



# Raising the curtain on the cost of a show

Ticket agents say they are there to provide a fast, easy and superior service to consumers – but how does it affect our rights, and at what cost?

**F**ancy going to a Bryan Adams concert? Currently, four tickets to see him at The O2 arena in Greenwich, London, in November will cost you £150 at the box office. However, Greenwich is inconvenient for many people – so buying online or by phone are the only options. But book through Ticketmaster and you will pay a service charge of £4.75 per ticket and a £2.25 postage fee – a total of £171.25, 14 per cent more than the face value.

Last year, airlines were heavily criticised for not showing total ticket prices upfront – when their so-called 1p flights actually ended up being a lot more expensive than advertised once taxes and charges were included. The Office of Fair Trading ruled that the total price for flights should be the first figure that consumers see. But agents that sell show tickets don't have to worry about this rule, a fact that many profit from.

## Extras, extras

Our survey of Which? members found that an overwhelming majority thought this was wrong – 89 per cent felt these fees should be included in any advertised price.

Buying tickets online is convenient, but many agencies charge extra fees and you only find the total price of your order just before you enter your credit card details.

The days of long queues outside a box office are gone. The internet accounts for most ticket sales, and phone lines are available for those without online access. Nick Blackburn, Managing Director of Seatickets, estimates that 85 per cent of its sales for music events are via the internet.

Ticket agents, in what is known as the primary market (see 'The second act', opposite) act on behalf of event promoters. The typical way that most agents earn money is through the additional fees they charge customers. These fees generally take

two forms – a booking fee per ticket and a postage charge for each order. This is different from other retail outlets. Shops charge a mark-up of the price they will have paid to a supplier; travel agents are generally paid by the holiday provider, so their fees are included in the advertised price.

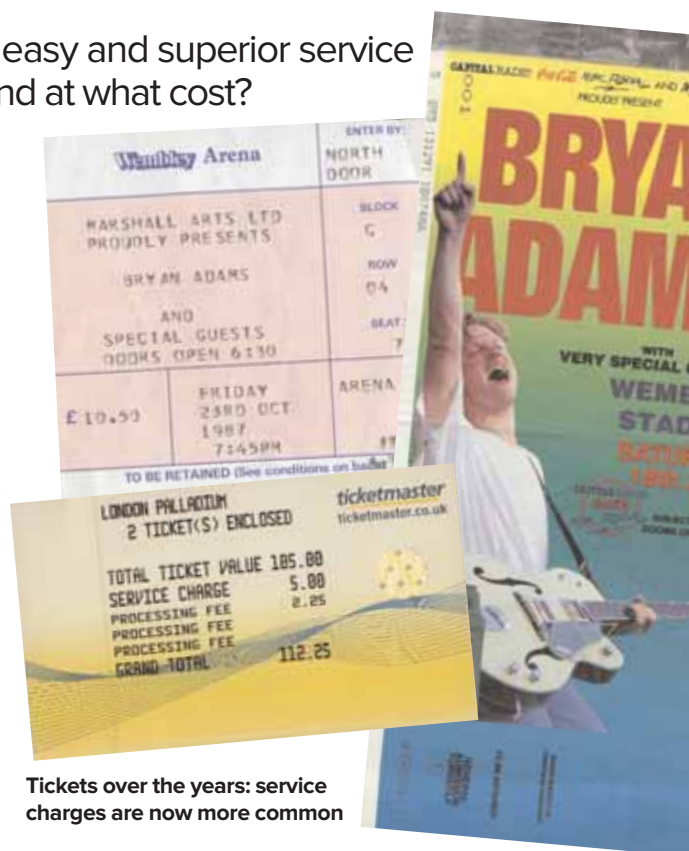
## How much?

There is no standard way to calculate a booking fee. Promoters and agents agree the fees for each individual event. Agents say additional fees cover the cost of running their businesses. Seatickets' Nick Blackburn argues that the price of booking fees has remained relatively constant over the years, while the cost of a ticket has risen sharply. Ticketmaster says that service charges across its business are worth an average 9 per cent of a ticket's face value. Music events attract a higher premium at an average 11 per cent, but we found that total charges added to tickets could hit as much as 30 per cent (see 'What you pay', p14).

