

## SMASHfestUK 2015 Evaluation Summary – Flow Associates

### 1.1 A great narrative concept

The concept of an impending asteroid hit as a unifying theme behind all the different activities and performances was very clever and effective. Children played along with the 'let's pretend' of it, asking with excitement if the strike was really going to happen. Children are more able than adults to hold in their mind the possibility of something being possible, while also being fictional.

### 1.2 A really positive response from audiences

The feedback from visitors to the festival' was enthusiastic on the whole. Supermarket Sweep was the most popular activity, partly because it animated the Library and worked well as a game. Other popular events were 'Dr Death and the Medi-evil Medicine Show' and the SMASHFestUK Comedy Club 4 Kids.

The performers and contributors were asked to pass on any feedback from audiences, and observations of how their sessions were received. Their observations were generally positive, for example:

*The event had a lively feel that fitted well with the community context. The overall theming worked well and allowed a lot of flexibility in the choice of activities and subject matter. The event was well attended and the audience were enthusiastic. Howie Watkins Both shows were a lot of fun. Lovely audiences for both and really enjoyed myself... Had a few parents tell us after the show that both they and their children had enjoyed.* Tiernan Douieb

### 1.3 New audiences were reached

This was an unusual event, with a diverse range of activities exploring science in an entertaining and creative way, so it was very likely that everyone attending experienced something new. Everyone saw scientific ideas as relevant to themselves and to potential situations in real life.

The event helped the Albany Theatre reach new audiences. Part of the festival was in Deptford Lounge, where regular users of the library were drawn to the other events in the Albany. Many of these had not heard of or visited the Albany, despite being very local.

*When...I announced the next event happening in ten minutes, one child looked so excitedly and was pulling his father along. He smiled and looked at me and said, "He's never been to so much theatre before!" which I thought was lovely.* Cat McGahey

The event was organised in a very inclusive way, with most activities open to all-comers and late-comers. Passers-by were encouraged in to explore by an actor, a troupe of zombies, some stormtroopers and volunteers offering spare tickets to the ticketed events. Although this made it a little chaotic in parts, it meant that people of all backgrounds and levels of confidence could have a taste of the experience.

### 1.4 Progression in learning

The Supermarket Sweep activity was mentioned most often as the most enjoyable activity. It was also the most successful as a learning experience, because children were returning to do it again and again. They were trying to get a better score each time, learning by trial and error what food stocks would be the most nutritious and sensible in a disaster. This is an excellent example of game-based learning, where you can progress in steps and improve through practice.

### 1.5 Challenge of pitching to young audiences

A key challenge was around pitching science to a different age profile than had been expected, for some of the events. The concept of SmashfestUK and its planned marketing was aimed primarily at teens, notoriously difficult to reach. However, families with young children were those responding to the marketing, or as passers-by being encouraged in. It was intended as an inclusive event, with activities to suit all ages. The message of Smashfest UK reached teens and young adults through talks at the Lewisham Youth Festival and in prior visits to local schools<sup>2</sup>, but these did not have the follow-on effect of drawing them en masse to the main venue of the Albany.

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## 1.6 Visitor information

Participants wanted more information about what each activity was, what level it was pitched at and what was expected of them, and performers/contributors wanted more information about the running order and process.

## 1.7 Prior marketing

The majority (42%) of attendees of SMASHFest had heard about it by word of mouth, either beforehand or on the day while visiting the area. This suggests that more prior marketing was needed.

Nearer the time, teens and young adults would have responded from direct communications spread by their peers, describing the rewards of participation.

## 1.8 Programming challenges

The programming was challenging because of the need for funding from different sources. ACE confirmed a grant for artist contributions (and resource for this evaluation) only 5 days before the festival started. This meant that the programme could only be confirmed at the last minute.

Luckily, Albany Theatre allowed use of the garden for extra space, which added to the variety and success of the event.

## 2. Recommendations for the future

### **Do it again!**

You've said, "We want to see SmashfestUK as an infectious idea that spreads." This certainly feels possible. The concept, mission and audience reaction are strong enough for SmashfestUK to be repeated, which will allow you to learn from the initial challenges and improve it.

### **Be mission-driven**

It should be driven by the mission (rather than by the brand or concept), which could be described as using compelling narrative frames to reinvent science communication/festivals, in order to engage young people more meaningfully in science. There is a great need for public engagement in science that helps people develop skills for a challenging future, and which is not entirely driven by corporate industrial agendas.

### **Invest more in engaging young people**

More work may be needed to convey the story to teenagers, who may need more incentives to buy into a 'let's pretend' scenario. Incentives might include prizes and awards, certificates/digital badges, learning outcomes and skills practice, the promise of thrilling immersive experiences and social kudos.

### **Consolidate the event**

Rather than expand it, condense any instance of SmashfestUK to one or two days. This will make it more manageable and affordable, and make it easier to attract audiences for the entire event. The audience would experience the whole narrative.

### **Build on the success of Supermarket Sweep**

Develop the Supermarket Sweep into a workshop that can be taken into schools and CYP groups (e.g. Guides/Scouts). It could also be offered on a more commercial basis to companies looking for team development packages.

### **Alter the mood for times of day**

Programme distinct activities in relation to particular target audiences and the times to suit them. For example, to attract teens you could kickstart SmashfestUK with an early evening event with a game-like party atmosphere (e.g. invite cosplay, end it with dance music, provide food). Incentivise them to attend the following day, for example, chances of winning prizes or giving them specific challenges according to their self-identified skills. The next full day, make it clear which activities are most suitable for younger children.

### **Invest in publicity**

Build up publicity with a real-feeling story in advance. For example, create short videos as fake news reports where astrophysicists, politicians and 'people on the street' give views about the impending asteroid threat (or similar threat if the scenario changes). Send emails into schools setting them the challenge to be prepared, which teachers can use in the classroom. Make a relationship with a local newspaper and blogs to distribute the 'news reports'. Involve a group of young volunteers to seed the story in social media e.g. create an 'asteroid survival group' on Facebook. More use could be made of platforms such as Snapchat and Instagram to involve and appeal to young people before and during the event.

### **Managing the event: More visitor information**

More volunteer greeters are needed, explaining the activities and directing participants to them. Volunteers would then have a clearly defined role and be easier to manage. In addition,

a future event would benefit from a main front desk and/or poster clearly signposting a map, and who to ask.