

THE TICKET INDUSTRY & THE PANDEMIC

JUNE 2022



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TICKETS *from*
AUTHORISED
RETAILERS™

STAR MEMBERS

JUNE 2022

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South West Ticketing Solutions
Theatre Tickets Direct
The Ticket Factory
The Ticket Machine Group
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Ambassadors Theatre
Apollo Theatre
Apollo Victoria
Arts Club Liverpool
Aylesbury Waterside Theatre
Beck Theatre
Bridge Theatre, London
Brighton Centre
Bristol Hippodrome
Bristol Old Vic

Cambridge Theatre
Chichester Festival Theatre
Churchill Theatre, Bromley
City Varieties Music Hall, Leeds
Cliffs Pavilion, Southend
Crewe Lyceum
Criterion Theatre
Delfont Mackintosh Theatres
Duchess Theatre
Duke of York's Theatre
Edinburgh Playhouse
Empire Theatre, Liverpool
The FA
Fortune Theatre
G-Live, Guildford
Garrick Theatre
Gielgud Theatre
Gillian Lynne Theatre
Grand Opera House, York
Harold Pinter Theatre
Her Majesty's Theatre
Hyde Park Picture House, Leeds
Immersive Hub
King's Theatre, Glasgow
Leas Cliff Hall, Folkestone
Leeds Grand Theatre
London Coliseum
London Palladium
The Lowry, Salford
LW Theatres
Lyceum Theatre
Lyric Theatre
Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith
M&S Bank Arena, Liverpool
Mamma Mia! The Party
Manchester Opera House
Manchester Palace Theatre
Milton Keynes Theatre
Minerva Theatre, Chichester
Motorpoint Arena, Cardiff
Motorpoint Arena, Nottingham
National Theatre
Nederlander Dominion Theatre
New Alexandra Theatre, Birmingham
New Theatre, Oxford
New Victoria Theatre, Woking
New Wimbledon Theatre & Studio
Nimax Theatres
Noel Coward Theatre
Novello Theatre
Nuffield Theatre, Southampton
O2 Academy, Birmingham
O2 Academy, Bournemouth
O2 Academy, Bristol
O2 Academy, Brixton
O2 Academy, Glasgow
O2 Academy, Islington
O2 Academy, Leeds
O2 Academy, Leicester
O2 Academy, Liverpool
O2 Academy, Newcastle
O2 Academy, Oxford
O2 Academy, Sheffield

O2 Apollo, Manchester
O2 Forum, Kentish Town
O2 Guildhall Southampton
O2 Institute, Birmingham
O2 Ritz, Manchester
O2 Shepherds Bush Empire
Opera North
Orchard Theatre, Dartford
OVO Arena Wembley
Oxford Playhouse
Palace Theatre
Palace Theatre, Southend
Phoenix Theatre
Piccadilly Theatre
Playhouse Theatre
Prince Edward Theatre
Prince of Wales Theatre
Princess Theatre, Torquay
Queens Theatre
Regent Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent
Resorts World Arena, Birmingham
Richmond Theatre
Royal Albert Hall
Royal Opera House
Royal Shakespeare Company
The Rugby Football Union
Sadler's Wells Theatre
St Martin's Theatre
Santa Pod Raceway
Savoy Theatre
SEC & OVO Hydro Glasgow
Shaftesbury Theatre
Sheffield City Hall
Stephen Joseph Theatre, Scarborough
Stockton Globe
Sunderland Empire
Swansea Arena
Theatre Royal Brighton
Theatre Royal Drury Lane
Theatre Royal Glasgow
Trafalgar Theatres
Twickenham Stadium
Utilita Arena, Birmingham
Utilita Arena, Sheffield
Vaudeville Theatre
Victoria Hall, Stoke-on-Trent
Victoria Palace
Watford Palace Theatre
Wembley Stadium
White Rock Theatre, Hastings
Wycombe Swan
Wyndhams Theatre
Wyvern Theatre and Arts Centre, Swindon
York Theatre Royal

PRODUCERS/PROMOTERS

Disney Theatrical Productions
DHP Family
Kilimanjaro Live
Live Nation
SJM Concerts

ORGANISATIONS

National Arenas Association
Society of London Theatre
UK Theatre

AFFILIATES

AKA
Albemarle of London
Audience View
Best of Theatre
Booking Protect
crowdEngage
Dewynters
JM Marketing
Line Up
Red 61
Seat Geek
SeatPlan
SecuTix
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Squire Patton Boggs
Tessitura Network
Theatreland
theatremonkey.com
Ticketing Business Forum
Ticketing Professionals Conference
TicketPlan
Ticketsolve
TixTrack (Europe)
Tix UK
Tungate Group
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2022
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Live music
Industry
Venues and
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INTRODUCTION

At its meeting on 18 November 2021, the STAR Council agreed to commission a report "To investigate what the ticketing industry experienced during the pandemic and what the recommendations are for the future. Are ticketing practices and policies fit for the 21st century?"

