IN CONVERSATION WITH...

Kingsley Jayasekera, Marketing and Customer Experience Director, West Kowloon Cultural District Authority – Hong Kong

'We're doing placemaking from scratch...It is what happens at the human scale that makes a difference to people's lives'
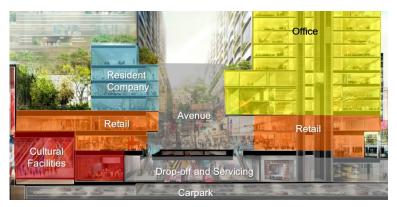

After working as Director of Communications and Digital Strategy for London's Sadler's Wells Theatre, Kingsley joined WKCDA in 2013, bringing his extensive experience in marketing, advertising and digital development for the creative industries. One of the largest cultural projects in the world, WKCDA aims to create a vibrant cultural quarter for Hong Kong, mixing indoors and outdoors activities in a 40-hectare area where the local arts scene can interact, develop and collaborate.

You've been in this extraordinary role for 5 years now. What's been the most significant change in moving from a smaller, more established British institution to this hugely ambitious new venture in Hong Kong?

The scale at which we are working is hard to describe. We currently have under construction three theatres (with 7 performance spaces), two museums and a park, with other venues soon to start the planning stage. There will also be offices for those working in the creative industries, retail and dining, and residential elements. But what makes it even more immense as a project is that this is

all built on reclaimed land so there is a huge amount of basic but highly complicated infrastructure work going on at the same time. We are also a start-up so that means we are rolling out new systems, policies and strategies. We also exist in a very dynamic region of the world at the meeting point between two very different environments. This means that while some parts of my role are very familiar, the start point, the journey, or the scale can be very different. This is 40 hectares of land dedicated to one purpose, managed by one authority with its own vision, approach and even its own bylaws.

'It's a city within a city'

There are some fascinating tensions in WKCD – world-class buildings of tomorrow, significant resources and a 'clean slate' mixed with high political expectations and a limited established local audience (and workforce). How have you gone about marketing something that doesn't yet exist to an audience that doesn't know they want it?

The key point is remembering something I learned from my work in the West End and also at Sadler's Wells:

'Don't define your potential or future audience by what you think you know already and who you see coming at the moment'

Sadler's Wells huge success was in part based on a firm belief that the audience for dance was much bigger than people within the dance world imagined; it was really our job to engage with people and invite them in. West Kowloon is 'a place for everyone' and, to be honest, you cannot hope to fill as many venues as we will have unless your offering speaks to a wide audience and is welcoming. So far, the test events we've been doing have reassured us we're on the right track. We've had a great reaction to the open-air events, to the Bamboo Theatre seasons and the art exhibitions we've been doing since 2013. There is a lack of audience data in Hong Kong and so we've conducted the city's first comprehensive audience segmentation study, looking at the demographic and behavioural factors that define people and their engagement with arts and culture.

So where do you think marketing and segmentation is going? It seems like the digital world has shown us that a lot of the distinctions we use to make between generations and demographics are inaccurate as humans are so much more irrational and complex. How do you stay ahead of these trends?

'Segmentation models have a habit of being too one-dimensional and sometimes lack the ability to get down to the required granularity'

The public's relationship with arts and culture is complex, driven by many factors – most segmentation models cannot account for the finer details of why one person goes to a certain venue but not another or why they like one artist but not another. The key for me is taking advantage of the huge opportunity the arts has – this is great content that people are passionate about. Let people control their own data, let them define their own interests, let them share with us the obstacles they face that stop them attending, big or small, and their specific needs. Reinforce this with behavioural data collected through purchases or online browsing and you can create an environment where the regular attender feels valued and recognised, and one where the new or casual attender can feel welcome and be guided to what they need.

I know you've talked about the need for better CRM systems in the past. How is this going?

