



STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION REPORT

March 2019

Prepared by

**Liesbeth Goedhart, Goedhart Consulting
&
Leah Maund, Sensorium Theatre**

CONTENTS

1.0	Introduction	3
2.0	Methodology	3
3.0	Results	4
3.1	Sensorium Theatre is highly valued	4
3.2	Artistic excellence equally important as capacity building	5
3.3	With support, others <i>can</i> delivery Sensory Storytelling – <i>will</i> they?	5
3.4	Professional Development	6
3.4.1	<i>“Love it, Love it, Love it, Recommend it!”</i>	6
3.4.2	A desire for more professional development opportunities	7
3.5	Top effort at meeting access needs	7
3.6	Disability-specific <i>and</i> inclusive audience models supported	8
3.7	Development ideas and opportunities	9
3.8	Grow slower, stay true to roots	10
3.9	Tagline – Is it time to change?	11
4.0	Conclusion and Summary of Findings	12
OTHER: Graphs		
G1	<i>Could others deliver ST’s Sensory Storytelling?</i>	6
G2	<i>Sensorium’s response to children’s access needs</i>	8
G3	<i>Potential new audiences for Sensorium</i>	10
G4	<i>Rate of growth for Sensorium Theatre</i>	11
G5	<i>Is there a need for change of tagline?</i>	12

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report presents an analysis of consultation data gathered from Sensorium Theatre (ST) stakeholders in February/March of 2019. The intention of the consultation process was to gain robust qualitative and quantitative data to inform Sensorium Theatre's next five-year Strategic Plan. The consultant worked closely with Sensorium Theatre's Organisational Development Coordinator throughout the consultation process.

The objectives of the consultation were to:

- check in with stakeholders about how well the company is delivering on its mission and about relevance of current programs
- explore how ST could enhance its offerings, and
- canvass stakeholder input into where the company should focus its efforts in the next five years.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The consultation methodology involved use of focus groups and an electronic survey. An invitation to attend the focus groups and/or to complete a survey was disseminated via the company's MailChimp database (approximately 570 subscribers) and social media (1,094 followers). The consultation was conducted *prior* to the commencement of the company's internal strategic planning sessions, in order to ensure the results of the wider consultation are fully utilised, i.e. fed directly into the strategic planning process from the front end.

2.1 Focus Groups

Subsequent to the MailChimp and social media campaign, a small/targeted individual email campaign encouraged a balanced mixture of different sub-groups of ST stakeholders to sign up for the focus groups. Two face-to-face consultations were conducted with 11 key stakeholders per group, **22** in total. Both groups contained a mixture of parents, education, therapy and library staff. The first focus group also included a former audience member with a disability, the second focus group; one arts sector/festival staff member, two Sensorium Theatre artists and two ECU researchers. All focus group participants had some past experience of ST's work.

The focus groups explored 8 key questions. Each focus group went for a duration of 1.5 hours. Comprehensive notes were taken, as well as audio recordings to help flesh out the notes. The notes were subsequently analysed for emerging themes and significant findings.

2.2 Electronic survey

An electronic questionnaire was developed, based on the focus group questions. The questionnaire contained 12 questions and took **48** participants an average of 6 minutes to complete.

Respondents represented a broad range of stakeholders. In addition to audience members and their families, there were members of the company's Management Committee, donors, Sydney Opera House and Arts Centre Melbourne representatives, regional presenters, producers, school principals & teachers, volunteer ushers – all with experience of ST's work. The survey respondent cohort also included a small number of people *without* direct ST-experience, (e.g. people tracking the company's work because they had heard about it from another school).

By asking different stakeholder groups the same set of questions, we were able to collect a consistent and statistically significant set of data, which lent itself to ease of analysis and, at the same time, provided a good sense of the range and diversity of views held by Sensorium Theatre's stakeholders.

A descriptive analysis of free text comments was conducted along with an analysis of occurrence of repeated words and phrases.

3.0 RESULTS

Consultation results are presented against 8 themes relating to the 8 key questions asked.

3.1 Sensorium Theatre is highly valued

All **70** consultation participants (i.e. 22 focus group participants & 48 survey respondents) were favourable toward Sensorium Theatre and its product.