This report will look at how STAR members managed to serve customers and clients during these extraordinary circumstances and

what lessons have been learned for the future. The report does not represent STAR's recommendations for ticketing in the future. It presents the results of interviews with ticketing leaders in February – May 2022 for discussion by STAR members, the Council and the wider industry with a view to ensuring ticketing practices and policies are fit for purpose in the future.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Staff in the ticketing industry showed tremendous commitment and worked heroically through the pandemic.**
- **Ticketing businesses reported an average drop in turnover of up to 85% in 2020 and 58% in 2021.**
- **The sale of ticket protection products grew during the pandemic as customers sought to protect their risk.**
- **Disputes through STAR rose from 2019 levels by 39% in 2020 and 73% in 2021.**
- **Employers have faced difficulties recruiting new staff when building back after the pandemic.**

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Consider greater consistency of ticketing policies across the live performance industry.**
- **Review policies regarding refunds and exchanges through all sales channels, both in the context of responding to a crisis and day to day customer service.**
- **Review practices regarding advance ticket sales income to help ensure that all sales channels are able to refund customers promptly if they have to.**
- **Consider refund of booking and transaction fees for cancelled events.**
- **Consider common technical standards for e-tickets and access control.**
- **STAR to take on a more proactive role in relation to common industry practice.**
- **Develop improved customer service for ticket buyers through the introduction of technologies such as online self-service and chat bots to deal with common questions.**
- **STAR to consider extending its Code of Practice to include standards of service and information for ticket protection.**

NEXT STEP

- **STAR to lead debate starting with STAR seminar on 30 June 2022 and progress to cross-sector discussions on key points determined by the STAR Council and membership.**

SUMMARY

In March 2020 the UK Ticketing Industry was thrown into turmoil by the sudden closure of venues of all types due to the need to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Arenas, Concert Halls, Theatres, Exhibition Centres, Festivals, Stadia and Visitor Attractions all had to close their doors overnight.

Producers, promoters, event organisers and venue managers were under tremendous pressure dealing with a completely unexpected and ever-changing crisis of uncertain duration. Their ticket selling partners were thrust into the position of dealing with enquiries from millions of customers.

Ticket sellers suddenly had to switch from selling tickets, mostly online with very little manual intervention, to dealing with an avalanche of emails, phone calls, webchats and social media contacts from ticket buyers who were anxious to know what they could do

with their tickets for events which were now cancelled, rescheduled or likely not to take place.

STAR members had to close contact centres immediately and switch to home working in order to comply with the Government's Working From Home Directive. Some contact centre telephone systems enabled staff to answer voice calls from home, so these ticket sellers were able to keep their incoming phone lines open although wait times rapidly lengthened due to the volume of calls. Contact centres which did not have such systems had no choice but to switch off incoming phone lines and deal with customer service contacts by email, social media and web chat. Some contact centres had such enormous volumes of customer service enquires that they decided to switch off incoming phone lines simply in order to be able to handle the volume of customer enquiries and to triage them in the fairest way.

Ticket sellers earn their income from fees and commissions charged on the sale of tickets. The pandemic meant that most of their income stream dried up overnight and, in cases where booking fees were refunded along with the ticket price, ticket sellers did their job twice for nothing.

STAR members had to reduce operating costs substantially and rapidly to stay in business. This meant placing staff on furlough, putting added pressure on customer service teams dealing with unprecedented numbers of customer enquiries, most of which required manual responses. Consequently, on 17 March STAR, put out the following media release:

As a consequence of new guidance from the Government on social distancing, many events in venues across the UK are being cancelled or postponed. This includes venues operated by Society of London Theatre and UK Theatre members from Monday 16 March until further notice. It also includes many other events in music, arts and sports venues across the UK. Customers are being asked to check venue websites for details on whether their event has been postponed or cancelled.

Those with tickets for a cancelled event can expect to be contacted by the company they bought their tickets from regarding exchanges and refunds. Wherever possible, customers are asked to avoid calling venues and ticket sellers and wait to be contacted. Flooding businesses with phone and email enquiries at a time when pressure is at its highest can be counterproductive.

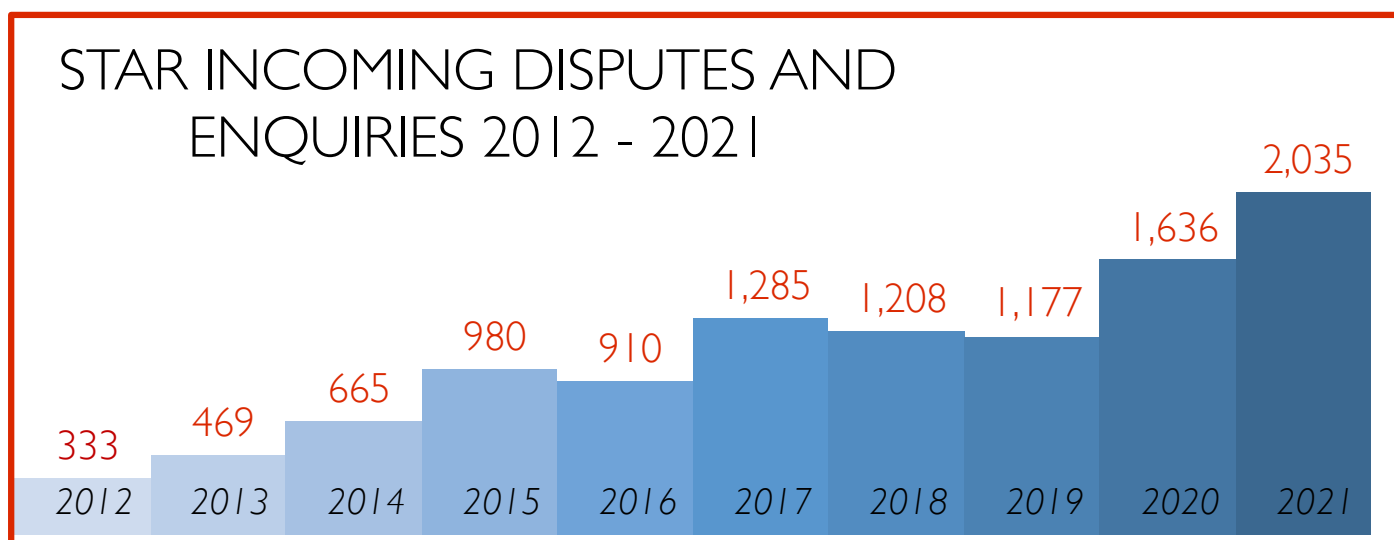
Jonathan Brown, Chief Executive of STAR said, “Rest assured, our members are working as hard as they can to resolve your issues. They are very busy also dealing with their own measures to care for their staff and run their businesses.

