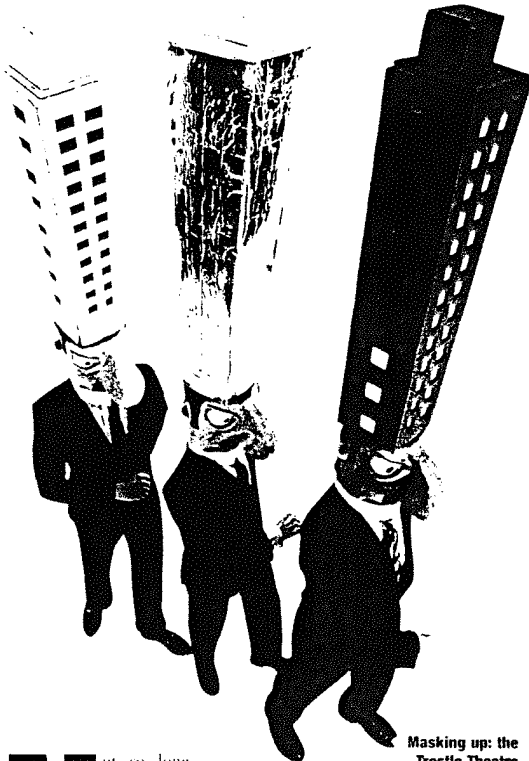


Unleashing the 'luvvies'

Need to motivate staff or train them in a new procedure? Then put them on the stage, says **Neil Bromage**



Masking up: the Trestle Theatre Company encourages staff to develop body language skills

Not so long ago, when retail managers wanted their staff to learn better team-working and communication skills, they dressed them up in combat jackets and dragged them around a muddy copse carrying machine guns filled with paint. Now they get them to write plays, compose poetry and play musical instruments.

As a result, actors, singers, poets and painters have never had such a diverse range of employment opportunities, as more and more businesses seek out their help in unlocking the potential of their staff.

Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's and Body Shop are among a growing band of businesses to make use of 'showbusiness' methods to train staff. When a group of Body Shop executives turned up for a course on 'Coping with Change', they were surprised to find themselves facing a Shakespearean actor, a gospel singer and a silk painter instead of a

pinstriped training manager. Body Shop learning and development manager Jim McNeish says: "It's all about learning how to learn. The market is totally different today. It's more about the heart than the head, and business has to cope with this. The beauty of using art is that it connects to different parts of us."

A break from the norm

Artistic providers say that staff can learn to cope with this more effectively by doing something other than their usual work.

Team-building and communication skills are not the only areas these creative-thinkers seek to address. In addition to the more obvious issues of improving leadership and motivation, practitioners also deal with what are becoming more relevant topics, such as change management, unlocking

creativity and dealing with conflict. Companies are now realising that creativity and innovation are their lifeblood, particularly if they are at all concerned with surviving and prospering. But, until recently, the relationship between business and the arts had been almost nonexistent. Thanks to the growth of sponsorship, businesses now recognise that a corporate hospitality box at the theatre, for instance, can provide a welcome alternative to one at Ascot.

A lot of this change has been bought about by Arts & Business (formerly ABS - the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts), a registered charity with over 300 member businesses, including the majority of the FTSE 100. It works with business and the arts to provide joint-ventures from which both partners can benefit.

Established in 1976, its role has now expanded to cover many forms of business/arts interaction. A&B head of marketing Paul Brown says: "Historically, the idea was to help business benefit from a more constructive and creative relationship with the arts, and the arts to use the professional skills and financial support of the corporate sector."

But things have moved on and while there are still only a handful of specialists delivering this service, it is clear from their client lists that these are widely-used practices.

One such provider is AKT Productions, which recently scripted a play entitled *Fairplay - The Scott String Quartet* for one client

specifically interested in brand awareness and change issues. Performed in front of the clients by professional actors, the play offered a very clear theme involving a new manager trying to change the image of a string quartet. It portrays people trying to adjust to new situations and a manager who wants the quartet to adapt to different scenarios in a chameleon-like fashion - in a photo call he wants them to behave like the Spice Girls, and in the concert hall a cross between a female rock band and a group of nuns.

The corporate audience was then challenged to undertake a brand audit and present their findings. An

according to Body Shop.

At Sainsbury's Fairfield Park store, where the Trestle Theatre Company has worked, staff are asked to 'mask up' as part of a communication skills workshop. They are then asked to convey the character of the mask they are wearing by using body language, displaying anger or happiness. Sainsbury's store manager Mark Foseland says: "Even though the workshop is aimed at improving our communication skills, it is invaluable in allowing staff to get to know each other better, and they are able to bond on an equal footing."

Nothing to fear

Trestle describes this as the 'Stretch Zone': "It's not a safe place, nor is it somewhere to be afraid. In the stretch zone you are flying, not falling. Things are unfamiliar but not threatening, challenging but not confrontational."

David Pearl of Lively Arts also emphasises the importance of this approach. "If two large companies have merged, they get to know each other much better this way than meeting for cocktails," he says.

Sainsbury's also brought in Trestle Secrets duo Karl James and Sam Bond to help it tackle the millennium bug problem. They devised a show using forum theatre and scenario painting, and presented it to more than 250 staff. They encouraged involvement, ideas and brainstorming from their audience.

Other companies have adopted a slightly different approach, and taken a more long-term view of their commitment.

M&S had a poet in residence for a year, who held lunch-time sessions with staff. Julia Havis, who runs the Arts and Science Forum at M&S, says: "It's about bringing people together in social situations to solve problems and giving people a taste of things they might not otherwise experience. We even had the Royal Ballet in one of our canteens."

M&S also ran a session interpreting dreams as a way to solve problems.

It seems the benefits of these off-the-wall activities are universally accepted, but what of the cost? After all, the Royal Ballet can hardly be cheap. Havis says: "Cost is not the issue for us, but I have to say it's an absolute pittance; it's really very cheap indeed."

Costs do vary depending on what the requirements are, but as a general guide, £1,000 to £3,000 is the norm. So, if your company needs to solve some staff or operational problems, the answer seems clear - break a leg. ■

'It's about bringing people together in social situations to solve problems and giving people a taste of things they might not otherwise experience'

improvisation of those findings was then acted out, drawing together the various themes.

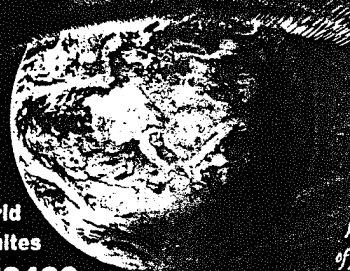
AKT director Andy Powrie says: "Parables and fables have been the tools of learning since time immemorial. Shakespeare described good theatre as 'holding a mirror up to nature'."

Similarly, Body Shop takes its clients into the 'C Zone' - creative, centred and controlled team-building workshops using percussion as an educational, recreational and motivational tool.

Body Shop's McNeish, who aims to run at least one course a year, says: "Surprising things can happen. People who would previously say they would never sing - or that they have no rhythm - sing, dance, or even draw. We have had staff produce a mural together. This sort of shared learning also improves communication. But when using art, the visual images are much more powerful and memorable."

Lively Arts staged a mid-conference evening event for Body Shop, at which 180 delegates were split into eight groups responsible for singing, dancing, music, lighting, etc. This type of theatre event was successful in breaking down barriers and developing relationships,


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