

## The ‘Beauty’ of Hong Kong Arts Centre

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### *Abstract*

The Hong Kong Arts Centre (HKAC) is a self-financed, non-profit art organization located at Wan Chai district in Hong Kong. For a private art organization in Hong Kong to own its venue is rare and HKAC is one of the few. HKAC offers programmes across various art forms including visual art, performing art and moving image. With HKAC’s unique position in Hong Kong, this paper tries to examine the effectiveness of its branding, marketing and audience building strategy. Regarding branding, it is found that HKAC’s branding strategy does not work well enough to distinguish itself from other art organizations. As its venue is open for hiring, and without a clear strategy in selecting hirer, it is somewhat confusing to audience as hirer’s programmes have also contributed in its branding. In examining marketing strategy, 7Ps marketing mix is applied for evaluation. HKAC has paid special attention in Price, Promotion within the marketing mix, while other areas are business-as-usual activities as adopted from the past. And the marketing strategy of HKAC is still using direct marketing approach instead of relationship marketing to create fan base for the organization. For audience development, HKAC would like to attract young audience but its marketing philosophy is going for “art for all” generic approach, so it fails not only attracting new young audience but also in retaining previous attendants. In conclusion, HKAC needs to work harder to bring branding, marketing and audience development strategy together in attracting new and retaining old audience.

### *Keywords*

Hong Kong Arts Centre, Hong Kong Arts Organization, Branding Strategy, Arts Marketing Strategies, Audience Development Strategies

### **Introduction**

There are two English idioms related to the term ‘beauty’: one is “beauty is only skin deep”, and another one is “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. For the former, it means what’s inside a person is more important than his/her appearance. But our daily experience tells us that people are certainly attracted by beautiful things/people, and we to learn beyond their beauty later on when we have built a relationship with them. What’s inside is not always so apparent from outside, so somehow we ought to make ourselves attractive enough to draw people closer and provide the chance to let them learning more about us. The latter simply means different people perceive beauty differently. It is definitely true that no matter how much we think we are attractive or how hard we try to dress up, different people will find us “beautiful” or not differently, we all have our own perception or taste in seeing beauty.

What is the point of talking about beauty? To put this into context, beauty is like the reputation or perception of an art organization (or any organization) by the outsiders. The discussion on “beauty is only skin deep” could be parallel to marketing/audience development for art organization, and we have to attract audience to attend the performance before they could know the true beauty of the performance and of the organization. Whereas the discussion on “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is analogous to the branding of the organization, somehow audience would perceive the organization differently (especially when branding is not done well) and it is no use for the organization just trying to “dress up” and expect people to see it the same way as the organization. And this article is trying to assess the “beauty” of an art organization and in this case, Hong Kong Arts Centre (called as HKAC from now on) is picked as the candidate.

But why choose HKAC? This is because in Hong Kong, it is very rare for a private art organization to have its own venue and it is also not very common for an organization to present programmes across various art forms, which include visual arts, performing arts and moving images. With this unique nature for HKAC, it would be good to check how well it is doing in term of its branding, marketing and audience development strategies. This article will attempt to focus on the performing art side of HKAC and evaluation will be drawn from data, observation and working experience with the Centre.

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Before we go into further discussions, let us first understand a bit about HKAC's background. According to its website, the HKAC was established in 1977, as a non-profit making, self financing arts organization, which focuses on promoting contemporary arts and culture within and across the border, with facilities including theatres, a cinema, galleries, classrooms, studios, a café and office space. Over the past three decades, the Arts Centre has become one of the Hong Kong's best-known and respected art entities, providing a wide range of programmes featuring local and overseas artists. It is dedicated to serve as a unique platform to bridge art and the community" ("Milestones," n.d., para. 1). The venues are open for hiring to third parties and carrying out events organized by its in-house programme department. According to the organization chart in its 2012-2013 Annual Report, under the executive director, there are four operating departments, namely, the programme department, marketing & development department, finance & administration department, and Hong Kong Art School. Even though it has programme team, production or creative teams are not enlisted, all of its own programmes are commissioned by HKAC through collaboration with organizations or artists outside of its structure. (Hong Kong Arts Centre 2012/2013 Annual Report, 2014)

### **Branding Strategy**

Management writer Doyle once wrote, "Brands are at the heart of marketing and business strategy" (Doyle, 1998). From this, we can say that among branding, marketing and audience development, branding is the most important of all since branding should be the guiding force of the organization inside out, affecting all the decision of the organization, so let us first examine branding of HKAC.