“Please be patient and kind as box offices, ticket agents and other ticket sellers are committed to helping you during this extremely difficult period.”

Despite the challenges caused by the pandemic, ticket sellers managed to deal with tens of thousands of cancelled or rescheduled performances and millions of customers for these performances, without negative headlines in the media. Customers who wanted refunds did get them, although the speed of refunds was in some cases not as fast as it should have been. One respondent commented as follows:

“The industry was dumbstruck to begin with. However, professionalism shone through and all worked together to enable refunds.”

STAR’s dispute resolution team received 3,671 contacts regarding enquiries and complaints during 2020 and 2021 as compared to 2,385 in 2018 and 2019. 2,035 contacts were received in 2021, the highest number ever recorded and a 73% increase on 2019. In 2020 74% of complaints related to the pandemic, this was down to 42% in 2021.



The pandemic led to collaboration between ticket sellers, promoters, producers and venue managers as the live performance sector struggled to work out how to deal with an entirely unexpected and unrehearsed emergency on a scale without parallel in living memory. Respondents expressed their appreciation of this collaboration, and hoped that it might lead to the adoption of more common ticketing policies across the industry in the future.

Governments of the four countries of the United Kingdom were unprepared for a pandemic; the sudden changes and U-turns which characterised their responses created further complications

throughout 2020 and 2021.

The live performance industry has emerged from the pandemic with a new representative trade organisation, Live music Industry Venues and Entertainment (LIVE), which represents live music and venues in the same way as SOLT/UK Theatre represents theatre and ALVA represents visitor attractions. STAR is a founder member of LIVE.

In addition to providing support and advice to their members throughout the pandemic, these trade organisations lobbied government to support their sectors which resulted in the Culture

Recovery Fund support package of almost £2 billion. This was in addition to the furlough scheme and the Bounce Back Loans available to all businesses during the pandemic.

STAR member respondents to the research said that they appreciated STAR's work on behalf of the ticketing industry throughout the pandemic as well as its continuing dispute resolution service.

The pandemic greatly sped up the adoption of new technologies and the adoption of new working practices. The widespread use of apps for mobile devices such as NHS COVID-19 has led to ticket buyers becoming much more comfortable using their phones to book and receive tickets. Some respondents commented that conversion rates for mobile were now at the same level as for desktops. The use of e-tickets combined with access control at venues is now almost universal. Several ticket sellers have closed their fulfilment centres as they no longer have any need to post out tickets.

Many ticket sellers closed their call centres so that staff working from home could manage the huge volumes of customer contacts via email and live chat and, in some cases, because their call centre

system did not support PCI compliant home working for processing card payments. Some of the call centres have reopened, others have not.

Ticketing software suppliers and in-house software teams switched development effort to pandemic related functionality as rapidly as possible. These included socially distanced seating plans, staggered arrival times for audiences and self-service tools for customers to enable them to request refunds or exchanges or convert their tickets into credit vouchers or donations.

Many ticket sellers reported challenges with the banking system, particularly when trying to make refunds to expired cards which became more frequent as the pandemic wore on. One payment service provider had to extend its period for refunds from 180 to 360 days. However, even this has not proved to be adequate in some circumstances.

Ticket buyers were generally patient during the early part of the pandemic as ticket sellers grappled with the uncertainties of the pandemic. However, this patience wore off as the vaccination roll-out progressed and businesses opened-up. One respondent remarked:

“By and large the theatre going public was considerate and understanding. They are remarkable consumers!”

METHODOLOGY

Will Quekett was engaged to interview ticketing industry leaders drawn from the following sectors:

- Arenas
- Banking
- Exhibition Organisers
- Trade Media
- Producers
- Promoters
- Industry Associations
- Sport
- Theatre
- Ticket Agents
- Ticket Protection
- Ticketing Software
- Venue Box Offices
- Visitor Attractions

Jonathan Brown and Will Quekett contacted over 60 people starting in February 2022 once the impact of the winter 2021

Omicron onslaught on ticket sellers had eased. Even so, some of these people were too busy to respond. Will Quekett was able to interview 39 people drawn from each of the selected sectors.

STAR Council member Richard Howle together with Jonathan Brown and Will Quekett drew up a list of questions for the interviews. The questions can be found in Appendix A attached

The interviews each lasted at least 30 minutes and in some cases over one hour. Interviewees were guaranteed that their responses to the questions would remain anonymous.

