

Martin Vogel, Freelance Consultant

Fads and trends in new media

Martin is a consultant and coach working with arts and cultural organisations. Until recently he worked as journalist, new media practitioner and strategy adviser at the BBC where he led the team that created iCan, later Action Network, the online social network which helps people to become involved in civic and democratic life. As head of business development at BBC News, he developed services such as news to mobile phones, content syndication and video on demand. He was nominated for an internal leadership award and a commendation from Greg Dyke for 'cutting through the corporate crap'. He became strategy advisor for the new BBC Trust before leaving earlier this year to help creative practitioners make the transition to leadership and leaders coping with the challenges of managing creatives.

This seminar challenged delegates to look beyond coping with the pace of change, to think afresh about how technology can authentically serve the purposes of an arts organisation.

Stop Playing Catch-Up

Let's take a high-level look at the problem. There is a different expectation that we bring to technology as organisations on the one hand and consumers on the other. Technology changes people's expectations of an organisation and how you interact.

As organisations, the website seems to offer various promotional opportunities, but it is largely static content with some opportunity to interact but not much. My experience of using these sites shows that it is rather like a glorified print leaflet with the box office attached.

From the consumer's point of view, what are their expectations? We know that quite often people are coming to us with a high level of motivation, often at a time when the venue is actually physically closed, and they are probably quite tech-savvy, so they organise their lives online and are accustomed to using it. Anyone under 30 has been growing up with this technology, but people much older than that are also very involved in the Internet and should not be forgotten. The website is the front line of their relationship with you. This is what you need to take into account. They might be looking to buy, or to find out more about your organisation, but they are looking for some kind of relationship.

Many arts organisations are missing a trick with technology

Many arts organisations are keeping up with the latest developments with e-mail newsletters and so on. However, it is not always clear what their purpose is, so we need to think about that. How does a particular blog or podcast fulfil, promote or further the organisation's purpose? It might be to invite people into a dialogue, but how are we gearing up to meeting that regular commitment; can we offer that functionality and resources to maintain it?



Provision should be informed by a clear value proposition and not just a desire to keep up with everybody else.

To be effective it is best to step back and be reflective about why you are using technology, what it represents, the opportunities to engage and the expectations from audiences.

What sort of audience relationships is your technology strategy creating?

If you are not engaging fully and creatively with your audiences, what does that say about your organisation? What is your purpose as an organisation? Are the relationships fostered through technology appropriate, and how does the use of technology support your strategic objectives? The website plays a huge role in helping your audiences understand what you are about. It is important that organisations are more mindful, in order to be more effective.

Connect your technology strategy to your core purpose

And where does the engagement with new technology take place within your organisation: is it in a silo with one person responsible or does it work across the organisation? These are strategic questions which you have to consider.



Technology is changing your audience relationships

There is no doubt that new technology is driving some profound changes. Let's think about the impact of technology upon the lives of people who use arts organisations. Technology provides instant access to culture in any number of ways (MP3 players, podcasts, music technology, creating music collections which are no longer dependent on all the different formatting and media, the choice of radio stations etc). The way in which people consume culture is therefore changing, becoming much more individualised, and creating a less deferential attitude to cultural institutions. People become more self-contained, as modern ways of engaging allow people to share experiences and interests across the world, unhindered by geographical barriers.

Lower barriers to entry enable anyone to become a creator

Technology is also bringing about quite profound changes in the way that people regard themselves and their sense of identity, and the world around them. Digital technology provides people with the means to create new art, bringing about the rise of the consumer creator. Music distribution and promotion has also embraced new technology, particularly social networking. MySpace and YouTube enable people to promote themselves and their own artistic endeavours, whilst blogs present a way to become published without the usual structures and barriers of conventional publishing. Take the example of blogs: it's estimated that there are around 200 million currently, yet only a tiny proportion have to be any good in order to make a huge impact.

People are able to create communities across the world, sharing common interests that might have been too 'minority' to achieve physically or without new technology. People are bringing a high degree of aesthetic sensibility to it as well, so we see work and ideas of a very high quality. For almost any interest that you can think of, there is likely to be a group about it online now.

How might this change how people engage with the arts?

