

# AUDIENCE TESTING IN AUSTRALIA: A CASE STUDY

Audience testing is a staple of the filmmaking process in the US and the UK, and it's been available for some time in Australia, yet few Australian producers use it. So why not? And why would they?



Acclaimed film and television producer Robyn Kershaw, whose credits include *Looking for Alibrandi*, *Bondi Banquet*, *Efie: Just Quietly* and *Kath & Kim*, is a long-time advocate of audience testing. Here she talks about why she used audience testing for *Bran Nue Dae* - which grossed more than \$7.6 million at the Australian box office - what she learned from the process, and why she would do it again

***What sort of testing did you undertake for BRAN NUE DAE? And what process was involved?***

When we had our investor screenings, we also invited representatives we had identified as being part of the target audience for the film –teenage girls and boys aged between 15-17 years, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. So that was at essentially rough cut and then we repeated the process another three to four weeks after the rough cut.

After both the screenings we then had their teachers moderate and speak to about 20 of the students, which we recorded – we needed to be with the investors after the screenings, and we couldn't be in two places at once, hence the recordings.

Having the target audience in the early screenings was essential to affirm whether we were on track with the narrative spine of the story and the comedy. Then we did another large - over 400 - test screening before picture lock-up, with about 12 focus groups. We had very specific questions we had formulated and moderated by (global research agency) Millward Brown. We targeted all quadrants, which was harder to achieve with the younger ones as the screening was on at night. And then (market research agency) Bergent was engaged to do further test screenings for the marketing in Sydney and in Melbourne in August 2009.

***At what stages of production did you undertake testing?***

At rough cuts and pre-picture lock off, all screened from the hard drive and then from film on completion.

***Had you completed audience testing on any previous projects?***

On Looking For Alibrandi we had regular focus group screenings throughout the cut with the core audience for the film. It was very basic - we rented the Hard Rock Café and played straight from an SPBeta. It was a really rough look when blown up but we needed to stay connected to the audience and their expectation of the experience of their beloved book. At the time it was the most stolen book from school libraries.

***Why did you decide to use audience testing for BRAN NUE DAE?***

I don't believe it ever occurred to our team not to test. Comedy needs to be cut for the humour and you can only truly test that with a live audience. And it's important to ensure that you are truly engaging with those you have identified as the target audience - so testing was always going to be part of the editing process.

***Have you changed the way you've audience tested over the years - are you doing things differently to your first audience testing?***

When we did Looking For Alibrandi we had virtually no budget - I think each of our test screenings cost \$350 - so we were unable to record the answers, formulate qualitative and quantitative questions or have independent moderators. Also director Kate Woods, writer Melina Marchetta and I spoke directly to the focus groups - after the screening we'd go outside and sit with lunch and interrogate the students, who were inevitably taken from Melina's school or were student from schools nearby that Melina had previously taught. I would never do that now... I try to be invisible and listen and really investigate the answers and the culture of the focus group and the questionnaires. I try to focus on what is really being said by the audience.

At the ABC we tested some of our concepts and series in development with a futurologist or 'cool hunter'. I didn't find it particularly illuminating regarding what to develop, but it was an interesting exercise.

***What did you gain from audience testing?***

Everything - a stronger hold on the perceived audience, a clearer sense of the elements in the film that worked and the ones that needed further refinement. Also a stronger sense of how to market the film.

***How did it alter your decisions regarding production or marketing?***

In post you are confronting what you have - as opposed to what you envisioned you would have. So the practical reality is to guide the film home to the audience and the experience you aspire them to have when viewing the film. If you can see who the audience is, then you have a clear sense of how to support the marketing approach to sell them the film.

***Can you tell us the top three things you felt have worked and haven't worked in your experience with audience testing?***

Identifying who the core audience is for your film - that is primary to moving forward on any testing. Once you have committed to 'speaking' to that audience, you can then identify what you want to learn from them when testing their experience of the film. And finally, really interrogate the audience belief - words can be misleading so staying focused on the experience of the film is critical to achieving success and truly 'speaking' to your core audience. Because if you can get them on fire with the film, they will tell other sections of the 'quadrants' and that's when you have a chance at playing to wider audiences.



**BRAN NUE DAE  
ROBYN KERSHAW PRODUCTIONS  
PRODUCED BY ROBYN KERSHAW  
DIRECTED BY RACHEL PERKINS  
SUPPORTED THROUGH FILM  
VICTORIA'S PRODUCTION INVESTMENT  
PROGRAMME**