'Hong Kong is sometimes simultaneously one of the most challenging and also the very best place to do something new'

The CRM is challenging as we need to support customers across three languages and work across the idea of 'one country, two systems', but the potential of a district-wide CRM that ties together arts and culture, dining and retail is very exciting, using a single online identity for people who use our Wi-Fi, buy tickets, become members, buy in our shops, eat in our restaurants, hire bikes or do any number of things within the district. But Data Privacy is an important concern and we take it very seriously. In our favour is the fact that when it comes to arts and culture people like their interests and loyalty to be remembered and recognised. The key is to understand the fine line between being helpful and appearing 'creepy' or intrusive. Many people forget this and they let the technology lead them without thinking. Just because you can do something does not mean you should. You may remember when U2 gave away their new album for free a few years ago on iTunes and automatically added it to everyone's libraries whether they wanted it or not – it was a step too far.

We are ambitious but also taking it in careful stages. The first thing is that we want to get people to share basic info and show them that sharing information can be a positive thing.

'We are trying to use technology to help us manage what should be a caring relationship'

Our visitors will have control of their own data; I want them to be able to access the information on the CRM system themselves and control and update the information we hold about them.

Your role includes marketing and customer experience. (How) do you distinguish between these remits? Where do you sit within the leadership structure of WKCD and would you change this?

Since I've been here I've had a few roles: marketing, digital, communications and public affairs... My current one is interesting but challenging. The positive opportunities around customer experience in a modern environment are immense and it is something that cuts across the whole organisation. Customer Experience should be everyone's concern but sometimes in an organisation as large as ours siloes can form and that makes customer experience and accessibility challenging for people to embrace and understand. I sit with the other Directors reporting to the CEO who is very supportive of initiatives to make West Kowloon accessible to all.

'In terms of customer experience, I'm focused on making it as seamless as possible'

There will be a district-wide app guiding people and making the transition between venues and other apps such as the museum guide or retail options feel as smooth as possible. The important thing is to maintain a common vocabulary and distinct tone for the district as a whole.

How do you distinguish between users for the district as a whole and those for specific institutions? And in terms of local, regional or international?

The first venues are defining their own audiences through programming. The first major venue is dedicated to Chinese Opera (Xiqu), the second is a black box for experimental theatre with an attached lounge/bar for live music. The M+ is a museum of contemporary visual culture and the Hong Kong Palace Museum will show artefacts from the Palace Museum in Beijing. As such, we are already offering a wide range of content. Of course, already there is a lot of interest in crossing boundaries between artistic forms and we have done a lot of experimentation in this area.

'The key is to remember audiences are complex – they don't just exist while in your venue, they have other interests and full lives'

They also have different personas – I used to see this at Sadler's Wells – the loyal fan who came to see contemporary dance but brought their parents to see Classical Ballet or Flamenco and would take their kids to see the Snowman or Breakin' Convention. As we add more elements the visitors will diversify – some coming just to eat or shop, others to see exhibitions or have a special night out at the theatre, some to sit in the park or see an outdoor concert. The key will be to join these diverse people, make connections, link them to new experiences.

As to local, regional and international – the district has to be authentic. If local people do not believe in it and support it, it will be false and won't succeed. So local is very important. Also, visitors want that authenticity, and people around the world are fascinated by Hong Kong, its culture and its fast paced, high rise, bustling, street culture image. We are also on the edge of an immense market on the mainland who will be joined to us through a new high-speed rail link. Though that does come with huge but exciting challenges – different social media, different regulations and laws, different currency, different search engines, different payment systems – it is very unusual to be so disconnected in real terms from your immediate geographic catchment area.

In Hong Kong, you're able to trial a lot of new technology to help with user experience and marketing. Can you tell us the innovations you're most excited about and how you think this will affect visitor experience in the future?

We've so far been using Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality to give people a sense of the future district, and that has been very interesting.

'I see AR having a lot of exciting applications in the areas of wayfinding and promotion'

Also, I have been looking at chatbots and their potential not only to help with enquiries but also provide a more personal experience as cultural guides, helping customers find the best events for them. Obviously with the CRM we will try and move towards more personalisation of content as part of an omni-channel strategy. As we continue with the planning of the district I personally have become fascinated by the potential of gamification as a way of doing public engagement exercises

– let the public run a virtual theatre and see how it works, balancing the different elements of the facility and business. They will discover it's harder than it seems!