Focus group participants considered the following to be important about the ST experience:

- sense of immersion
- contained/safe environment
- access to the arts in ways otherwise never available
- importance of preparatory work with teachers and Education Assistants
- pure joy visible in children and carers alike
- reciprocal learning – teachers from artists and artists from teachers/therapists/parents
- strong, respectful relationships
- artistry, creativity and amazing props
- great music, catchy songs, rhythm and metre
- kids allowed to explore – none of the usual restrictions
- performers good at reading cues and demonstrating high level listening skills and flexibility.

Survey responses to the question of what stands out about the ST experience, in order of prevalence:

- engagement/ability to connect/listening/interactivity/individual attention/tailored
- inclusivity/thoughtfulness/love/sensitivity/pure joy
- professionalism/integrity/rigour/quality
- creativity/innovation
- uniqueness
- educational/rich learning experience
- catering for all sensory needs
- suitability to a range of disabilities.

Parents were surprised by the reactions and level of engagement of their children and appreciated the opportunity to replicate elements of the methodology at home. A sense of bonding, reciprocal learning and growing together for parents, teachers and children was recognised by one school principal as a 'priceless' quality of the ST experience.

"Perfect for students with Autism and intellectual disability. Highly inclusive and for one of my students, it is the most joyful I have ever seen him – purely as this perfectly catered for his individual needs. The support provide to staff to cater for sensory needs in the classroom is also fantastic."

Survey Respondent

3.2 Artistic Excellence *equally* important as capacity building

When asked what was more important to them - artistic excellence, capacity building or both - the overwhelming majority, **67%**, selected both. 19% of survey respondents selected artistic excellence, 15% selected capacity building.

In the focus groups, participants felt that the artistic excellence of the bigger shows was very important as it ensured a lasting effect on the audience (children). For therapists, it was the point of difference compared with other work already being undertaken in the therapy space. Artistic excellence was necessary for inclusion in festivals and was critical to justify the cost and effort of taking children on excursions.

Contrasted with this was the ease and approachability of the sensory storytelling experience, which was considered important for different reasons. Its suitability for a younger cohort (0-8 y.o.) was valued. Its low-fi nature meant that parents and teachers could replicate it. Lower costs ensured that it was more accessible for schools, while the less-precious approach, and the familiarity of the stories, were seen as important enablers.

One survey respondent commented that while both have their place, if made to choose, the artistic excellence and professional delivery by performing artists was ultimately the standout priority. Another said, quite insightfully: *“The art is about connection – so capacity building is also pursuing artistic excellence”*.

3.3 With support, others *can* deliver Sensory Storytelling – *will* they?

The survey showed **just over 50%** (52.17%) of respondents believed that teachers, therapists and librarians could eventually become the people to deliver the Sensory Storytelling program. 23.19% thought that they could be expected to deliver it, but only with selective uptake of elements of the arts-based methodology. 13.04% believed it should remain delivered by the experts. 10.87% selected ‘other’ in response to this question. See Table 1 for graphic.

The general thrust of the ‘other’ comments was that without involvement of artists, the quality of the program could be affected. A suggestion was to always have one artist in residence to work alongside the education, therapy or library staff. There were some reservations around time and capacity and a comment that the training may need to be tailored for each group (teachers, therapists, librarians).

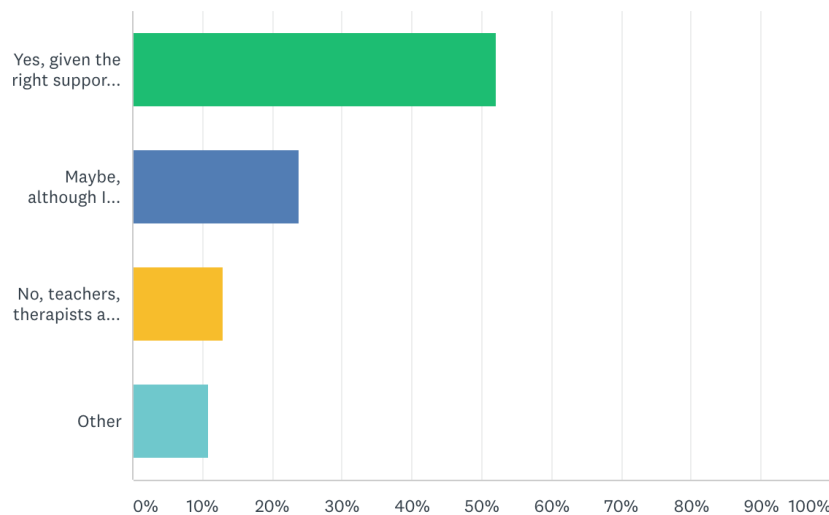
For the most part, focus group participants responded positively to the question. However, some teachers expressed concern about not having time to roll it out.