A brand is an engineered perception (Mukerjee, 1998). This definition summarizes nicely on what branding actually does. A brand is engineered, which means it requires the company to pay effort in building up its brand; a brand is also a perception, which is about how people think about the company. And the perception is from the customers' point of view instead of the company's one, customers perceive the company's image from its marketplace behaviors through things like the customer's experience and word of mouth, customers react to what the company actually does rather than what it says it will do. (McMurrian & Washburn, 2008) A brand is a promise and we should never make promises you cannot keep. (Chong, 2002) This implies a brand is a statement to the customers on what it will do in the future, this does not means we should not consider what the organization says, but we just have to put what the organization says against what it does, whether it is keeping its promise.

Therefore, we should see what HKAC says it will do first. In its mission statement, it has two missions in the list, the first one is to provide "the community with diverse and educationally-enriching programmes of contemporary visual arts, film and performing arts"; the second one is to offer "a wide range of quality arts education programmes covering Fine Art, Applied Art, Media Art and Drama Education". ("Vision & Mission," n.d., para. 3-4)

From HACK's 2012-2013 Annual report, for the four categories of programmes (exhibition, moving image, performing art, public art), it has presented or co-presented 40 programmes in total between July 2012 to June 2013, and each of the art form roughly shared the same number of programmes. Even though there is no figure available on which programme contained educational elements, from the author's observation, most of the programmes had related seminar, talk, post-event sharing to accompany with the performance. And the publication Artslink by the Centre carries articles with review or preview for its programmes. From this observation, it seems that HKAC has delivered its first mission to provide diverse programmes and educationally enriching programmes in various art forms.

For the second mission, under its organization structure, it has a separate department Hong Kong Art School to organize arts education programmes. It offers programmes with the academic levels from diploma to master degree. Short courses are available too. And the range of courses covers from visual arts to media arts. But it currently does not offer course on Drama/Theatre. So we can say it has at least keeping part of the promise for mission two but education programmes are mainly focus on visual art side.

It seems HKAC has been achieving most of the missions, but is it already enough? When Doyle (1998) wrote about brands, he also mentioned that customers will be indifferent to a company if what it is offering is perceived the same as others, and if customers are willing to pay more if they see the brand

is superior. This implies how a company trying to position itself in the market is very important in order to build a successful brand to make the company profitable. From its mission statement and also its list of programmes, it is very hard to see where HKAC would like to position itself among other art organizations as even though each programme may have certain goals to achieve. For instance, HKAC has a role in supporting new playwrights through its recent “Playwright’s studio” programme. However, there is no distinctive programming philosophy or area of focus when putting all the programmes together, making it hard to identify with what it’s trying to achieve except leaving with an impression that it is just another Arts Centre with various art activities going on inside only. Therefore, it does not seem to differentiate itself from Leisure and Cultural Services Department of Hong Kong Government in providing diverse art programmes, and it could not achieve what Doyle suggested by differentiating itself against others to make audiences willing to pay more, and a pity success of each programme could not carry forward as a lasting effect on its brand.

By reviewing HKAC’s recent programmes, we can find that most of its performing art programmes are not performed by a well-established organizations, and the opportunities are somehow given to newer and emerging groups/ artists. This does give a feeling its programming philosophy is to support new artists but this image is weak because it’s marketing or even its mission does not try to convey such message. And it is doubtful if this direction will continue if there is major people movement within its programme department or senior management as this philosophy is not written in its vision and mission statement and unlike to carry forward after major people changes.

From HKAC’s website (<http://www.hkac.org.hk/>), it has a tagline “A hub for Arts and Community”, the word community is also presented in its vision and mission statements. However, there is no clear indication which group of community it is referring to, it seems the word community means Hong Kong in general. It feels like it wants to be an art hub for all, this is problematic because Hong Kong people in general is a target too big, when considering it as a programming or audience development philosophy will be easily losing track on who to target. And when art is largely appreciated and consumed by higher educated people, building an art hub for all will require pouring in tremendous resource and effort across education/outreach and programming to transform general population into art attendants.

One more issue with its branding is that it has to collaborate with companies/artists to produce a programme because it does not have its own production team, while its venues are open for others to hire, it is difficult for people to figure out which programmes are presented by HKAC or by a third party. Audiences may confuse about whether all performance happening at its venues are commissioned by HKAC if they do not look into details, so it seems that the third party hirers also somehow contribute to HKAC’s branding. But HKAC does not seems to have any direction behind venue hiring such as supporting certain type of art organizations/artists or genre by giving them priority or special rate and HKAC does not in control of this part of branding contribution.