How do the ethics compare to other parts of the world? What are the risks of this new technology?

Technology comes with benefits and risks. There are some things you need to remember.

> *'You do not own social media, so while you may engage people on it you can find it changes on you again and again and it's outside your control'*

It's not the same as direct communication via your own channels. And increasingly with digital marketing whatever happens and no matter how careful you are with data and how it is used, other people's misuse can radically change the landscape around you, leading to changes in legislation. Think about the impacts of GDPR, the end of net neutrality, the recent scandals over Facebook, etc. Hong Kong has solid guidelines on data privacy and marketing data and these are a useful check. But the key is treat others as you would like to be treated. Sometimes the arts can be a bit too self-orientated and forget the customer's needs or take their ongoing support for granted.

Analysis from the Cultural Infrastructure Index suggests that the increase in private funding means that a lot of new cultural buildings are moving further into the leisure/entertainment space with associated retail and hospitality strategies. What does this mean for arts and culture? Do you think cultural spaces will have to work harder to be more distinctive and avoid a cookie-cutter, overbranded experience?

I think there is an exciting meeting point between commerce and culture and I think that is a good thing.

> *'Cultural spaces will not so much have to work harder but instead adapt to new environments'*

That is something I believe they are capable of doing. So many older venues I see today are so much better thanks to improved bars, dining, retail and engaging front of house experiences. It has made them more welcoming, more responsive and accessible to diverse audiences, and dare I say it, more fun.

WKCD has been leading some amazing free public and temporary programming to build audiences in Hong Kong. How are you able to ticket this and capture this data? (A lot of other districts have challenges with this).

With our big free festivals, we asked for online registration and this formed the basis of an e-list that still has a strong open rate. We also ticket all our talks and seminars. But data collection is a challenge for the regular Freespace Happening events we do and also the M+ exhibitions. We have an e-list of 110k+ which is a very promising start for a project that has not opened a major venue yet. We also have a strong following on Facebook with almost 100k+ followers across various pages. Having our own CRM system being fed by our own ticketing system and district- wide Wi-Fi will really open up opportunities to collect data.

What do you think the cultural district experience of the future will look like? What are the biggest changes you expect in 5 years and 10 years?

I think the cultural district experience in the future won't feel radically different to what we see now in many places. Why?

'Because a cultural district should feel natural and you should feel at ease there, it should feel spontaneous, organic, even if it is underpinned by rigorous planning'

The technology we use should be intuitive and invisible, the messaging helpful and engaging.

Where do you look to internationally in terms of cultural district development?

It's hard to draw comparisons – it's interesting to look at the mainland as they have a boldness that is admirable, a desire to be at the cutting edge and of course they are exploring new models of operation.

'In many ways I am fascinated not by new districts but by older districts in established cities that have grown organically – they have a magic that we need to learn from'

The biggest challenge we have is creating a complete district across 40 hectares that mixes theatres, museums, public spaces, dining, retail, offices through a planned process that feels natural.

'In many other places, culture has been embedded over time'

For example, in Barcelona, Shenzhen or many other places, old factory units have been taken over – it's the little details that make a special experience when you're walking around. Here, we're doing placemaking from scratch. The appetite for street performance and outdoor programming has

grown so quickly since I've been here but there is still a culture that strictly limits what you can do on public spaces that we need to help change. There is a tremendous street culture here where people sit around and chat but a lot of the buildings (such as shopping malls) don't allow that. So the danger is that the architects only see the beauty of the building and ignore the human factor. We need to make sure these impressive new venues are not just temples to culture but rather places people feel comfortable to sit around and linger in. We need to create a tone that is inviting and not too serious.

What do you think GCDN could achieve collectively, to be more than the sum of its parts?

I think the opportunities for exchange are exciting. To share ideas and best practice; to find ways of benchmarking and case studies. So far it has been reassuring to see that no matter the scale of the project, they are all special through their authenticity, their local flavour and all these small but significant details. It is what happens at the human scale that makes a difference to people's lives.