Other caveats included:

- librarians’ focus is on their own Better Beginnings program (cannot be expected to deliver the Sensorium Theatre brand), what they require is general disability awareness training
- music skills as presented in professional sensory storytelling performances may not exist among all teachers.
- face-to-face learning (i.e. embedding workshops) will be required along with e-packaged resources.

One focus group respondent thoughtfully suggested that a graded approach needed to be taken, i.e. more ST delivery of the Sensory Storytelling program initially, along with the PD, then slowly grade to others delivering.

Graph 1 – Could others deliver Sensorium Theatre’s sensory storytelling program?



“I hovered between yes and maybe....I think it can, however, the artistic aspects may not be captured as well. However, it depends on the goals of the group etc. as to what's more important.”

“I think there is a big difference between professions in this field delivering this experience to others upskilling and adapting”

“I think it’s pretty specialised work that takes time and motivation to develop (not necessarily ‘talent’ as such, but commitment and clear intention)...[Also] part of the reason Sensorium artists can do what they do is because they don’t have to take care of physical, educational, therapeutic or behavioural needs. Most other staff don’t quite have this clear slate to work with.”

“To teach teachers how to deliver what you do mean students can learn and enjoy long after the workshops are over.”

3.4 Professional Development

3.4.1 “Love it, Love it, Love it, Recommend it!”

60% of respondents reported they had found the professional development they experienced extremely useful and welcomed more of it.

Of the 16 survey participants who had experienced Sensorium’s professional development sessions, 15 found it extremely useful and felt it inspired them to put techniques/ideas into practice, and one person found it useful, although they wanted more links with theory. The following, from an esteemed national venue, was one of a number of positive comments: *“We have embraced TP [PD??] with Sensorium at Sydney Opera House and received a lot of positive feedback. Sensorium are highly specialised in this area and a great resource for teachers”*. What a great endorsement!

At the first focus group (Carson St School), the professional development training was confused with the embedding workshops, and through this error we learned that face-to-face preparatory workshops were highly valued by school-based staff. A preparatory process involving embedding workshops for students and a Sensory Walk for teachers was considered very useful in terms of children knowing beforehand what to expect, and teachers getting upfront knowledge about the theatre residency process and content (and the chance, then, to tailor lesson plans to reinforce themes covered in the show).

3.4.2 A desire for more professional development opportunities

Other professional development offerings participants would like to receive include:

- how to incorporate more sensory into what has been called ‘Four blocks’ or balanced literacy programmes (being taken on in a few schools atm)
- we are keen to link emotional development and the use of low & high tech communication strategies
- more industry sessions, for igniting the conversation with theatre makers and artists
- more copies of material (hard copy and online), including more copies of the earlier books & CDs that went with ST shows
- detailed instructions on how to make the props
- artist training, which is different to PD
- training very focussed on FOH staff/ how to interact with different abilities audiences
- use of co-design principles to develop future professional development programs, (teachers, therapists etc will be more likely to engage and commit to applying PD they have co-designed),
- disability awareness training for library staff,
- craft sessions to follow the storytelling which could then be replicated at home
- professional development tailored to different target groups – specifically for teachers, for therapists, for librarians, e.g. teacher training that links to the education curriculum.

