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<b>Paper Name:</b>	To be or Not to Be Excellent	
<b>Presenter Name:</b>	Janelle Colquhoun Director Salubrious Productions	
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*“Earth shattering? Nah, not even close to what it felt like to be forced to give up my career singing with the Frankfurt Opera, driver’s license, pet bird Figaro, solo travels around Europe, photographic hobby and living alone in my tiny one-room German apartment.*

*No, returning to live with my parents in Brisbane, relying on them to drive me everywhere, help choose my clothes, read my letters and have ‘experts’ tell me I would never sing with an opera company again was more like I’d smashed naked through a plate-glass window.”*

Extract from “Too Blinkered to See” by JC Lesley (aka Janelle Colquhoun)  
<http://career.worklifegroup.com/career-stories/too-blinkered-see-jc-lesley-50.html>

This extract should give some idea of how I felt when I went blind at the age of 29 in the middle of a successful international operatic career.

I had to adjust to a new way of life and found although my singing voice was still perfectly capable of excellence, nobody wanted to contract me to an opera company—their preconceptions of my disability ruled me out of most singing work. I have one disability, yet hundreds, perhaps thousands of abilities, but the label they stuck on my forehead was “disabled”.

It was through involvement with Access Arts Inc and joining the board, I discovered how many other performers, likewise of a professional standard were also being denied and excluded from work due to the disability label. With my skills, experience in the mainstream arts industry and extensive networks, I established Salubrious Productions, an entertainment and production agency specialising in professional artists with a disability.

I tried finding my artists work, promoting them as excellent artists who also happened to have a disability. However, I found unless these artists were exclusively interested in working in the disability community, the label of “artist

with a disability” did not open doors or secure bookings. No matter how well they were promoted and how professional or excellent their talents, clients prejudice and preconceptions precluded them from work. Even the government disability departments weren’t often willing to hire them for a disability event; they seemed to have the same prejudice and preconceptions, declining to acknowledge the talents and skills of these artists or support them in getting work.

When I protested that artists with a disability should be booked to perform at disability events, I was informed it was an “inclusive” event and thus the reason for including non-disabled artists (often to the exclusion of artists with a disability). Inclusive is great, but then why weren’t non-disability events being “equally” inclusive of artists with a disability? Under this “inclusive” banner, were they also willing to declare it was acceptable to feature mostly non-indigenous artists at an indigenous event? Highly unlikely I suspect.

I needed to change my marketing strategies and promote my artists in a different way. Since I also represented numerous artists without a disability and had networks to hundreds more, and since most of my artists with a disability wished to receive mainstream work, I worked on the motto – “The best artist for the job”. Frequently the best artist also happened to have a disability—the client was educated about the artists’ skills and talents, and the artists received work in the mainstream. Often I didn’t notify the client of the disability—if I had been booking instead a gay artist, would the client have been notified?

Many corporate, non-government organisations and private clients began booking my artists and I won two contracts with the Brisbane City Council (BCC) in 2001. From these initial BCC contracts to produce 20 shows a year, I received offers of further contracts, and now produce over 100 shows a year for the BCC from large concerts to children’s pantomimes. I am able to offer artists with a disability regular work in these series—from booking a deaf mime artist for BCC library performances, to a blind vocal quartet a spot in a BCC Classical Lunchtime Concert.

Securing bookings for my artists was more about knowing the arts industry and expectations of professional arts practice and passing on this information. But I also needed to do more than just book my artists – I needed to understand their disability, any limitations, and work with the artist to make sure both they and the client would have a positive experience. It might mean taking the time to talk through step by step with a singer with a mild intellectual disability, leaving home, catching and changing buses, arriving at the venue, finding the organiser and performing; coordinating someone to meet a blind pianist at the taxi; or arranging someone to offer an arm to walk a comedian with cerebral palsy up the ramp onto stage. A big part of being an arts agent and producer is also knowing how to best market and promote artists and events.

For an individual artist, being professional means having the whole package – the skills and talent, a professional attitude, a capacity to deliver and good promotional material. I receive about 5 requests a week from artists wanting me to get them work. My first contact with them is often via email or post

(although first contact by phone would be preferable). I need to decide whether I can get these artists work based on the material they submit. If I receive an email telling me how wonderful they are and I should ring them, they'll never hear from me. I don't need to take on more artists, but most of them need more work! If they've sent me promotional material, then it should at least include a biography and photo.

