

# Ticket fees in the spotlight

In December 2013, we launched a campaign calling on ticket companies to play fair on ticket fees. Now we go behind the scenes to reveal who is influencing the level of fees you pay and why



## Live music

Here we show the different parties involved in arranging and promoting live music shows and outline the roles and responsibilities of each



### Ticket company

Ticket companies sell tickets on behalf of a promoter or a venue and charge a booking fee on top of a ticket's face value. This is their main source of revenue and covers costs. Part of it may also go to the promoter, venue and artist through commission, sometimes called rebates. Some firms (eg WeGotTickets) say they don't do this as they believe it's unfair to customers.

The most common arrangement for larger events is for a firm to charge a fixed amount (for example, 8%) and allow the promoter to charge on top (eg 6%), so you would pay an extra 14%.

Depending on the relative power of the promoter and the ticket company, the driving force behind fees will vary. In some cases a ticket firm will have more of an influence, in others a promoter.

ILLUSTRATION DENIS CARRIER - SYNERGY ART

## WHAT YOU'LL LEARN

• What influences the amount you pay in fees • Which companies are most open about their fees • How to get the best deal

On 23 January 1977, the University of New Mexico hosted a concert by the Electric Light Orchestra. The gig marked a turning point in the history of live entertainment, as it was the first Ticketmaster event. Ticketmaster wasn't the first company to offer an alternative to queuing at the venue or buying mail order tickets, but it reinvented the role of a ticket agent and turned itself into an integral part of ticket sales for major events. Just four years later, the company expanded across the Atlantic to London and it's now a giant of the industry.

For as long as there have been agencies such as Ticketmaster, there have been ticket fees – concertgoers paid a service charge of 25 cents, or 3.8%, on top of those \$6.50 ELO tickets, for example. Such fees are disliked by many ticket buyers. Almost 50,000 people have supported our campaign calling for ticketing companies to end hidden fees and justify how much they charge. Many of you have said you feel ripped off by the size of fees and don't understand why they're levied.

This frustration is unsurprising, as ticket companies can prioritise their relationship with event promoters over their relationship with customers. This is because they assume that once they secure business with a promoter, tickets will sell successfully.

In this article, we shine a spotlight on the behind-the-scenes arrangements that influence the fees you pay, reveal the companies that still don't display all their fees upfront, and suggest ways to get the best deal on tickets.

## The cost of ticket fees

Between March and May 2014, we looked at the ticket prices and extra costs charged by 17 ticketing companies for music, theatre and comedy events. We went through the online booking process for five events with each company – 85 individual bookings. Where possible, we chose the same event with a range of companies.

Across all 85 events, compulsory fees added 18% on average to face value prices, but for certain events they were more than double this. London-based Stargreen added 37% through a £9.25 charge (£7 booking fee plus £2.25 compulsory postage) on top of a £25 ticket for Shakespeare in Love at the Noël Coward Theatre in July 2014. Stargreen had an average mark-up of 28%, making its compulsory fees the highest of all 17 companies. Following our investigation, we're pleased that Stargreen has introduced an option to collect theatre tickets at the box office for free.

For all the companies, the level of compulsory fees varied between events. This was most marked with See Tickets, whose compulsory charges ranged from 5% of a ticket's face value (for Charlie and the Chocolate Factory at Theatre Royal Drury Lane), to 31% (for Shakespeare in Love at the Noël Coward Theatre).

Why can compulsory fees vary wildly from event to event and company to company? It's because ticket companies are only one player in a large cast that influences the cost of a ticket. We spoke to ticketing experts from Billetto, London Theatre Direct, the O2, Skiddle and We Got Tickets about the arrangements for live music and theatre shows. The illustrations below show how these work. ➤

## West End theatre supply chain

Here we show the different parties involved in arranging and promoting West End theatre productions and outline the roles of each one



### Delivery fees

There are generally two types of compulsory fee: a booking fee, which usually applies per ticket, and a delivery fee, which applies per transaction. Delivery fees can be impossible to avoid. Of the 17 companies we looked at, six didn't offer a free delivery option at the time for any event. The six were BH Live, Eventim, Gigantic, Stargreen, Ticketline and Ticketmaster.

The delivery methods available can depend on the ticket agency's relationship with the venue. E-tickets, for example, are usually only an option if the ticket agency is the official box office for the venue. This explains why you can print tickets yourself for events at the O2 when you buy them from its official ticketing partner, AXS, but not elsewhere.