A senior therapist shared her finding, from attending numerous training sessions and workshops over the years, that the best professional learning experiences are those that involve both the practical and the theoretical. The discussion also brought up the view that it was important to remember that the ST experience was pure joy, not therapy – a very small amount of teaching and learning woven through the experience was enough.

3.5 Top effort at meeting access needs

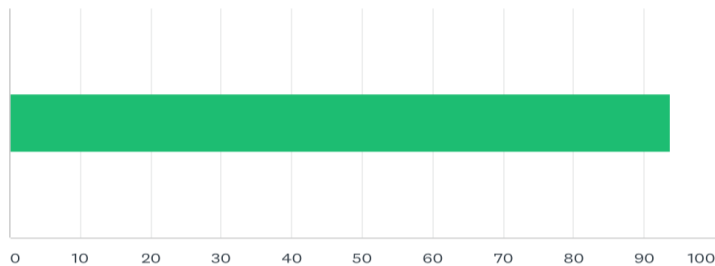
Both focus group and survey participants believed Sensorium Theatre met the access needs of the children very well. When asked how well they felt Sensorium Theatre responds to children’s access needs on a scale of 100, survey respondents scored Sensorium a high **94**.

Suggestions on what could be done to enhance response to individual needs:

- more training for the artists in the science, research and praxis around disability etc.
- consider diagnosis (vision, gross motor, fine motor and cognitive) & sensory background for seating, access to play items etc.
- room for improvement in accommodating students in wheelchairs (not specified)
- do more of the same and do it more often, keeping groups small
- longer seasons (yet keeping audience numbers low)
- more members of the ensemble or lower the ratio even further?
- maintain a good balance between hands on and listening type activities
- make shows a little shorter? Having a recess for longer shows
- use augmentative and alternative communication systems/ provide AAC support,
- learn how to use PODD devices
- know about each child’s strengths and needs, e.g. by ensuring, at start of school engagement, profiles of likes & dislikes, communication needs etc. are shared with ST artists, or just a quick chat to EAs or teachers to find out what kids sensory needs are first.
- work with presenting venues to ensure the whole visitor experience is as accessible and sensitive to diverse audiences as the performance
- have a legion of trained volunteers to help at sessions so there is adequate support

- increase the frequency of performances, but stick to small audience size
- if filling a larger venue, e.g. Spiegel Tent, have row-by-row sensory distribution people
- Sensory Storytelling – a greater surrender to play might sometimes be good.

Graph 2 – Sensorium’s response to children’s access needs



3.6 Disability-specific & inclusive audience models supported, DISABILITY-SPECIFIC preferred

56% of respondents preferred Sensorium’s work to be delivered using a disability-specific audience approach, while 44% preferred a mixed/inclusive audience model. Comments further reflected the even distribution between these two points of view, recognising that each format had its own benefits. Suggestions included the idea that new families might generally start with a preference for disability-specific delivery and, over time, might progress to inclusive audience deliveries.

When asked, within the focus group context, about preference for disability-specific or mixed/inclusive audience model, participants varied in their opinion. Parents preferred a disability-specific environment while festival organisers, therapy staff and researchers were interested to see Sensorium perform for mixed/inclusive audiences.

On balance, a mix of the two was considered most appropriate, potentially starting with the disability-specific format and gradually moving towards mixed/ inclusive audience scenarios, but always allowing for a plan, e.g. having contingency option for students when they are overwhelmed.

Note: It was considered potentially more difficult to present age-appropriate material that would appeal to both teenagers with disabilities and the neurotypical teen/young adult audience. Therefore, it may be best to have the mixed audience format only for younger children.

3.7 Development ideas & opportunities

29 survey respondents put forward their own ideas about what else ST could be doing. Suggestions included:

- link in with current literacy programs in Special Ed schools
- cater for teens
- collaborate with other performing arts companies or artists in other states/countries, (e.g. co-pro with Trusty Sidekick or Bangara Dance)
- train and develop a strong access arts sector nationwide, regionally or internationally through sharing knowledge of this practice
- offer fee-for-service master classes to large arts organisations and provide them with the opportunity to be mentored to work with children with disabilities
- encourage more parent engagement

- more productions, more partnerships (e.g. with companies such as DADAA) - partner with venues around introducing AUSLAN interpreting, audio transcription and captioning services
- develop work for adults and for the aged
- tell stories that reflect Australia and our region
- installation work in public places and museums
- more in-school programs
- ongoing publicity to spread awareness of your work
- artist development, knowledge sharing of this practice in Australia
- consolidate Sensorium's current products and work on sustainability.