The final interview was with the STAR disputes resolution team which was particularly valuable in relation to collating feedback from ticket buyers.

Will Quekett recorded the interview responses by hand and subsequently transcribed 555 relevant answers into a database for analysis.

FEEDBACK FROM INTERVIEWS

The answers were each given one of the following Response Types: Recommendation, Trend, Positive, Negative or Comment.

Each response was also allocated to one of 29 Topics, for example 'Pandemic's effect on business', 'Common Industry Practices', 'Customer comms', 'Tech', 'Role of STAR', 'Recovery'.

The responses were sorted according to Response Types and then by Topic. The table attached at Appendix B shows the Recommendations and Trends listed according to Topic frequency with the most frequent at the top of each table.

WHAT DID RESPONDENTS RECOMMEND?

(NB text in italics below represents direct quotes from respondents, these are not necessarily STAR recommendations.)

I. Common Industry Practice

Respondents mentioned the benefit of working together during the pandemic on important issues affecting ticketing generally and recommending that it continue into the future. In particular, respondents felt that the Events and Attractions Industry needs better comms between producers/promoters/venues about ticketing policies and ways of working. It should be prepared to share important common customer service and commercial matters and agree common technical standards for e-tickets and access control. The industry needs to review booking fee levels and ticketing policies regarding cancellation and rescheduling. Other important comments included:

- *Move to standardise ticketing policies across the industry. More ticket inventory distribution via API.*
- *Must be clearer in comms about refund or retention of booking fees. More unified response to CS challenges across the industry.*
- *Need consistency across live entertainment re refunds and exchanges.*
- *Need consistent ticketing policies across all venues. Sales channel should be irrelevant to customers.*
- *Peer group conversations should continue after pandemic recovery*
- *Ticketing companies must be able to handle refunds in bulk and manage rapid customer comms.*
- *West End box offices could learn from the regions about building customer loyalty.*
- *Work together to cut down fraud, make it easier to detect fraudulent ticket sites.*
- *Covid heightened collaboration between competitors. Companies talked to each other and evolved common COVID related practises. Collaboration between promoters/venues and ticket agents but some companies chose to stay out of the mainstream.*

2. Refunds and Exchanges

A majority of respondents said that the common pre-pandemic policy of not allowing ticket buyers to cancel or exchange their tickets should not return after the pandemic. This would be more problematic for concerts and other one-off events rather than long running theatre seasons:

- *Agents and venues have a legal obligation to provide a refund if a performance is cancelled.*
- *Customers frustrated at speed of getting their money back. Hard for STAR to explain need for agents to get money back from promoters or venues. This should not have an impact on consumers.*
- *Theatres need to be more flexible with customers. Issue credit vouchers in case of illness, not a good idea to have people who are ill in venue.*
- *Debate needed about lessons learned, especially refunding booking fees and speed of refunding when requested.*
- *Exchange tickets for a fee to prevent capricious changes could continue after pandemic.*
- *Industry needs to take long term view re no cancellation, no refund as not doing this can put off audiences.*
- *Pre-pandemic policy of not allowing ticket buyers to cancel or exchange has to continue for concerts as promoters can't allow random refunds. Introduce more expensive tickets which can be cancelled or exchanged as with travel, hotels etc.*
- *Ticketing companies should not agree to contracts where event promoters make decision as to whether they will refund or not, despite their legal obligations to do so.*
- *More flexibility needed with refunds and exchanges. 95% of claims on ticket protection on day of performance or after performance, so little possibility of exchange in circumstances which have prompted claim.*
- *Customers should be able to claim refunds online once approved. Cancel and exchange tickets should be possible online. 8,000 forms returned within one hour for manual processing on one occasion.*

3. Box office monies

Many Respondents said that box office revenues should be held in a way that enables refunds to be made quickly in the event of mass cancellations

- *Box office revenues should be kept in trust until performance has taken place.*
- *Do not touch box office revenues until performances have matured.*
- *Industry must be really, really careful about paying advances. This will be very challenging for smaller promoters. Need mechanisms for returning advances within defined timeframes.*
- *Must make sure all ticket channels can refund as required more quickly.*
- *Must review security of box office revenues.*
- *Security of box office revenues must be improved.*
- *Ticket sales revenue must be held in escrow. Agent and venue customers must be treated equally.*
- *Ticketing companies should focus on improving customer experience and looking after customers' money.*
- *Venues should not use box office cash to run their business.*

4. Role of STAR

STAR's representative work on behalf of the ticketing industry and its ticketing dispute resolution service throughout the pandemic has been greatly appreciated. One or two respondents recommended that STAR take on a more proactive role in relation to common industry practice, possibly through its relationships with other industry stakeholders.

- STAR dispute resolution very useful for resolving ticketing disputes. Also, critical to have central body to speak for and represent ticketing industry. Important that STAR/CPA/NAA/LIVE collaboration continues for the future.
- STAR must lead review of policies and practices re booking fee, refunds, exchanges, security of cash. Government will not legislate, is ticketing industry too fragmented to satisfactorily self-regulate? Does the industry actually want to change?
- STAR needs better quality data in order to lobby Govt. Really bad comms from Govt during pandemic.
- STAR report will be useful for looking at industry wide changes. Advantage in making big changes as a collective.
- STAR should become more than just a mediator and take on a leadership role post pandemic. Is the membership prepared to support this?
- Ticketing industry needs more joined up voice in future. STAR can provide this especially through LIVE membership.
- JB involved in all industry and government deliberations. Represented STAR and ticketing in good and fair way.
- Pandemic has heightened STAR's importance within the PR for live entertainment and to the ticketing industry generally.
- STAR's 'be nice' message to public very useful to begin with.

