

# Radical Marketing Approach builds Brand Advocacy

**ABRSM** – the exam board of the Royal Schools of Music – has adopted radically new practices to improve the speed, efficacy and impact of engagement with its examiners. This group, which represents the face of the organisation to hundreds of thousands of exam candidates each year, has become the focus for a new “self-managed” approach to research, using ABRSM teams to lead conversations and the latest findings from Neuroscience to gain insights.

## Background

ABRSM celebrates its 125th anniversary in 2014 and is part of the fabric of the music education system in the UK and across the world. Last year, over half a million graded practical exams were conducted across 90 countries, each involving a candidate performing to one of ABRSM's 600+ UK based examiners. These assessments not only provide a motivational force for individuals' musical development, but generate more than £40m for this not-for-profit organisation; money which in turn is ploughed back into music education.

## Challenges

Changing attitudes to music and examinations, technology and competition from rival boards are driving change. Highly qualified and rigorously selected examiners, all of whom are engaged on a freelance basis with ABRSM and many of whom have worked with the organization for many years, play the key role in the relationship between ABRSM, the candidates (most are children) and teachers. Customer research had identified that examiner manner is the key driver in the exam experience.

ABRSM faced a number of questions:

- How engaged do examiners feel and how can ABRSM positively influence the examiners' interactions with candidates?
- What would improve the relationship with this key group to ensure their continued role as ambassadors for ABRSM as a global organization?
- How should ABRSM keep this key stakeholder group engaged as it navigates through changes in the music education landscape which will inevitably impact on the work of its examiners?

## Approach

Rather than commission external market research ABRSM took the bold step of deciding to use its own staff as the research team – for a number of reasons. To:

- Demonstrate ABRSM's desire to hear directly from examiners
- Increase the impact of feedback across the organisation
- Increase the speed with which the ABRSM makes change
- Minimize the cost of external marketing spend
- Equip ABRSM with the skills to conduct future research projects

ABRSM worked with Mike Pounsford, an organisation development and communication expert, to devise the approach. Key steps included:

- Preliminary interviews with ABRSM leaders and examiners to identify areas they wanted to explore
- The development of structured focus groups to be led by ABRSM
- Training on focus group leadership to members of the ABRSM examinations and marketing teams (including a “rehearsal” focus group in which other ABRSM staff acted as examiners)
- A day in which 50 examiners met at ABRSM to participate in focus group discussions and large group reviews of feedback
- A debrief in which ABRSM applied a framework based on Neuroscience to analyse the engagement of examiners
- The development of actions and a review of these with the Directorate
- Feedback to all examiners of the resulting actions at their annual conference

## Results

“This project was principally a research piece, but the method we adopted in itself began to address the issues we had set out to explore” says Ben Selby, ABRSM’s Business Development Director. “The very fact that it was people from within the organization leading the conversations sent a strong message that we were looking to build relationships.”

Feedback from examiners has been very positive. Fears that issues, with potentially costly implications, relating to their terms and conditions of work and the acute time pressures of the exam day were not realized. Instead, feedback majored on a deeper level appraisal of what it meant to be an examiner, and to be at the heart of the ABRSM system for musical assessment. “By engaging in the way that we did, the proposals that arose were constructive and realistic” says Selby.

Recommendations that emerged from the work included quick wins and longer-term changes. Short term, for example, ABRSM quickly set up and is supporting an examiner-led social media group which now has over half the panel signed up, and is constantly active. IABRSM has also committed, longer-term, to be more open about the make-up of the examiner panel and how work is allocated. For example, a new application process has been opened-up to all examiners to apply for the roles of examiner Trainer and Moderator. A year on from the initial project, this recruitment process has borne fruit, and taking this further, ABRSM has also piloted a change to the way in which examiners’ work is appraised, to make it much more a two-way information exchange about aspects of examining work and examiner performance. Unsurprisingly, conclusions from trialling this change will lead to full implementation from 2015. The results from the pilot have been hugely positive in other ways: base line scores recorded at the beginning of the project on issues such as how supported examiners feel, how much they feel part of a team, how well the organization communicates with its examiners and the extent to which examiners feel valued have all increased dramatically.

“Two big concerns with a freelance group like the examiners - who represent the organisation but are not employed by it - are that they will use an opportunity to give feedback as a chance to either focus solely on reward, or will be too concerned about the impact on their offers of work to speak honestly” says Mike Pounsford, the Managing Director of Couravel. “We worked hard to make this research exercise a genuine collaboration between two groups who are inter-dependent, and for whom the future of music examinations is a core issue. The conversation forms part of their relationship, so it was important to focus the questions on the things that matter to both. The approach ensured that this felt like a real partnership.”

### Conclusions

Many industries use teams that they do not employ personnel to deliver customer experiences that are critical to their brand. Franchise operations, automotive marques, training companies, IT consultants and agency sales operations spring to mind. ABRSM’s approach illustrates how innovative research can generate insight and build relationships. Advances in Neuroscience help cast new light on old data. It changes the way feedback is evaluated to uncover the drivers of engagement.

John Holmes, Chief Examiner at ABRSM concluded: “This research helped us not only get closer to our examiners but also use their feedback to influence colleagues at head office. It is early days, but the outcomes of the project have really begun to strengthen our relationship with examiners. As a result, our ultimate customers – the candidates – get a better exam experience which in turn enables them to perform to their very best.”

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