When invited to put forward development ideas, focus group participants suggested the following:

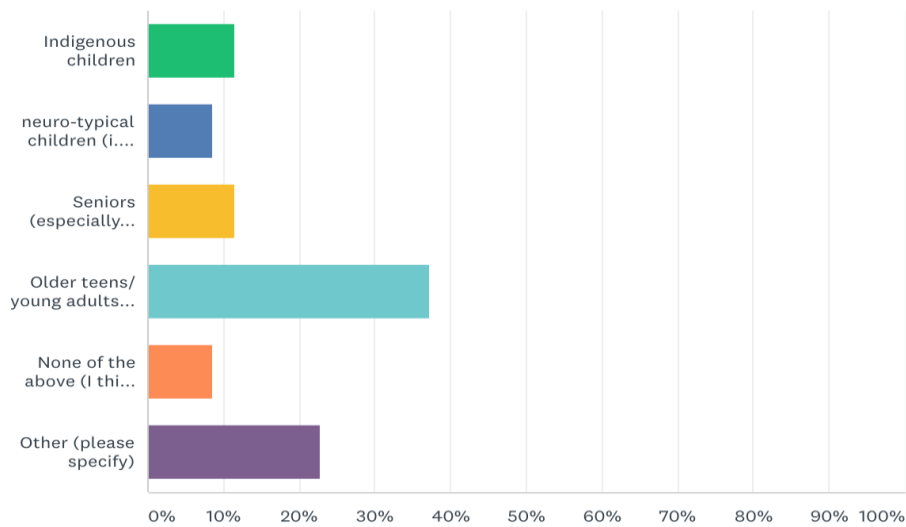
- package up all the resources and present them in a "pack" or "kit" for hire (including tent, props, etc)
- a parent kit as well as a teacher's kit
- a booklet about the show/storytelling session that goes home afterwards with the story, scenes from the show and some simple ideas around props
- link in with children in hospital
- create works for young adults with disability (over 18 years)
- employ artists with disability
- provide pathways for students Sensorium has worked with, e.g. work experience
- put professional development in NDIS plan (noting that you don't have to be a registered training provider)
- provide access for artists to observe the methodology
- new work for teens/young adults with disability, including sensory storytelling for an older cohort (with age-appropriate stories)
- work for seniors/ older people living with dementia [see stakeholder email on this]
- an ongoing family capacity building group (i.e. beyond the 5-week Sensory Storytelling program).

In the e-survey, participants were then asked more specifically to choose a preferred potential new audience for Sensorium Theatre. The majority, 40%, selected **older teens/young adults with disability**. 11% of respondents selected Indigenous children, 9% neurotypical children (as in more inclusive audience programs), 11% seniors (especially those with Dementia), and 11% believed Sensorium should continue to focus on children with disability. 20% selected 'other' with comments including: "All your options have merit...", "I want to say ALL OF THEM! But my favourite would be the seniors", "I think you are addressing already a wide spectrum", "This is a hard one! But I think that it needs to be sustainable, and that the pressure to grow and extend could threaten that." A preference for targeting a new audience of older teens and young adults was also very strong among the 'other' respondents.

"I selected several groups before deciding on older teens/ young adults!... Young adults with disability experience exclusion once they leave the support of school. Also, it can be challenging to have older teens/adults in an audience with younger children – there's so little programming/opportunity" Survey respondent

"Love the idea of thinking of material for teens. Little special kids do have a lot of focus and are more easily catered for. It gets a bit more challenging finding age appropriate stuff for teens and young adults".

Graph 3 – potential new audiences for Sensorium



3.8 Grow slower, stay true to roots

The main question put to stakeholders, the question we built up to in both the focus groups and survey, was a simplified version of a more complex question the company is trying to grapple with. Participants were asked to respond to an either/or conceptualisation:

Presently there is strong interest in Sensorium’s theatre work from big venues both in Australia and abroad, including some exciting opportunities for international collaboration and touring. As a small company, how do you think Sensorium Theatre should manage this interest?