For some events agents say you can collect your tickets from a venue box office, but we found that charges were also applied to this. Ticketmaster's TicketFast service, where you are emailed a PDF of your ticket that you print at home, also charges – see Graham Hunt's story, opposite. For the Bryan Adams event Ticketmaster will charge £2 to use TicketFast, just 25p less than having a ticket posted to you.

## What theatres do

It's not just ticket agents that charge booking fees. We called several theatres around the country and found that most would charge you a booking fee if you were to use their online or phone services to book tickets. The same applies for many major event venues. In fact, for many events the only way to avoid paying any extra fees is



Tickets over the years: service charges are now more common

**Ticket agencies earn money through charging customers additional fees**

to turn up at the venue's box office. Even then, pay cash to avoid a fee, as a credit card charge is often applied.

In our survey, 79 per cent agreed that booking fees were too expensive and didn't reflect the value of the service. The cost of booking fees is never stated in any ticket advertising – in fact, it is very rare for ticket face-value prices to be advertised at all. Often, the first the consumer hears about them is when they go through to a sales site or phone line to book the tickets.

But Nick Blackburn did tell us he would consider including more pricing information on Seatickets' material.

We also found that terms used to describe additional fees differ – for example, our research found that a booking fee can also be known as a service charge, a convenience charge or a processing fee.

## 'WHY AM I PAYING TO PRINT MY OWN TICKET?'

### Graham Hunt, 45, IT manager

Regular Ticketmaster customer Graham Hunt is still puzzled about why he paid the site for the privilege of printing tickets himself.

Graham booked two tickets in May last year to see Canadian rock act Rush at Wembley Arena. The tickets cost £39 each, plus a £4.55 service charge per ticket. He saw he could use Ticketmaster's TicketFast service, which could email him a PDF of his tickets for him to print. Graham was impressed and chose this for 'the convenience of having the tickets in my hand and not having to worry about delivery' – but this convenience cost him an extra £2.75.

Graham feels this was excessive when the service charge added nearly 12 per cent to the ticket price. But more confusing is 'why I was paying £2.75 for printing something out on my own computer, on my

paper and with my ink, as opposed to paying for someone to print tickets out on their paper, put them in their envelope and send them to me'.

'As far as I can see there is no human interaction from Ticketmaster at all in this activity,' he told us. Ticketmaster said that the charges are due to 'the technological investment involved in the delivery of the ticket and, while the printing of the ticket is undertaken by the customer, the same support mechanism for the delivery of the ticket applies, so there is still a cost attached'.

Official online sellers are still Graham's first choice for tickets, but as a frequent online shopper he says: 'I don't think there's any other industry where you end up paying so many charges over and above the face value.'



When we looked at prices for an REM concert at Twickenham (see 'What you pay,' p14), we found several agents that clearly stated the delivery fee was exactly that, but Seatickets' term of choice was 'transaction fee', while Ticketmaster used 'order processing fee plus delivery price'.

Our survey found that 89 per cent of our members were in favour of one common term for all additional fees, to make them easier to understand.

### Refunding issues

If you can no longer attend an event, you're rarely entitled to a refund, despite tickets often being purchased months in advance.

Our members seem resigned to this. More than a quarter of those surveyed who had a ticket they couldn't use gave it away; a further quarter said the ticket was unused.

Ticketmaster says it is looking into a ticket insurance service whereby people can obtain refunds if they can no longer attend an event. Unsurprisingly, this would incur yet another charge at the time of booking.

If an event is cancelled or rescheduled to a date you can't attend, you should expect your money back, including the additional fees you were charged. Some agents refund booking fees but not the postage fee, as

they argue that the transaction has taken place, although Ticketmaster says it does refund this if the tickets have not been delivered when an event is cancelled.