5. Customer Communications

Respondents emphasised the need for clear, concise and rapid comms to customers about cancellations and rescheduling, status of refund processing and ticket issue. Ticket sellers should embrace new comms technology and use it better. Respondents reported differing responses from consumers at various stages of the pandemic.

- Confirmation email with Booking Reference number important as this is needed for live chat with some companies.
- Customers can't accept booking fees which are high in relation to the cost of the ticket.
- Must communicate Ts and Cs very clearly from the outset of any future crisis, especially in relation to booking fees.
- Must get out comms re last minute cancellations very quickly before people leave home.
- People don't read emails! Customer comms should be kept short and succinct.
- Quality and frequency of customer comms v important in respect of keeping customers happy, especially re refunds.
- Customer attitudes changed during pandemic. Panic to begin with, then calmer, then as rescheduling continued became more aggressive and some copied emails to everyone they could think of to get attention.
- Customer expectations higher re flexibility with refunds and exchanges and quality of service
- Customers initially very supportive. Some even donated to production casts. Good customer feedback due to comms which made CS processes very clear.
- Customers started off being difficult as didn't know what to expect. Nervousness about refunds, STAR messaging did filter through and trust built up. Speed and frequency of messaging stepped up.
- Customers started off being very understanding and helpful, however this wore off as rules changed and shows continued to reschedule.
- Need to be much quicker responding to CS challenges, use DM to customers in order to take off-line asap. Need to get better at dealing with non-resaleable tickets.

PRINCIPAL TRENDS

Closure of call centres is a trend which was forced upon ticket sellers by the sudden Working From Home directive and by the sheer volume of incoming phone calls which overwhelmed call centres. Some ticket sellers had telephone systems which enabled them to keep their phone lines open. Ticket sellers which closed their call centres continued customer service via email, social media and live chat. Some of these call centres will not reopen. STAR's disputes and enquiries team reported that "Customers on the whole OK with live chat which is used in other industries, eg energy, but it does take some time to get used to."

- Closed call centre when phone sales stopped.
- Could not cope with volume of phone calls so had to switch off call centre. Switched to live chat function, easier to triage CS comms. Only call as a last resort. Spurred on tech to allow more automation of CS functions. Conscious of an undercurrent of sympathy from customers. Summer of 2021 more of a challenge when dealing with COVID hangover.
- Couldn't furlough all staff as work continued, CS demands through the roof, had to switch phones off, back on now.
- Had to switch phones off, CS online only. Call back if necessary. Zendesk from mid-2021 helped deal with customers online. Moved to email customers to advise them would call re refunds which helped retain customer trust.
- Had to turn phones off at peak to triage customer contacts fairly.
- Introduce tech to enable Amazon-quality customer service. Have now replaced phone lines with customer chat. Industry needs to remember that customer is king.

- Much effort looking after customers and staff. Had to turn off phones at peak, phones restored now.
- Now very mobile focused, customers don't miss phones.
- Switched off phone lines, live chat only during pandemic, won't reopen. Good agent can handle multiple chats at once. Outgoing calls only now.
- No PCI compliance for home working. Transferred CS to email and live chat which was much better at dealing with social media enquiries. Used Zendesk type system.
- Kept call centre open throughout pandemic. Dreadfully long wait times but still better than back and forth on email. Implemented Zendesk software during pandemic, great for unifying comms with customers.
- Keeping phone lines open throughout pandemic most important and appreciated pandemic response. Appreciated by clients and by customers who really want to talk to humans. Took calls from customers of other agents who had switched to live chat only. Customers will hang on for an hour or more if they really need to talk to someone.

e-tickets and booked admission times for visitor attractions were almost universally adopted by venues as they re-opened to minimise person to person contacts.

- Adoption of e-tickets and mobile tickets in the West End represents a positive development
- Hard ticket is dead. Theatres moved quickly to e-tickets and scanning.
- Hard tickets effectively dead although some agents will offer a souvenir ticket for a fee
- New technologies adapted very rapidly. Now 100% e-ticket, have closed fulfilment centre. O2 now fully mobile.
- Pandemic forced very conservative event organisers rapidly to embrace mobile, e-tickets and access control.
- Pandemic led to more rapid adoption of good tech. Total switch to e-tickets, no need for ticket despatch centre any more.
- Pandemic prompted adoption of e-ticketing using an App. Customers have to register to receive tickets so now know 60k out of 80k attendee names compared to 12k previously.
- Pandemic sped up adoption of e-tickets, scanning has made COBO queues a thing of the past.
- Tickets to mobile big winner from pandemic, opportunity to run own ticket resale marketplace using mobile tickets.
- Ticketing software has filter which enables sending of multiple tickets to individual phones
- Switched to full digital ticketing earlier than expected, some negatives for venue. Post show comms gives customers opportunity to print souvenir tickets but take up is limited.
- Pandemic forced rapid adoption of timed ticketing. Enabled flexing of staff to deal with predicted visitor numbers and keeping capacity within COVID acceptable limits. Doesn't work for all, frustrating to have to book admission to go to attraction's shop.
- Visitor attraction sector adopted timed entry very quickly. Great for Ops and CRM staff. Mandatory advance booking however may have put off spontaneous walk-up visits and compromised 'open to all' ethos of big museums.