After reviewing its overall branding, we can now examine in smaller areas, which is different elements of HKAC’s brand identity. There are several elements inside a brand identity, namely, pricing, quality, presence, awareness, reputation, image, preference, share of market, customer commitment, all of these join together to form the brand identity perceived by the people. As not all of these have any data, research or observation support, we will focus on a few of them.

In term of pricing, price is relatively lower than performing arts programmes by other organizations (e.g. HK\$60 for its Playwright’s Studio performance comparing to HK\$200-300 or above for a well-known performance) or sometimes even for free (e.g. “Concerts In Progress” performance), so this may give the impression the quality of the show may not be good enough. This is understandable as most of its commissioned are not well-established organizations, if it charges the roughly the same price like other established companies, audiences may not be willing to pay such a price. And this cheap-or-free strategy does meet its target to be an art hub for all and also give you a sense that it is aiming to promote art.

On presence, HKAC has quite a number of media coverage from different media. Using “Hong Kong Arts Centre” as the keyword and the time frame from 1<sup>st</sup> Jan, 2014 onward to search under the information portal WiseNews (<http://wiseneews.wisers.net/>), this yields around 970 results with mentioning of the name across different newspapers and magazines, this mention could be a story coverage, information on its event or merely mention because the author/interviewee has a history with

the organization. This means it is about 2.6 mentions per day, and it is covered in various magazines/newspapers with different target audience, it has a high presence in the media. And most importantly, it does not have any scandal or bad representation from the press so far, and its reputation should not be bad from audience's view. This is unsurprising as HKAC has established for 36 years already, if it does not have a good presence and relationship with the press or even has a bad reputation, HKAC is likely to go out of business already.

Lastly, about image, it uses a consistent color scheme, mainly using yellow and white as its representing color scheme, this color could be found using on their logo, website, mobile app or promotion materials. It is a good strategy as the audience could recognize your brand instantly. The color yellow also makes people feel it is bright, young and energetic, and its website design also use a comic style, this also helps to project a feeling of youth even it is 36 year-old already. And the simplicity style of its logo gives out a modern feeling, so as its promotion materials, this goes along with its programming focusing on western art form.

In conclusion of this part, HKAC has built a brand as promoting art through educationally-enriching programming but it is not special enough to distinguish it from others while its image actually projects a young and energetic brand identity which match with its certain programming direction in partnering with emerging artists. HKAC urgently needs to re-think where it wants to place itself among the market, and especially need to review how its image could make relevant to its programming philosophy to communicate a strong distinctive brand image.

### Marketing Strategy

When converting marketing plan into practice, it is very common to use the "marketing mix" approach, this approach is not a scientific theory, but simply a conceptual framework to help marketers in formulating marketing practice. The idea behind "marketing mix" is similar to mixing a cake; you can adjust different ingredients in the mix in order to bake different type of cakes, so marketing mix approach is a framework of marketing different product by adjusting the components within the framework. The "marketing mix" approach is often called "4Ps" as product, price, promotion and place are widely accepted the four element in marketing mix. But with growing number of criticism for the 4Ps, more Ps were introduced to improve the tool. In 1980, Boom and Bitner suggested to add 3Ps, namely participants, physical evidence and process, into the mix to apply this concept to the service sector. (Goi, 2009) As what is delivered by the performing arts to the audience is the intangible audience experience, this is similar to service industry, this article will therefore apply the 7Ps as to access HKAC's marketing strategy.

Product is not the key strategy used by HKAC. From its promotion, there is seldom emphasis putting on the production group or the performance alone, it is more on presenting what the show is about or trying to achieve. As discussed above, HKAC offers various kind of performance in collaboration with outside groups/artists, and not all of them come with a big name or have a good track record, especially some of them are emerging groups/artists. So it is wise for them not to put the product up front as its key marketing strategy since it is hard to attract audience if the audiences do not have the confidence in the quality of the performance. But when the performance is done by a well-established group or with a good feedback, HKAC is not shy to point out that. For example, when promoting the non-verbal physical comedy *Detention* by Tang Shu-wing Theatre Studio, the studio and the excellent feedback for the performing running at Edinburgh Festival Fringe had always been brought up.

