!

Eg 1 – Punchdrunk Enrichment

LIFE CHANGING THEATRE. FOR EVERYONE.

We create unique theatrical experiences that take you to another world.

For schools, families, adults and communities, our work can transform, have a powerful impact and puts people at the heart of an unforgettable journey.

EG2 – Bryony Kimmings

**BRYONY KIMMINGS LTD.**
MAKE MIND-BLOWING,
MULTI-PLATFORM ART WORKS TO PROVOKE SOCIAL CHANGE, BABES!

When communicating with partners and venues, it’s then often useful to expand your USP to inform your key ‘ask’ or case for support by exploring three further question:

* What do I want?
* What do I want it for?
* What impact will it make?

It’s sometimes also useful to think about asking for support (from funders, venues, sponsors, charity partners or benefactors engaging with partners) as telling a story, and/or inviting people to join you/your company on a journey. It can be a short journey, or you might be after a longer term partnership.

But a key is to not be afraid to make a concrete ‘ask’ – come to the show, programming in a specific space, support with R&D or rehearsal space. That gives whoever you are communicating with a sense of what you need, and if it is something they are in position to provide without wasting your time!

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**Approaching venues**

The below is a process I use when planning tours or partnerships with venues. Whilst there is some value to mass mailing venues (you never know who might be interested in your work), the aim is to reduce the number of venues you have identified as suitable for your show, so you can make more targeted and specific requests to venues.

STEP 1: BUILDING A LIST OF VENUES

There are thousands of venues and spaces across the UK, so a few places to help you build a list of venues to research more into\*:

* BLACK THEATRE LIVE –<https://www.blacktheatrelive.co.uk/venues>

Has a search function so useful when looking for venues near each other to build a tour.

* PUBLIC CAMPAIGN FOR THE ARTS – <https://www.campaignforthearts.org/map/>

A new website and has some information on closed/re-opening status for venues.

* OFFIES – <https://offies.london/eligible-venues/>

A good list of London spaces, especially for emerging and mid-career artists. By no means complete as new spaces open very regularly in London!

* ALSO – look at other similar companies touring lists (often on their show project pages on their websites) for a sense of spaces similar companies or shows have toured to.

*\*These listing sites go out of date quickly, so do check venues sites directly for contacts and opening status.*

STEP 1: NARROWING THE LIST

For this step it might be useful to use the Making the Case template to capture your research to save for future use with different projects or shows.

Some of this research also exists in the STAMP venue database (London only) which can be found here, but it’s always worth checking the venue website to see there are any indicators priorities have changed: <https://www.stamplondon.org/our-members>

Some key considerations to narrow your list:

* **Geographic Location:** where am I based, where is my audience based, where the work is based, where am I from?
* **Capacity:** studio, midscale, larger venues. It’s also worth noting the language venues use to describe their spaces isn’t always a strict indicator of capacity (ie Leicester Curve’s studio is circa 400 seats and Pleasance’s studio is 80 seats). Venues who are reopening with social distanced auditoriums will now generally be at reduced capacities (ie Pleasance’s Main House is usually 250 seats and will reopen with 100 seats).
* **Programming Model:** does the venue programme short runs, one night, or longer runs? Are they primarily a producing theatre (developing work in-house) or do they accept visiting productions, and what is the usual ‘deal’ (guarantee, split, hires)

I then look for other indicators on the venue’s website, that suggest to me the work or partnership I am looking to pitch, matches what the venue does.

Three useful indicators:

* **Specialism Indicators:** For some venues this is very clear (Royal Court supports New Plays, New Diorama devised and company based work) but for others it might take a little more digging e.g Pleasance’s ‘About Us’ shows we are interested in Comedy and Contemporary Theatre, and in our further information for shows looking to come to Pleasance, we specify that the Main House is looking for “touring and/or inventive new productions of musicals and plays” (but not new plays specifically) and Downstairs specifically references “new plays by debut and emerging playwrights and companies”. These will often change over time, and with new leadership. You can also look across development programmes and pathways –BUT NOT ALWAYS A CLEAR LINK TO ARTISTS ON THEIR STAGES.
* **Thematic Indicators**: does the theatre have clear themes across their programming and does your work fit with these themes? If you can’t find previous shows online, often these appear in theatres Charity Commission Report or Annual Reports.
* **Audience Indicators** – Does the work presented or programmed by the venue, indicate that the venue feels they have some key target audiences? Does your work speak to this audience?

If you’re unsure or can’t work out – consider calling or emailing to ask!

The aim of this research is to narrow your list down to make targeted approached. I would be aiming for 6-10 venues.

**STEP 2: FORMULATING THE ASK**

What’s your ask?

I always come back to the questions: Who am I? What is my work about? Why is this important or compelling? (Is there anything unique about this worth highlighting?)

Then: What do I want? What do I want it for? What impact will it make?

In my experience, a clear ask is more likely to get a response than “can I have a coffee?” or “a conversation about future programming”.

Also don’t be a afraid to ask for a few things – but accept that you might get a few no’s. From my experience, it’s much harder to say no to three things, than it is to one!

**STEP 3: POLITE PERSISTENCE**

* ***How often can you follow up?*** If the ask is specific, then I think it’s fair to follow up after a few weeks, or sooner if time sensitive. My general rule of thumb is to be “politely persistent” ☺
* ***Am I asking the right person?*** Often a phone call to the theatre to ask who is best to address a specific ask to is useful?
* ***Do I know anyone (other artists, theatres) who could also make an introduction?***Often other artists who have visited that theatre will be able to give you an understanding of the indicators and narrowing questions above, and might point you in the right direction of who to approach, or even make an introduction for you (if you don’t ask, you don’t get!)
* ***How do I track my follow up?*** – potentially using the Making the Case template so I don’t need to redo all the research every project/show.

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(look forward to your targeted and specific emails and invites!)