

# Create a digital hub

Vicki Allpress Hill looks at the role websites play in audience development

Last week an arts marketer threw me a curly question. 'Are websites dead?' she asked. Her point was that Facebook, Twitter, blogs and YouTube had replaced a lot of her website's previous functionality. It was a good question. What is the role of a website in today's arts organisation? 'No,' I replied. 'Websites are alive and well, and have the potential to handle much of your audience development work. Employ yours.'

Finding new recruits, encouraging first-time and repeat attendance, engaging with audiences, enhancing understanding of the art form and harnessing initiators are cornerstones of audience development. Your website can be put to work to help you achieve any one of these goals.

In many instances, lifetime relationships with audiences commence on your website. Ask yourself, what question is your website the answer to? Qualified prospects for your art form may not yet know you exist, but might be 'Googling' something you deliver – perhaps 'concerts' or 'school workshops'. Clever

use of keyword optimisation can help these searchers find you and bring them to your site – an effective market development tactic.

Be sure to give yourself the best chance of capturing their data once they've landed on your site. Bounce rates (% of visitors who land and leave) on websites can be high. A relationship starts with a dialogue and ideally you would like your visitors to have signed up to hear from you before they leave your site. Optimised well for data capture, your website can help you build an email list or social media following which is your first step in developing an ongoing relationship.

Your website is an important tool for encouraging attendance – both first time and repeat. Providing the uninitiated with a taste of what they are likely to experience can relax their anxieties and inspire their interest. Videos can be powerful devices for breaking down barriers, whether they are insights, previews or audience voxpops. The Royal Opera House has a strong focus on making opera and ballet more accessible by telling the stories behind the stage. The *Discover*

section on its website provides a rich resource of synopses, trailers, interviews and image galleries.

Common concerns such as 'Is there parking?', 'Can we eat beforehand?' and 'Do we need to dress up?' Can be immediately addressed by a well-executed *Plan Your Visit* section on your website, created with the new visitor strongly in mind.

According to research by Creative New Zealand, increased attendance in the performing arts can be primarily attributed to 'having others to go with'. San Francisco Symphony has cleverly tapped into this need by integrating a social network powered by Ning into their website. In this space, audiences and classical music lovers can connect with each other and plan to meet up at concerts. An extraordinarily rich user-generated network has evolved, with almost 3,000 members who can create groups and events and share content.

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater redeveloped its website last year with a clear focus on audience development. Erik Gensler of New York-based arts digital consultancy Capacity Interactive managed the project and

## User receives auto responder

Immediate email introduction to Ailey

## User signs up for email

User selects preferences

## Put on email cascade

Based on geography and preferences. Automatically receives a series of emails over first 30 days post sign up.

## Build online relationship

Emails include a 2-for-1 offer to take classes at the Extension, discounts at the Ailey Shop, and an upcoming performance schedule.

## User develops closer ties to Ailey

Resulting in more ticket sales, donations, loyalty, etc.

Alvin Ailey Dance Theater's 'email cascades' initiate a long-term relationship from the starting point of email sign-up on the website.



Top: San Francisco Symphony's *social network* integrated into its website provides a meeting point for audiences and classical music lovers.

Right: The rich resource of material in the Royal Opera House's *Discover* section helps to tell the story behind the stage.



currently works with Ailey – regular performers at Sadler's Wells – on digital marketing strategy. He explains how they are using email address capture on the website as a starting point for educating and engaging new visitors: 'We set up email cascades for new users. When a user signs up for email on the website, they immediately get an auto-responder that lays out what the Ailey organisation offers. Then, based on their preferences, they get three to five emails over the first month of their new relationship. These emails introduce them to the company and provide offers.'

A new user interested in classes and living within 25 miles of NYC might receive a *Welcome* email, *Classes Intro* email, *Classes Discount* offer, *Ailey Shop 10% Off* offer and then an *Ailey is coming to NYC* email.

Gensler has observed that 'open rates of auto responders are almost triple those of monthly newsletters', indicating that users who land on a website and then sign up are – at that moment – in a state of heightened engagement.

Social media plug-ins, such as 'like'

and 'share' buttons and live feeds, can convert your website into a platform for peer-to-peer recommendations and conversation. The *Community* section on Brooklyn Museum of Art's website is an outstanding example of multiple online channels being merged to offer web visitors a choice as to how and where they might engage further. The Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Orange County has developed a Facebook widget that enables audiences to converse about an event using their Facebook login right on the event page on their site.

Up in the highest rungs of your audience loyalty ladder, your website can help you to reward loyal patrons and enable initiators. Via online 'Patron Centres', customer-focused arts organisations are delivering personalised service and messaging to audiences based on their constituent types, attendance behaviours and preferences. The Kennedy Centre in Washington DC is an example of one organisation using the Facebook Open Graph for site login, expanding the possibilities for audience members to invite friends to their events.

Conduct a review of your website using your audience development goals as your filter. How well is your website performing in areas like 'encouraging first-time ticket purchase', 'enabling peer-to-peer interaction', 'deepening the understanding of the art form' and 'providing initiators with tools to share and recommend'? Some small changes such as optimising the purchase path and integrating social media plugins can make all the difference to your audience development efforts. ●



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