Organisations need to consider the kind of relationship that your audiences might want with you when they access the website and how this will be managed.

It is increasingly clear that consumers seek authentic experiences that bolster their sense of self and expect the company (or arts organisation) to deliver what they promise. An example of this was the Primark fiasco when it was discovered that they were using sweatshop labour. Now, everyone loves cheap clothes, but not at any price. Primark rendered itself and

its consumers *un-* authentic by disproving or betraying its own ethical policy. Every store had a sign telling people that they produced their clothes fairly and they were caught out.

Bloggers grill Ramsay's seasonal food call

- Online menus include imported produce
- Chef says his idea would improve quality

Tim Hayward
Saturday May 10, 2008
[The Guardian](#)



Gordon Ramsay in his kitchen at Claridge's, London Photograph: Sean Smith

When Gordon Ramsay fulminated yesterday that restaurants should be fined for using out-of-season produce, the result was inevitable. Foodie bloggers rushed to scrutinise the menus of his restaurant empire for any hint of hypocrisy.

They weren't disappointed. While Ramsay's comments were welcomed by the Soil Association and chimed with the growing popularity for locally sourced food, they did not completely accord with his own menus.

People are much more empowered now and expect to have more control over their environment and their choices; they want experiences that are commensurate with their lifestyle and will hold businesses to account. For example, when Gordon Ramsay recently suggested that restaurants should only produce seasonal food, it was very swiftly discovered that his own restaurants were not serving seasonal food and thus not living up to his own standards.

In this day and age, if you're not living up to what you proclaim, you will soon be found out. It is much harder these days for an organisation to coast along and provide substandard service.

The arts nowadays are more inclusive and engaging, showing a shift in attitude from the era of industrialisation, when the arts were largely about bringing an experience to people who did not usually have access to it and who were not usually thought of as participating, but receiving something good for them.

Nowadays, people can access any culture they want, wherever they want and however they want, and they are free to participate, consume or co-create. People come to the arts with their own sense of authority or artistic ideas. This places pressure on arts organisation in

terms of the standards that audiences expect. People are no longer passive consumers but part of the creative community.

We are losing the competitive advantage that the arts used to enjoy: we are no longer the sole arbiters and presenters of innovation, creativity and talent, as people become more empowered and start creating and responding to independently produced work. We are also finding that the relationship people want is no longer about the event itself, but the before and after too; how we engage with people and draw them into our world. This means there is only one direction to take:

Make your audience feel involved

We must go beyond the actual cultural event and offer content so that people can understand what we are doing and are able to participate in the enterprise, not just consume it. Technology conferences in the United States have been using functionality to involve their participants in rich and new ways. This makes the event more interactive, but there is also a payoff in that participants are keen to participate next time thus increasing awareness, attendance and (presumably) sales.

Think about the extent to which your organisation meets people's needs for authenticity and self-actualisation. Do you engage your audiences as consumers of culture or as creators of culture?

There are some practical ways to put these ideas into effect. I want to challenge the idea that being Digital is about being on a treadmill and trying to keep pace. The small tweaks can make an impact and transform a website.



How will you ensure your audiences have an experience that can be rewarding through technology? The first thing is to look at is whether you have the tools and how you can achieve what you want in the most simple and accessible way. It's much more about using existing resources than creating whizzy new tools and sites.

Facebook, YouTube - all of these things plug together and can be incorporated into your website and encourage people to participate and engage spontaneously. Free resource products are available that you can incorporate into your website. A number of organisations use these tools already, but it is what you do with them that makes the difference.

For example, the BBC created a panel of listeners for a programme using e-mail; they contacted them every day after the programme to ask them for their opinions. Now this is a simple way of gathering feedback, but it allowed them to build up a rich picture of their audiences' needs. They have an ongoing focus group for very little cost.

You don't have to create all the content yourself or control it; but if you want interactivity, you need to be prepared for everything that entails and encourage people to react to it and build it into their own content.

Some organisations worry that if you start facilitating this kind of dialogue, then it can backfire. They perceive negative comments or challenges as criticism. It is a real issue, but it is a management problem: how will the organisation respond to critical debate, how much mediating will there be, or will the community be the mediators by responding in turn? By allowing the community to respond and take responsibility for the dialogue, organisations can gain credibility for being transparent and open to discussion in a mature way.