It is a condition of membership of the industry's self-regulatory body, the Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers (Star), that booking fees, as well as the ticket's price, are refunded when an event is cancelled. But we found that many ticket agents, including Stargreen, Gigantic and Seatickets, do not refund any such fees when events are cancelled or rescheduled. Star cannot enforce its rules against these agencies as they are not members.

Nick Blackburn said: 'If a concert is subsequently cancelled, I believe we have the right to retain that booking fee as we have done the work for which we have charged the customer. When we have to refund the customer following cancellation, the cost of that work is covered by the original booking fee and for large concerts/events this work can be extensive.'

The government has said it wants a 'well-functioning primary market...to help fans dispose of tickets they can no longer use'. It has pledged to work with Star on 'a new code of principles for the ticketing market that meets consumers' needs'.

## THE SECOND ACT

### How the resale market works

The first place most people think of when looking for resold tickets is eBay, but there are other specialist sites – generally called the secondary market.

Agencies like No1soldoutevents.com sell tickets that are hard to find at substantially more than the original face value; fan-to-fan exchanges like Seatwave, Viagogo and Getmein enable individuals to sell their unused tickets to willing buyers.

On these sites it is individual sellers who set the ticket price, not the site itself. Some will sell tickets if they can't use them, but others may have bought tickets from official sources with the

intention of making a profit – it's common to see tickets on such sites within minutes of them officially going on sale. These sites also add extra fees and postage costs.

You have fewer rights if you buy from a secondary agent. And it can be hard to trace your seller if the tickets you receive were not what you ordered or, worse, were fake. There is no guarantee that secondary sellers actually have any tickets.

Just 1 per cent of our members with a ticket they could not use sold it on Seatwave, Viagogo or Getmein, while 12 per cent used eBay or Gumtree.

## KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

### What your ticket allows you to do

#### Venue vs agent

It's the event promoter, venue or performer that contracts to provide the show – so check all their terms and conditions before buying. A ticket agent generally acts as an intermediary and paying a booking fee creates a contract with the agent, so it is obliged to get you your tickets in time.



additional cost of buying a ticket on the day, if it's more expensive. If the agent will not pay and is a member of Star, use its complaints procedure.

#### Pay by credit card

If the tickets cost more than £100, and you pay by credit card, you can claim compensation from your credit card provider, as it is jointly responsible if the promoter breaches the contract – for example by cancelling the event and not refunding you. But for eBay regulars this does not apply for PayPal.

#### Wrong seat?

If you get to the show and find your seats are in the gods, when you paid for the front row, complain to the agent as soon as you can. You could claim the price difference between the tickets you booked and those you got.

#### Undelivered tickets

You should get a full refund if your ticket doesn't arrive, plus the

#### Extra fees

You are entitled to a full refund of the ticket plus, usually, any additional booking fee or service charges, if the event you have booked for is cancelled, rescheduled or altered – a change of location, for example, but not if an understudy appears in place of a show's headline star.

#### Secondary market

If buying from a secondary source, the original authorised seller need not act on any complaint you have, even if an event is cancelled. Check the terms of the secondary site before you buy.

#### More information

Go to [www.which.co.uk/consumerrights](http://www.which.co.uk/consumerrights)

### OUR RESEARCH

We surveyed 2,500 Which? members about their experiences of buying tickets in February 2008. Nearly 1,700 had bought tickets for a UK event in the past 12 months.

## Contacts

Society of Ticket Agents and Retailers (Star)  
0870 603 9011; [www.s-t-a-r.org.uk](http://www.s-t-a-r.org.uk)

#### TABLE NOTES

We took a snapshot on 8 April of two events. We looked at their ticket prices and extra costs on various websites. Prices and availability vary daily.

## WHICH? SAYS

### A better deal for consumers, please

Ticket agencies need consumers, so it's right to expect them to play fair with us, as well as with the promoter. Tickets should be priced and sold in the same way as other consumer goods, be they air flights, holidays or, indeed, cans of soup.

Prices should be more transparent. Currently, little pricing information exists before tickets go on sale and some indication of pricing should be included on all advertisements. Agents should also highlight additional booking fees on their advertising and at the start of the

online process, so you know exactly what you're paying upfront. The words used to describe these fees should also be standardised.