It's not unreasonable to expect fans to cover the cost of posting a physical ticket, but the cost can vary a lot. Standard delivery ranged from free to £3.25, and secure delivery from £4.50 to £7.95.

Charges for collecting tickets from the venue are more contentious. While this can be frustrating for customers, some companies have told us fees are sometimes applied to box office collection deliberately to discourage people from selecting this method and causing queues at the venue. Our research identified three companies (Eventim, See Tickets and Ticketmaster,) applying a fee ranging from £2.50 to £3 for box-office collection, though their reasons for doing so aren't clear.

What annoys entertainment fans most is having to pay to print tickets at home. Our campaign supporters describe the practice as 'an insult', 'crazy' and 'absurd'. Of the six companies that offered e-tickets for at least one event, four (BH Live, Eventim, TicketWeb and Ticketline) charged a fee of between £1 and £2.50. TicketWeb said it keeps charges to a minimum and reviews them constantly. AXS and Ticket Factory offered the service for free – we want all companies offering e-tickets to do this.

### Fees brought centre stage

Extra fees are part of the fabric of the ticketing industry and are often a ticket company's main source of revenue. But it's crucial that ticket buyers are made aware of the fees at the start of the online buying process so it's easy to compare prices between sellers.

The Committee of Advertising Practice (CAP) code, administered by the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), requires all non-optional charges to be included in or alongside the advertised price. Our investigation last year found seven companies failing to comply with the code. Six weeks later all seven – ATG Tickets, BH Live, See Tickets, Stargreen, Ticketmaster, Ticket Soup and Ticket Web – agreed to show all compulsory fees upfront.

But as of 10 June, Stargreen and TicketWeb still haven't made the changes. Both include their booking fees in the advertised ticket price, but their compulsory delivery charges aren't revealed until you add tickets to your basket. Stargreen has told us it will soon be updating its system to show all fees upfront.

Of the companies that have fallen into line, we think some are doing better than others. BH Live highlights both its service charges and delivery fees in a red text box that's easy to see when selecting your tickets. But Ticketmaster's compulsory delivery fees aren't immediately obvious – you need to click on a link to see them. It does clearly show booking fees next to the ticket price.

We don't believe this complex industry is working well for consumers. As part of our campaign, we're giving ticketing companies a month to respond to our concerns. If they don't give an adequate response, we'll urge the competition regulator to investigate the market. ■



HELP US MAKE SURE THAT TICKET COMPANIES  
CHARGE FAIR FEES. GO TO [WHICH.CO.UK/TICKET](http://WHICH.CO.UK/TICKET)

## Get the best deal on tickets

Here's how to look for deals and avoid paying over the odds

### ● AVOID THE SECONDARY MARKET

Sites such as Viagogo, Seatwave and GetMeln act as a marketplace for people to sell spare tickets, often at more than face value. Tickets to the Young Vic's sold-out production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* this summer, for example, are on sale for up to £190 each on Seatwave. Their face value is £10 to £35.

● **BUY FROM OTHER FANS**  
Scarlet Mist and Twickets offer great alternatives to the secondary market. They are

fan-to-fan ticket exchanges that allow people to pass on and buy spare tickets to UK events. The only rule is that no tickets can be sold above face value. See [twickets.co.uk](http://twickets.co.uk) and [scarletmist.com](http://scarletmist.com)

● **USE CASHBACK SITES**  
Cashback is often available on purchases from ticket companies. Quidco was offering 6% on theatre tickets from Lastminute.com in early June and you could get up to 8.4% on London Theatre Direct purchases through Top Cashback. Don't be swayed

by the lure of cashback alone, but it's a nice bonus if you've already got a good ticket deal.

### ● SHOP AROUND

Don't assume that the ticket outlets listed on an artist's or show's website are the only place to buy tickets. And remember not all shows sell out, so don't feel pressured to buy tickets as soon as they go on sale – it can pay to take the time to compare prices.

### ● CONCESSIONS

Many theatres offer discounted tickets if you're

unemployed, over 60 or under 25. And if you leave it until the last minute, some theatres release seats on the day of performance at even lower prices. The Theatre Royal Bath offers 40 seats at £6 each from noon for Mon-Sat evening performances.

### ● PREVIEWS

You can often see shows more cheaply during the first few shows of a run, before press night. All preview tickets are half price at the Royal Exchange Theatre in Manchester, for example.