Apart from needing to know what they do, I want to know immediately this artist is professional. I need to know that when I put them forward for a job or promote them for an event, I don't have to waste time chasing them for a well-written, articulate and relevant biography and high-quality photo.

A badly written biography with irrelevant information, of an unsuitable word length, and with typos and spelling and grammatical errors does nothing to promote you as an excellent artist—it doesn't sell your talents and skills if you're not even attentive to your written presentation. Would you expect a client to choose you, or a media department to promote you, or a newspaper to write about you if you've provided them with sub-standard biographical information?

As a producer I spend an enormous amount of time chasing artists for GOOD QUALITY photos – snap shots at the beach, or in a live performance half in shadow with a microphone across your face, or of such low quality is NOT a promo shot and is not professional. I promote that my agency and productions have talented and professional artists, so why should I damage my reputation by booking and promoting artists who cannot even provide good promotional material to convince clients of their artistic excellence?

The wording in promotions and marketing is always critical – it's the difference between getting work and an audience or not. A few tips are to never make comparisons e.g. "Red Couleur's paintings of Ned Kelly are better than those done by Sidney Nolan"; never include negatives e.g. "Robyn Byrd can sing any song at your wedding, except for pop songs"; and try to avoid clichés, too many adjectives and potentially condescending language e.g. "John Smith will knock your socks off with his dazzling and amazing display of fabulous dance moves as he wheels his crippled little body around the stage".

What is the first thing you think about when deciding to put on an arts event?

Many artists think: "I've got a whole body of work I'm going to exhibit and sell lots of pieces", or "My band is hot, we're going to put on a concert gig and make heaps of money", or an organisation might think: "We're going to put on a disability day with performers and an art exhibition to promote awareness to our local community".

Great ideas, but instead of first looking for a venue, or date, or sponsor, the VERY FIRST thing I believe people should consider is the marketing: "Who will attend; what is my target market; how can I convince them to pay money /leave the armchair and TV; what is in it for them when there are so many other choices and things to spend their entertainment budget on?" Artists and

organisations need to decide whom they are targeting in their promotions and what will attract their target market. You will need to decide whom you want to target and focus your marketing.

Big productions with big names spend fortunes on promotions and marketing to sell tickets. No production company will bring an artist or production to Australia if they don't think they can sell enough tickets to cover costs and make a profit. They need to be confident people will want to attend and then will advertise on TV, radio and in newspapers. They have ads running every day for weeks/months to sell the tickets. How can a relatively unknown individual artist or organisation with a non-existent or limited marketing budget and an insubstantial database of supporters convince people to attend?

I believe from the outset when deciding to put on an arts event, you should be thinking of who will want to attend and why?

Maybe you need to slightly change the focus of your event, or adjust your thinking on what you believe the outcomes will be, but don't leave the marketing until last! How many times have you received an invite to an event with only one or two days notice, or received a last minute urgent plea to try and convince you and all your friends to attend, and how many times at your own event have you been disappointed by attendance numbers? Marketing CANNOT be left until the last moment. It is an integral part of the event and must be done collaboratively throughout the whole process if you want anyone but friends and family to attend.

Marketing CANNOT just be a one-off contact with your target audience. You need to convince people to attend, whether it's by having something totally unique and extremely interesting, or by doing some outrageous or controversial promotions in order to get people talking about the event, or by running an intensive targeted marketing campaign, or by including a celebrity who will attract the audience—remember, while it's nice to have a politician open your event, few are going to especially attend just because a politician is there!

Flyer drops to every letterbox in your local area won't convince many people to come. Even if a person is interested after reading the flyer, have you included all the relevant information? Don't forget the 4 essential Ws of advertising material: What; Where; When; Who, and I also suggest How as well - how to find the venue if it's not well-known or easy to find, how and where to book and How much it will cost, even if it's free. You want to make it as easy as possible for people to attend—don't make them work to find out the essential details of your event.

The Arts Activated conference began promotions at least 12 months ago, with web site presence, newsletter updates and regular media releases – you had the opportunity to hear about it numerous times and become interested before you had to finally make the decision to attend.