We want refund policies relaxed, too. If a ticket can't be used for genuine reasons, agents could help more. If an event is cancelled or rescheduled, a full refund on all you paid should be yours as a right.

Star must boost standards more by increasing its membership and ensuring compliance to its code of practice, so all consumers enjoy an industry-wide fair deal.

### WHAT YOU PAY: ONLINE TICKET PRICES AND CHARGES

|  | TICKET PRICE (£) | BOOKING FEE (£) <sup>a</sup> | POSTAGE (£) <sup>b</sup> | OTHER CHARGES (£) | TOTAL (£) | MARK-UP (%) |
|--|------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------|-----------|-------------|
| <b>BUDDY – DUCHESS THEATRE, LONDON, 30 AUGUST</b>                  |                  |                              |                          |                   |           |             |
| <b>AUTHORISED SELLERS – TWO TICKETS</b>                            |                  |                              |                          |                   |           |             |
| LASTMINUTE.COM   | 110.00           | 8.80                         |                          |                   | 118.80    | 8           |
| LONDON THEATRE DIRECT  | 110.00           | 10.00                        | 1.00                     |                   | 121.00    | 10          |
| SEETICKETS   | 110.00           | 7.00                         |                          |                   | 117.00    | 6           |
| THEATRETICKETS.CO.UK   | 110.00           | 28.00                        |                          |                   | 138.00    | 25          |
| THEATRE TICKETS DIRECT   | 110.00           | 28.40                        | 0.75                     | 3.49              | 142.64    | 30          |
| TICKETMASTER   | 110.00           | 6.60                         | 2.25                     |                   | 118.85    | 8           |
| TICKETSWITCH   | 110.00           | 5.00                         |                          |                   | 115.00    | 5           |
| VIEWLONDON.CO.UK   | 110.00           | 28.00                        |                          |                   | 138.00    | 25          |
| WEST END THEATRE BOOKINGS  | 110.00           | 28.00                        |                          | 2.00              | 140.00    | 27          |
| <b>SECONDARY SITES – PRICES ARE FOR TWO £55 FACE-VALUE TICKETS</b> |                  |                              |                          |                   |           |             |
| SEATWAVE   | 158.00           |                              | 6.50                     | 27.86             | 192.36    | 75          |
| VIAGOGO  | 164.00           | 16.40                        | 4.99                     | 3.74              | 189.13    | 72          |
| <b>REM – TWICKENHAM, 30 AUGUST</b>                                 |                  |                              |                          |                   |           |             |
| <b>AUTHORISED SELLERS – TWO TICKETS</b>                            |                  |                              |                          |                   |           |             |
| GIGANTIC   | 90.00            | 10.50                        | 2.00                     |                   | 102.50    | 14          |
| SEE  | 90.00            | 12.00                        | 4.80                     |                   | 106.80    | 19          |
| STARGREEN  | 90.00            | 13.50                        | 5.50                     |                   | 109.00    | 21          |
| TICKETLINE   | 90.00            | 11.50                        | 1.75                     |                   | 103.25    | 15          |
| TICKETMASTER   | 90.00            | 11.00                        | 4.95                     |                   | 105.95    | 18          |
| <b>SECONDARY SITES – PRICES ARE FOR TWO £45 FACE-VALUE TICKETS</b> |                  |                              |                          |                   |           |             |
| GETMEIN  | 130.90           | 23.05                        | 5.88                     |                   | 159.83    | 78          |
| NO1SOLDOUTEVENTS   | 179.98           |                              | 7.95                     | 31.50             | 219.43    | 144         |
| SEATWAVE   | 115.98           |                              | 6.50                     | 20.46             | 142.94    | 59          |
| VIAGOGO  | 130.00           | 19.50                        | 4.99                     | 4.28              | 158.77    | 76          |

<sup>a</sup> Also known as service charge or processing fee <sup>b</sup> Also known as order processing fee or transaction fee