Many respondents praised the commitment of their staff who worked from home for many months, often in less-than ideal circumstances.

- Ticketing team creaked under the strain! Didn't make any contact centre staff redundant. All switched to live chat and email. Worked...to maintain staff welfare. Moving to live chat really worked, staff now in office 3 days out of 5.
- **Ticketing teams rose to the occasion, unsung heroes!** Switching to use of laptops before pandemic, Contact Centre in the cloud system designed to manage remote working.
- **Heroic staff worked long hours from home.** Sep 2021 - 30,000 emails stacked up, 68,000 calls in one week, 27,000 calls in one day, despite this had to cut back on permanent staff and let casuals go.
- **Very tough time pulled through by heroic staff and hard work/long hours.** Saved money wherever possible. Move to home working very well handled. Worked hard not to lose audiences and all advance sales revenues.
- Some very dark days with 5- 6,000 emails waiting to be dealt with at any one time. Audiences on the whole supportive. **Industry worked together well to engender trust and confidence with customers.**
- 'Cross pollination' across like-minded venues very helpful. 2 out of 40 box office staff handled 13,000 refunds over the telephone.
- Customers adopted 'Dunkirk spirit' to begin with however became more querulous as pandemic stretched on. Stressful for CS team dealing with shouty people while WFH.
- CS can always improve, sheer volume of work was a massive challenge. WFH works well for CS teams although challenge of inadequate working space at home for some. Difficult to train new staff when WFH.
- Home working tremendous challenge for young people in small flats and parents with children who need home schooling.
- Maintaining staff morale and well-being throughout pandemic very important as was keeping them up to date with all necessary information.
- Microsoft Teams critical tool for managing WFH. Meetings recorded so people could catch up with meetings they missed.
- WFH good for older workers with children, not so good for younger people in small flats and shared house.
- **Customer facing staff had the toughest time.** Some senior managers made commercial decisions which created stress for CS staff.
- Loneliness, pressure of children at home, logging on for too long all challenges for WFH
- Switched to WFH quickly, people had to use their own laptops due to shortage of supply. WFH teams could not take incoming calls for tech reasons, had to switch to outbound only via Teams.
- Ticketing did pretty well. Customers got their money back eventually. Managed to maintain relationships with promoters and venues over switch to WFH and maintain information flow to staff.

Technologies such as Teams, Zoom and Zen Desk were widely used to manage remote working. It is hard to imagine how this would have been possible without these tools and the fast broadband to support them. Live chat was widely used to manage customer contacts once phone lines had been switched off.

Ticketing software companies were able to adapt to WFH relatively easily, they responded to the demands of the pandemic by rolling out functionality such as bulk refunds, socially distanced seating plans and staggered arrival times with limited staff resources. One respondent commented that ticketing software company's CEOs banded together to share views. Another commented that the CEOs of some of their client venues showed outstanding leadership. Other pandemic specific developments included scripts for rescheduling performances, moving seats, amalgamating performances, issuing vouchers and extending the life of vouchers. Some ticketing software companies developed tools which easily enabled customers to turn their ticket purchase into a donation. One not for profit venue received a 'five to six figure sum' in donations. Another reported 40% of customers donated the value of their tickets. Respondents felt that ticketing software companies must continue to innovate:

- *More investment in smart tech to make it easier for people to see their ticket, pre-order drinks and enhance overall event experience.*
- *R&D must continue, focus must be on making it easier for consumers to get tickets*
- *Rate of adoption of new tech sped up, must use it more effectively.*
- *Ticketing industry should use tech to catch up with Customer Service in other industries.*
- *Need to find money to invest in new tech and not be afraid to change long standing habits*
- *Ticketing needs to keep up with tech as it emerges.*
- *Use tech better, ticketing software should include following functionality - bulk refund, social distancing, full attendee information, automated refund and exchange functionality.*
- *Venues should switch to digital tickets and adopt access control.*
- *Lack of sales provided time for tech innovations. Website team v busy, better queue management and e-comms now for website.*

Some producers were able to switch to producing Virtual Content for people to watch at home. Ticketing software companies rapidly developed functionality to sell tickets for virtual events.

The pandemic massively sped up consumer adoption of virtual content which generated some revenue and opened up new markets for the future. Some respondents commented about this trend as follows:

- *Consumer acceptance of virtual events massively sped up by the pandemic, worldwide audience for some producers.*
- *Content owners should think about overall experience, not just the performance, tech can provide tools to widen experience, extend reach through streaming, create post performance NFTs etc.*
- *Continuing hybrid events could engage more young people. Digitisation makes CRM easier*
- *Edinburgh book festival successfully ran as virtual event, will continue as part virtual event into future.*
- *Expect to see adoption of bitcoin and sale of NFTs.*
- *Pandemic has sped up development of live digital content which is readily accepted by younger audiences, 2 million views for Niall Horan and low tens of thousands for online Carols.*
- *Possibility of converting new online audiences to regular subscribers.*
- *Now seeing move towards metaverse, eg London Fashion Awards where virtual fashion was sold online.*
- *Rapid improvements in live streaming tech offers possibility of new virtual audiences for sold out events.*
- *Streaming offers Live Content Owners new audiences worldwide, opportunity for new international memberships.*
- *Ticketing companies and ticketing software companies can provide means to monetise virtual content.*
- *Ticketing will be better at monetising hybrid events after the pandemic. Note Koko in Camden reopening with built in provision for live streaming. Streaming does however open up IP challenges.*