I find when producing an arts event predominantly featuring artists with a disability I must be especially clever and strategic with the promotion and marketing. Advertising a show as "Come and hear the talented artists with a

disability perform at the Powerhouse” will normally only attract the current small group of disability arts supporters.

Why do we need to highlight disability for this event anyway? Are we trying to use the label to excuse any lack of talent or apologies for an unprofessional or less than excellent event? Even if this were not the case, would the general public perceive it this way?

When advertising some of my productions, I try avoiding using the word disability. While mostly this strategy has been successful, not every idea has worked. In one concert I promoted the performers as “differently abled”. Unfortunately the review in the newspaper the next day congratulated the great concert given by the “differently disabled” musicians!

I rarely use disability in the headline of a media release or promotion, and often not in the advertising at all. Is the only way to promote an artist with a disability or a disability arts event using the disability label?

There will always be the Steady Eddys who rely on the disability focus to promote their act, but most well known artists throughout history are not promoted or known for their disability label. Does every gay, or CALD, or indigenous, or woman, or senior artist always promote one of these labels in preference to their artistic label?

Sometimes, of course. Sometimes it is an essential element of the event and particularly targeted for a specific group in the community. But when you want to market an event broadly and attract an audience who would not normally support a disability arts event, then I don't believe disability should be the label.

I can't remember Stevie Wonder or Jose Feliciano's concerts being promoted as “Come and hear the excellent blind guy sing”! Neither can I ever remember a Bach or Handel composition or John Milton poem or painting by Monet being promoted for their blindness/vision impairment; or Beethoven or Schubert for their deafness; or Vincent Van Gogh for his mental illness – these artists are considered excellent in their fields. If you had to promote their excellence, would YOU be focusing on their disability?

Choosing the wording to be used is a careful process. I called one of my cabaret productions: “Move over Beethoven, This is Cabaret!” I didn't mention the words disability in the marketing at all, even though all but one performer involved had a disability – I wanted the general public to attend and be educated. I chose a venue, which already had members who would receive the promotion in their regular newsletters, a buffet dinner was available for those who wanted, and I offered free tickets. I didn't advertise the fact it was a free event, I spoke on the radio and offered 8 double complimentary tickets, I emailed to all my networks and to organisations making the similar offer – “Please find attached 2 complimentary tickets. Please contact me if you need more.”

The venue was full to capacity, and I received innumerable letters of thanks for offering these free tickets to people who rarely went out due to their limited budgets. If I'd advertised the event as a free event it would have devalued

the show—in most people’s minds, free equals incapable of excellence. I’m sure my audience would have more than halved if it were advertised as free.

I find offering a few free tickets to any event on the radio is a sure way to get some free promotional air time and an excellent way to create interest.

If you want to have the media notice your event and promote it, you need to send out good media releases. The headline of one of the media releases sent to promote Arts Activated was: “Are Artists with a Disability capable of Excellence?”

A day later I received an email on a disability mailing list, asking what we thought of this headline. I emailed to say I thought it excellent—it did exactly what it should—it grabbed attention, created controversy, stimulated debate and was a perfect news headline – it created interest and discussion.

Learn how to write and format a media release and write it for your target market. I put on an arts exhibition: “Minority in Majority”. On the walls were indigenous artworks and those by an artist with a disability. Set up on plinths were sculptures—but hidden in black boxes, so people had to feel not see the art—it was especially to give the vision impaired an art experience and the sighted a blind experience. Separate media releases promoted the different elements of the exhibition – the indigenous artist who lived in the local area; the sculptures to view art by touch.

There are an enormous amount of arts marketing resources available both online and in print as well as information on how to write biographies, curriculum vitas and program notes, plus how to correctly structure, format and target media releases. So much of this information is available free.

As a singer and speaker and producer I need to promote myself to suit my target market which often means re-writing my biography to suit—sometimes I’m an excellent singer with a disability; sometimes I’m an excellent singer who is blind; sometimes I’m an excellent singer with diabetes; sometimes I’m an excellent singer with kidney disease; sometimes I’m an excellent singer with an organ transplant; and sometimes, I’m just an excellent singer!