Price is clearly one of the key marketing aspects HKAC relying on. As mentioned previously, the price is relatively cheaper or even free and this matches with the its programmes of using non-established groups, so it is obvious it has thought about its price positioning against products from other organizations.

Similar to many other art organizations, the main focus of the marketing mix is on promotion and it has different channels for promotion, inside or outside its organization. Some are using its own resources: an official website with every programme info and highlighted programme at the front page; a mobile app with the similar function as the website; own publication called Artslink which contains not only programme info but also review or preview article for its programmes and is distributed to more than 150 locations ("Publication," n.d., para. 3); promotion flyers and posters at its building; weekly programme highlight e-newsletter to its ACFan subscribers. Outside its organization: advertisement on

printed media or at place outside its building (e.g. MTR station); unpaid media coverage in numerous newspaper and magazines; promotion flyers and posters available at other art and cultural venue like Hong Kong Cultural Centre. And in this digital age, definitely it has a Facebook page for posting programme promotion and programme highlight. And all of these promotions are not very different from other Hong Kong Arts Organization.

On place strategy, HKAC is easy to access, and is about a 10-minute walk to the nearest Wan Chai MTR Station. There is also quite a number of bus stations nearby, but since performance usually happen within its building so it is harder to develop new place strategy and emphasis is not put at this. It has tried to bring performance to other places before like Street Music series has musicians performed outside Sha Tin City Hall. However there is no attempt to break through the place limitation using Internet, especially some of the performance are free, there is not a need to worry about ticket sale for streaming the performance live on Internet.

For the participants element (some will call it people instead), this involves the people who deliver the service to the customer in the process. In the case of HKAC, the people element would be related to its front of house staff. The front of house staff are polite, it is easy to identify them as they are wearing a black t-shirt as uniform, and they do know about the basic information of each performance too. The experience with the front of house staff is pleasant, it is just the image of them is not very different from other front of house staff elsewhere. Something more could be done in this area, like training them to understand beyond the basic information of the performance, or even making them become a (better) art lover, and this in turn could turn them into future audience or as a good advocator of the organization through word-of-mouth.

There is a great advantage for HKAC for having its own building not just on programming, it also helps building the physical evidence element as people could instantly know about it when they are seeing its logo/sign outside the building, and its name is also presented on the map, people may make aware of them when simply browsing the map. And within its building, the color used is the same yellow and white color scheme, it feels bright and comfortable inside. There is a strong physical evidence for HKAC.

Process in marketing mix is referring to “the procedures, mechanisms and flow of activities by which the service is acquired”, and marketers “have to ensure that customers understand the process of acquiring a service and that the queuing and delivery times are acceptable to customers”. (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995) On HKAC’s promotion materials or website, where and how to get ticket is clearly stated, and box office is presented in the building, it is very easy for the audiences to obtain ticket or place enquiry. It is rare for a performance to late start, audience could expect when the show will be started though we can argue whether the audience is acceptable for the start time is subjective, some may find it start too early or some too late. This is no evidence this consideration have been tapped into. And we can say that HKAC is doing fine at the process element.

After reviewing marketing strategy through the 7Ps, we learned that HKAC has paid special attention in Price, Promotion within the marketing mix, while other areas are business-as-usual activities that carried forward from the very start without refreshing strategy to further enhance those areas.

According to Prahalad and Ramaswamy (as cited in Hill & Sullivan, 2003), marketing has been changing from simple business transaction to relationship marketing and one of the criticisms for marketing mix is it is treating customers as passive and no interaction is involved, and relationship cannot be built through this direct marketing technique (Goi, 2009). So it is also important to see whether HKAC has been building up a good relationship with the audiences and it seems little has been done in this area. Relationship building is mainly happening on its Facebook page, when people make a comment or suggest on the page, they will get responded. Other than this, there is no obvious relationship building strategy has been adopted, even it has collected contact information for ACFan, it is used for sending e-newsletter only, and the direct-marketing e-news is not customized according to subscriber’s selected interest. With the uniqueness of owning a building, more could be done to help making its audience happy, something like free Wi-Fi in the building for e-newsletter subscribers or programme suggestion to audience at the box office could let audience feel important. And a simple welcome and goodbye with a smile (not the forced kind) from the front of house staff at the start or the end of the performance could already make a huge different in the experience of the audience.