EITHER

respond to national/international demand & position Sensory Storytelling as a PD program

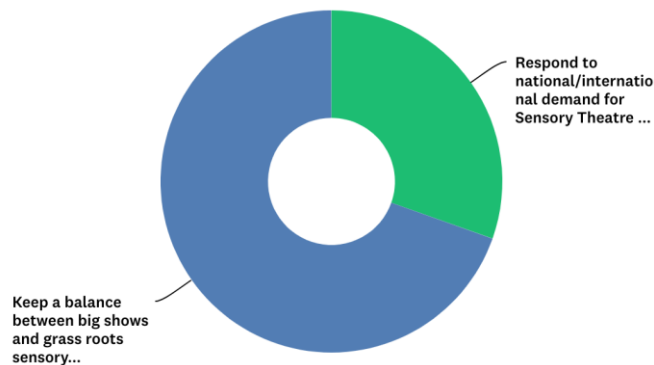
OR

keep a balance between big shows/big projects and grassroots Sensory Storytelling work, even if it means slower growth

70% of survey respondents selected the second option - ensure a balance between response to rising national/international demand and local grassroots work. It was recognised that one feeds the other, i.e. an interdependent relationship between artistic excellence and capacity building. One focus group respondent, a researcher, suggested the key question Sensorium needed to ask itself was “how do we grow the organisation, whilst maintaining quality of product/ staying true to our values?” It was suggested, if possible, to take on the challenge of the international work while creating the sustainability to keep delivering at the local level.

A majority of respondents (69.57%) believed Sensorium should seek to achieve a balance between big shows and grass roots sensory storytelling work in schools and libraries, even if that means slower growth. A lesser 30.43% believed Sensorium Theatre should, in the coming five years, respond to national and international demand and position Sensory Storytelling as a professional development program (with fewer Sensorium performers directly involved).

Graph 4 – Rate of growth for Sensorium Theatre



Additional comments reinforced the priority of keeping a balance between sensory theatre and sensory storytelling, recognising the issue of resourcing the continued growth. This thinking was perhaps best summarised by the comment to “aim big - hopefully this will bring more resources to establish quality productions in multiple locations”.

“While I selected ‘national/international demand for Sensory Theatre’, I appreciate the two are not mutually exclusive and I imagine the grassroots work acts as a bit of a laboratory for experimentation and innovation? Also, this grassroots work is important for disability sector relationships. The number of companies making this work is so small, we need companies to tour and creatively lead PD!”

Other comments:

- formalise Sensorium’s sensory theatre as an arts methodology for other artists to learn
- Sensorium’s Artistic Directors could become trainers of artists to create and present new work around Australia
- first try to deliver more performances (big or small). Only then consider more professional development work and eventually lessen the number of Sensorium performers engaged in delivering sensory storytelling
- caution: “don’t water down your product”
- going overseas will lift Sensorium’s profile in WA
- aspire for balance.

3.9 Tagline – Is it time to change?

Three quarters, or **76%**, of survey respondents had no problem with Sensorium’s tagline “*extra sensory theatre for extra special kids*”. Among the 24% who felt the tagline did need to change, many believed the term ‘special kids’ was problematic and out-dated. It was also suggested that the use of the term ‘kids’ may be limiting to any effort to capture a new audience of teens, seniors etc. Getting around these problems of audience labelling, a suggestion from a focus group participant: “just name the experience or the potential (not the target group)”. One survey respondent felt there was no need for a tagline, preferring instead the way Sensorium markets its sensory productions “by providing a preview and description of what to expect and who it would benefit”.

