Counting attendees at live events

Key points

- Attendees refer to the total number of individual people who attend or engage with an event or activity.
- Attendance for ticketed events is straightforward, as the number of tickets sold or distributed is a reasonable indication of attendee numbers.
- There is a risk with non-ticked events if no strategies are in place.
- Inaccurate attendee counting presents problems and can impact future planning, set unrealistic benchmarks, reduce credibility and influence flow on analysis of impact.
- Method for counting attendees at a non-ticketed in-person event will depend on if event is in a restricted area (Defined entrance and exit points) or unrestricted area.

Attendee count is a basic measure for all arts and cultural events and activities. The total number of attendees refers to the total number of individual people who attend your event or activity.

For **ticketed events** this is a fairly straightforward measure, as number of tickets sold or distributed is a reasonable indication of attendee numbers (though it does not account for those pre-event ticket buyers who may not turn up on the day or people who buy multiple tickets to different activities within a larger event).

The challenge is much greater for medium and large scale events that are **non-ticketed**. There is a significant risk of double counting people and over-estimating numbers if clear strategies for counting attendees are not thought through as part of event planning.

Why does accurate counting matter?

Inflated attendee counts present a number of problems:

- it is hard for you to properly plan for future events based on an accurate assessment of attendees, which in turn can result in wasted resources if you over-supply facilities and services, or safety and other issues if you under-supply

- they set an unrealistic benchmark to reach for future events

- they may not appear credible to your public and sponsors

- they make calculations of flow-on economic, social and environmental impacts unreliable

- they can over-state the negatives associated with your event such as environmental impact.

How do you count attendees at non-ticketed events?

It is difficult to suggest one counting method that can be applied to all non-ticketed events, as it will vary depending on the nature of your event – e.g. if the event attracts a set audience for a specific period of time *or* people come and go over the course of one or more days; if there is one entry only *or* multiple possible entries *or* no defined entries; and so on.

Below are some ideas to think about as you determine the most appropriate method for your non-ticketed event. Depending on the complexity of the exercise, you may benefit from engaging a researcher or event specialist to help you establish a credible methodology. Arts Queensland has developed a separate fact sheet about *Engaging external evaluators*, available at www.arts.qld.gov.au/arts-acumen.

Events in a restricted area – e.g. venue with entry doors
If there is a defined entrance-only point to your event it is much easier to obtain an accurate count.

Methods commonly used include:
- manual counters operated by staff or volunteers who 'click' the number of people entering (consider having two people conduct this count if resources allow so that tallies can be compared at the end)

- electronic counters positioned to automatically record the number of people entering

- turnstiles which register the number of people entering

- 'proxy tickets' such as wristbands, whereby the attendee count becomes 'number of wristbands distributed'

If people are coming and going from your event, a separate re-entry gate will prevent you double counting attendees. If this is not possible and you are conducting a manual rather than electronic count, wristbands or other 'tags' worn by attendees can be one way of ensuring you only count new attendees (i.e. those not yet wearing a wristband).

Events in open spaces without defined entry points – e.g. park

A number of approaches exist for **estimating baseline attendee numbers** depending on the nature of your event, including:
- dividing the space into segments or grids and organising staff or volunteers to count the number of people in each segment at regular intervals, with the final estimate worked out using counts across all segments

- calculating the maximum possible crowd size prior to your event and estimating the number of attendees relative to the maximum size (e.g. if your event is approximately half-full, your baseline estimate would be 50% of the maximum crowd size)

- using a program that allows you to count the number of smart phones in a defined area, based on the assumption that one smart phone represents one attendee

- using data from attendee surveys (e.g. 25% of attendees surveyed had an official program and a total of 8000 programs were sold, making the baseline estimate 32,000)

Once you have established a baseline estimate, **it is critical this figure is adjusted** to account for a range of variables that increase the risk of double-counting. These variables include repeat viewing (people coming and going through the day or returning over multiple days), the movement of attendees around the event (the average number of different points people view the event from) and casual spectators who happen to be in the area but are not specifically attending. Attendee surveys are important for gathering data to enable these adjustments to be made.

As noted above, engaging the services of researcher can be a very worthwhile investment to help you set up this kind of process, develop the required formulae and establish a methodology that can be reliably applied into the future.

If you are interested in reading further about these issues, try the following article as a starting point:

- Davies,L., Ramchandani,G. and Coleman,R. (2010). 'Measuring attendance: issues and implications for estimating the impact of free-to-view sports events.' *International Journal of Sports Marketing and Sponsorship*, 12(1), pp.11-23.
http://shura.shu.ac.uk/2851/1/DaviesfinalIJSMS.pdf