Google AdWords were mentioned by some respondents who felt that their widespread use to promote individual sales channels had a negative effect on live events. For example:

- *Multiplicity of outlets selling the same inventory competing for the same Google AdWords increases advertising spend with Google for all and may result in an increase in ticket prices.*
- *Viagogo was mentioned by two respondents as being a problem due to its continuing use of AdWords to promote speculative ticket offerings, including tickets that haven't even yet been put on sale by the event owner*

The pandemic had a massive negative effect on business. Some ticket sellers were prepared to divulge headline statistics. For those that did, the average drop in turnover for 2020 as compared to 2019 was 85% and for 2021 as compared to 2020 it was 58%.

Others commented as follows:

- *12% cancellation and refund requests only in first round of cancellations. Couple more percentage for each subsequent round of cancellations.*
- *15% - 20% refunded or exchanged. 97% of customers held on to their tickets for one music festival client.*
- *77% of customers exchanged, 60 % given credit voucher if exchange not viable. Auto refunded to voucher, two-year validity.*
- *94% of customers hung on to tickets as fans wanted to go to concerts for which they'd booked.*
- *ALVA Visitor numbers (millions): 2019-151.3, 2020-45.4, 2021-67.8.*
- *ALVA Visitor numbers down from 2019 levels as follows: 2020 70%, 2021 57%.*
- *No donations, 20% refunds, 40% exchange, 40% credit voucher.*

- No donations, 50/50 refund/exchange.
- No donations, no vouchers. All refunds or customer hung on to tickets.
- No new sales in 2020; 30% refunds, 40% donation, 30% gift vouchers.
- Profit dropped by 100% in 2020. Returned to profit now (Feb 2022).
- Sold more than refunded and exchanged in 2021. Refunds amounted to 20% of sales in the year.
- Tremendous financial challenge for venues, which lost all earned income channels overnight.
- Turned into massive revenue drain, had to furlough 80% of staff.
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Ticket Protection has been praised by the ticket sellers that offer it and is now much more widely taken up by ticket buyers than was previously the case. Ticket Protection companies reported a 300% increase in conversion at the peak of the pandemic however this has now stabilised at 200% of the pre-pandemic conversion rate. Ticket sellers appreciated Ticket Protection Underwriters' quick decisions in 2020 to accept COVID related claims from ticket purchasers. However, ticket sellers are not obliged to refund customers who cannot attend an event due to COVID if they have not taken out Ticket Protection. There has been a suggestion that STAR Code of Practice might be extended to include standards of service and information for Ticket Protection companies.

Cover against cancellation for COVID related reasons is, however, still not covered by standard cancellation and abandonment insurance for events.

Banking related problems created difficulties for ticket sellers which needed to refund tens of thousands of tickets a day due to limits on daily refunds. PayPal's 180-day limit for refunding customers created great difficulties for several ticket sellers. Expired credit cards have caused a huge problem as ticket sellers could not relatively easily refund cards used to buy tickets, so have had to find ways of refunding customers without breaching PCI regulations. This was a great challenge for customer service teams working from home. Some ticket sellers that did not refund booking fees could not automatically refund customers as they were not refunding the full amount paid for tickets.

Government's management of the pandemic was criticised by most respondents. In particular sudden rule changes and the last-minute extension of the furlough scheme which came too late to avoid redundancies in some cases. The temporary reduction of the VAT rate created a great deal of work for ticket agents for no benefit as the reduction was passed on to promoter and producer clients. However some producing venues which sold their own tickets did benefit from the reduction. The furlough scheme was used by all respondents in order to retain staff despite the plunge in income caused by the pandemic.

Recovery is now the principal focus for STAR members who all managed to stay in business throughout the pandemic, despite the tremendous financial and operational challenges faced by all of them. This depends upon having attractive events to sell and for customers to be willing to go out again. Respondents reported that sport and outdoor events were selling strongly. Music events for young people are also selling strongly, the pandemic has increased demand for podcaster events, esports and immersive art experiences which also appeal to a younger audience. A lack of international tourists has affected sales at West End theatres and some London visitor attractions. At least one ticket seller reported that regional theatres were recovering more quickly than those in London.

Some venues report very high levels of no shows for concerts, up to 30% in some cases. These may be people who have simply forgotten that they had tickets.

Recruitment has been a problem for some ticket sellers during 2022. The pandemic forced many STAR members to make redundancies in 2020 and 2021 and they are now finding it difficult to recruit suitably qualified staff. The replacement of phone and counter sales channels with the internet means that ticket sellers now need people to deal with more complex customer service matters rather than routine ticket sales. Some respondents felt that a generation of experienced staff had left the industry as people made redundant had found employment elsewhere and were reluctant to return to ticketing due to a pandemic induced sense that it is a volatile industry. Working From Home which is now widespread for ticket sellers has made it more difficult to induct and train new staff.