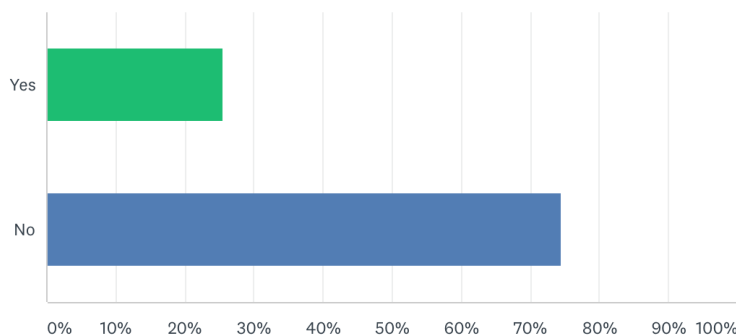
Whilst the survey respondents seemed, on the whole, to like the company tagline, discussion that ensued at the first focus group, coupled with the statement below, suggests a change may be required:

“The term 'extra special kids' and 'special kids' is out-dated ... 'Special needs' is historically an education term, rarely if ever used in [state name] now, and not in the creative industries. Language changes over time and its great you are thinking about this. I am keen to know what feedback you receive to this question – at [venue name] we refer to 'Inclusive Theatre'... I'd support alignment in terminology (internationally) especially in the context of this as a genre of theatre.”

Suggestions for a new tagline:

- creating extraordinary performances
- extra sensory performance for extra engaged kids
- just simply “sensory performance for special kids”
- inclusive sensory performance for children with disabilities
- Something appealing to teenagers would be good. What though? “Extraordinary sensory...”
- sensory performances for kids of all abilities
- inclusive performance for all children
- inclusive theatre for all children
- inclusive sensory performance for children with disabilities
- multi-sensory performances for special people with extra needs, by special people
- extra sensory performance for extra-ordinary kids
- sensory-friendly performance art
- sensational storytime
- sensory immersion that will widen your world
- unique sensory experience – through the arts
- delivering unique sensory performances to those with additional needs.

Graph 5 – Is there a need for change of Sensorium’s current tagline?



4.0 CONCLUSION & SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The consultation revealed a strong appetite for more Sensorium Theatre professional development opportunities and training events, along with support for the idea of upskilling teachers, librarians and therapists to deliver sensory storytelling, recognising a few caveats (see page 5).

Additionally, participants identified the need for Sensorium Theatre to stay on mission, maintain its professionalism and continue to pursue an artistic excellence agenda in balance with low-fi, grass roots programs for schools and libraries.

To follow is a summary of 12 key findings of the consultation:

1. ST is on track with its mission of sparking the imaginations of children with disability through the magic of live theatre & storytelling.
2. Current programs are highly relevant and meaningful to stakeholders.
3. Capacity building is just as important as artistic excellence to Sensorium Theatre stakeholders, and, it is suggested, the pursuit of both cuts to the heart of what makes ST stand out.
4. Stakeholders believe teachers, therapists and librarians *could* learn to deliver ST-brand Sensory Storytelling, but it is doubtful that they will do so.
5. ST's current PD offerings have been well received.
6. There are lots of ideas for further development of PD. Also, the embedding workshop model should not be discarded altogether as it is very much valued by schools.
7. ST is to be commended on its commitment to making inclusive children's theatre. There is still room for improvement in the area of access, however, especially by ensuring ensemble member training in disability theory, and by working more collaboratively with venues and other partners to execute best practices, such as audio description, and to better accommodate students in wheelchairs.
8. Both disability-specific *and* inclusive audience models are supported by ST stakeholders. If pushed to choose, the consultation results would lead the company in the direction of staying focused on a disability-specific approach.
9. Stakeholders have lots of ideas about development possibilities for ST. At a higher order level, ST has the potential to influence development of a strong access arts sector nationwide. At the level of fee-for-service possibilities, PD (including artist master-classes and FOH & librarian disability awareness training) is sought after and cries out for development.
10. If ST sought to target a new audience, older teen/young adults is the stand-out preference.
11. Stakeholders caution the company to take care not to grow too quickly, emphasizing importance of staying "true to roots" and continuing with all three current program offerings.
12. Finally, the qualitative (*not* the quantitative) feedback suggests a tagline revision may be required.

"You're doing the big shows, the storytelling and the professional development. The challenge is to keep doing all three. All of those three inform each other. Keeping the connection between them is really important."

Parent & Focus Group 2 participant

END