### Audience Development strategy

In Heather Maitland widely quoted book *A Guide to Audience Development* (1998), the definition of audience development is “a planned process which involves building a relationship between an individual and the arts”. In a much detailed definition, Rogers (as cited in Hayes & Slater, 2002) defines audience development is “quantitatively and qualitatively targeting new sectors in innovative ways to broaden the arts audience base, then nurturing new attendees, along with existing audiences, to encourage them to grow with the organization”. Using this definition, we can basically say that audience development is to attract/nurture new audiences while retain/grow existing audiences and bringing them closer to arts.

In term of audience development approach, a large number of authors think it is “an essential function of marketing in the performing arts”. (Tajtáková and Arias-Aranda, 2008) Rogers (as cited in Hayes & Slater, 2002) even further proposed marketing, education and programming should go hand-in-hand together to carry out audience development strategy. We will assess HKAC’s audience development strategy through examining its marketing, education and programming strategies in shaping audience development.

Regarding marketing, it seems HKAC wants to target general art audience. Promotion channels cover places which could reach art lovers in general, for example, MingPao Weekly, TimeOut Magazine, etc., and sometimes targeting specific group such as university students when the product is fixed with this group. Maybe the price strategy could attract youngsters as a cheaper price is affordable to them, but the author believes this strategy is not developed for attracting young people rather to reflect the reputation of the performing groups as discussed previously. Social media like Facebook is also employed; this could reach to the younger generation, as they are the main users of social media. Other than trying to reach younger people through different channels, there is no specific strategies like special discount to them or hiring a young artist to represent HKAC in attracting youngsters. So, it seems HKAC is aiming to target art audience in general, with a bit of effort put in reaching younger people, this is likely due to its “arts for all” belief.

Within its programme department, there are members responsible for outreach programme. They will bring performance to secondary schools from time to time, one example is their Street Music Series, they would bring independent musicians to perform and share at secondary schools. It is clear HKAC wants to nurture and attract the school students into arts. Except for this, talks, post-performance sharing are usually arranged for each individual programme or series, review or preview articles are also available in its publication Artslink, similar to marketing strategy, those programme-related events or publication is under “arts for all” approach too, no specific group is targeting at. Hong Kong Art School is also the same, operating like any other schools, it does not have any promotion/attraction to specific segment of people unless the person has the interest in that area already.

At last, we come to programming part. As mentioned above, programmes are usually performed by young and emerging artists, this could attract young people, since artists are young people themselves too, performance content or style would be very likely to relate to young people’s life. And since HKAC does not only commission performing arts programmes, programme crossing different art form (e.g. dance performance in an exhibition) could be an opportunity to attract art lover from other art form, currently only related promotion materials have been placed at visual art, moving image events as a way to attract. This is not effective and creative enough in term of programming to attract attendants across various art forms.

Combining these three parts together, HKAC has certain elements in reaching young generation, though those are not very attractive approach because they are adopting a generic method in marketing, education, and it is very one-way communication from HKAC only. And its “art for all” approach is an issue too, attracting general art lovers simply means you do not have any group to attract in mind at all because within art-lover group, there are different segments inside too, such as different personal income, different age, or interest in different genre. It seems it is not effective enough for HKAC in attracting/developing new audience.

How about retaining existing audiences? It is a complete failure in this area since the author could not find any evidence there is any activities in retaining previous attendants. Its ACFan database is used for direct-marketing email only, not for understanding or communicating with its “fan”; its Facebook page

is just another promotion channel, not using for collecting feedback, opinion, suggestion or even proactively interacting with page members to build relationship.

### Conclusion

The revisiting of HKAC's branding, marketing and audience development strategies feel like it is very unique in what it inherits but the "beauty" of it is not all very obvious. It is hard for people to go beyond its "beauty" and get a taste of its personality because understanding someone thoroughly will require a relationship. Its "art for all" philosophy is admirable, though this vision is certainly difficult to help making a distinctive position in the market. And besides all the areas that have not been done or not been doing well, there is one thing that has always been missing in forming branding, marketing and audience development strategies, and that is marketing research. As branding, marketing and audience development all require the organization to know its current position, understand the existing audience, marketing research is one of a good way to clear the picture. But like most arts organizations, HKAC does not use marketing research to understand itself more. And HKAC is in need to formulate a clearer vision and carry it inside and out, so it should have no more disconnection between its branding, marketing and audience development strategies. In an ideal situation, these three strategies should be responding to each another, and also be handling together between marketing, education/outreach and programme departments.

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