Respondents were asked how ticketing could best prepare for any future pandemic or other event which shuts down venues. Clearly ticket sellers need to include pandemic in their Disaster Recovery planning scenarios. One respondent made the point that standby offices for disaster recovery are not much use during a pandemic. The following points have emerged as being particularly important:

- Ensure telephone system easily supports home working.
- Install multi-channel customer service system which can support customer service operations from home and/or office.
- Introduce automation into customer service operations wherever doing this can assist managing any future enormous surges in customer enquiries.

- Continue WFH on at least a hybrid basis. Make sure all staff can be equipped with screens and furniture suitable for home working at short notice.
- Ensure ticketing software continues to support and improve upon the innovations introduced during the pandemic, for example:
 - bulk refunds
 - social distancing
 - full attendee information
 - online refund and exchange functionality
 - staggered arrival times
 - rescheduling performances
 - moving seats
 - amalgamating performances
 - issuing vouchers
 - donating tickets
 - selling tickets for virtual events.

In addition, some ticket sellers commented as follows:

- *Ticket sellers must have very robust platform and Customer Services to go with it.*
- *For similar crises in the future, move quickly to automatic refunds. Make decisions quickly. Be realistic about time frames.*
- *In future emergencies shouldn't make redundancies straight away, rather hang on to staff.*
- *Must communicate Ts and Cs very clearly from the outset of any future crisis, especially in relation to booking fees.*
- *CS must improve. Adapt intelligent use of bots, adopt WFH, improve training and implement Zen desk type CS management products.*
- *In future pandemic type crisis don't panic! Make sure customers' money is well protected and easily accessible. Don't make front line ticketing and CS staff redundant so quickly.*

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

STAR wishes to thank the 39 people who generously agreed to be interviewed for this report at a time when they were very busy with the demands of reopening after the worst of the pandemic. STAR also wishes to acknowledge the tireless and dedicated work of all the people working in the UK ticketing business throughout the pandemic. In particular, the STAR Council thanks its own disputes resolution team for their patience, commitment and good humour during the last two and a half years.

Will Quekett
June 2022

APPENDIX A

Questions asked at interviews.

Questions for all respondents

- How did the live entertainment ticketing industry fare in the pandemic?
- What were the challenges it faced?
- How did it meet those challenges?
- What did it do well?
- Where does the ticketing industry need to improve? / What can it learn from other sectors?
- How long will it take for the live entertainment industry to recover?
- If there was another pandemic, what should the industry do differently?
- What will change after the pandemic? (Commercial models?)
- What will be better for the ticketing industry as a result of the pandemic?
- What will be worse?
- What changes does the ticketing industry have to make (and is it capable of doing so?)

Questions specifically for Ticketing Companies – answer as many as you can

- Can you tell us the percentage by which your turnover dropped in 2020 and 2021 as compared to 2019?
- Can you tell us your percentages of new sales/donations/exchanges/refunds during 2021?
- Did you have difficulties with expired credit cards, customer chargebacks?
- Were there any banking related challenges other than those above?
- Were there any challenges in connection with making refunds?
- How did ticketing departments / organisations manage the volume of customer queries (lack of resource in customer service/financial and technical teams?)
- Challenges to working from home (data security / PCI issues /telephony /CRM/customer communications).
- Were you able to recover booking fees refunded from client promoters/producers?
- Should STAR again look at booking fee insurance for ticketing companies?
- How did government schemes (Furlough, Loans, CRF,VAT changes) benefit (or not) the ticketing industry.
- Difficulties arising from the Impact of Covid on clients and suppliers.
- Consumer expectations/attitudes/sentiment (esp. disputes escalated to STAR, consumer feedback to STAR).
- Role of STAR other than dispute resolution, ie lobbying, providing information to Government via DCMS and other industry bodies such as Live, SOLT etc.
- Did other organisations support the ticketing industry.
- Ticket Protection – were the products on offer fit for purpose?
- How did ticketing technology companies contribute, eg systems for handling batch refunds, social distancing in venues, staggered arrival times? What were their challenges?
- Challenges of re-opening.
- Staffing / resource.
- New requirements/procedures.
- Technical solutions?
- Hiring apprentice(s)?
- Continuous uncertainty.

APPENDIX B

Analysis of Recommendations and Trends resulting from the research.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Common Industry Practices
Refunds and Exchanges
Box office monies
Role of STAR
Customer Comms
Tech
Recovery
Agent Status
Refund of booking fees
Self Service
Ticket Protection
WFH
Call Centre Closure
Banking challenges
Recruitment
Comment Only
Viagogo
Improvements
API for music
Pandemic's effect on business
Turnover drop
Virtual content, NFTs, Blockchain
E-tickets
Furlough and CRF
Government response
More advance booking
Change in booking patterns
Google Adwords
Donations from customers

TRENDS

Pandemic's effect on business
Customer Comms
Recovery
Refunds and Exchanges
Virtual content, NFTs, Blockchain
Common Industry Practices
E-tickets
Turnover drop
Call Centre Closure
WFH
Tech
Role of STAR
Recruitment
Comment Only
Ticket Protection
Agent Status
Refund of booking fees
Banking challenges
Self Service
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Change in booking patterns
Box office monies
Government response
Viagogo
Improvements
Furlough and CRF
Google Adwords
Donations from customers
API for music



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