However as a site is mediated, or interactivity encouraged, it will provide valuable consumer insight, which can help an organisation turn itself around. For example the Royal Opera House responded to criticism of pricing by running an offer for *Sun* readers, effectively dealing with the issue and changing perceptions of elitism.

Think about what it means to enrich a website: articles by curators, reviews of shows, creating space for blogs, anything basically that helps people to educate themselves and join in the discussion. Many companies are doing this, but few are doing it all the time and with any consistency. There needs to be a cultural shift, so that the website is more integral to the operation of the organisation as a whole and not a promotional tool. The BBC only realised the potential for its website when they started to open up in these ways, allowing them to cross promote programmes across the different strands and platforms.

Think about how you are using your own readily available resources, how you are generating interesting content and who is managing and facilitating it. Is this discursive or simply placing your opinions on the website?

Time to get to work

Delegates were then given an exercise, working in pairs

- What kind of relationships are you creating through new media?
- In an ideal scenario, what outcomes should your new media strategy deliver?
- Where does responsibility lie to make this happen?
- What small initiatives can you take to make the ideal scenario a reality?
- What strikes you most from this conversation?

Pairs move into groups

- First appoint a spokesman
- Quickly share your key thought from previous conversation
- Select as a group the single thought that strikes you most to share with everyone

Themes arising from the group work

It still comes down to resources. An organisation can decide to have a digital or a media strategy and how they are going to provide content etc, but it still has to be paid for. Organisations need to prioritise: if it's a priority to make a content rich website, then the organisation has to find the money to pay for the expertise and time.

There is also a time issue, because there needs to be a commitment to creating the content (whoever does it) and then maintaining it. These are boring things to bring up, but unless we can do it properly, there doesn't seem much point. It can also be difficult to make formal connections between what people put up independently on YouTube etc, and your own website, so that others follow through, make contact with your organisation and hopefully buy tickets or visit exhibitions.

Other organisations have a review facility and would like to develop this into an online conversation with attenders. One organisation found that the website allows their audiences to share the experience and talk about their product with others. They have a policy of encouraging all comment because whether it's positive or negative, it's engagement and we have an opportunity to persuade them to change their minds.

The question of policing is significant, especially in the performing arts, where people can say outrageous things about productions. Organisations tend to monitor for swearing, but otherwise don't. This was actually a recent issue in the media, where some were saying that YouTube and MySpace should take more responsibility for mediating the content. The providers responded that they provide the facility and functionality, not the content. The web itself is value-neutral; it is people that do things with the content. One solution is to find ways for the audience to alert the organisation to potentially offensive or illegal content – the community largely polices itself.

Resources and priorities. Quite often, arts organisations get very excited by the possibilities of new technology and rush off to create a MySpace page, for example, without thinking about whether this is what our audience needs. In other areas of marketing and audience development, we identify a need from our audience and fill it, whereas with online opportunities we get very excited about what we could do without thinking about whether that's what our audiences need us to do. Do we put in the same amount of thought and research when we are planning to develop our online presence as we do when we are producing posters, print and other promotional materials?

Organisations have an internal issue to address: that of criticism being acceptable to the creative or artistic team. At the moment, positive feedback is accepted, but negative criticism tends to be rejected out of hand. There is often nervousness at the idea of posting anything that is not glowing praise, yet it's essential to keep the bad comments up with the good comments (leaving aside bad language); it demonstrates openness, maturity, willingness to discuss and it stimulates debate as other users and attenders agree or disagree. We only have to look at the Amazon review pages to see how that works: for every one critical review, there will be two or three disagreeing. So really for arts organisations, it's about trying to persuade the creatives that this is a good thing and not threatening to their work.

The online strategy has to be a part of what an organisation wants to do in the future, so it has to be adequately resourced in order to deliver it and to ensure that everyone in the organisation has bought into the strategy and will contribute towards it. There is a need to get

more sections of an organisation involved in the production of content for the online strategy, even if it remains the responsibility for the marketing department to deliver it.

Closing thought: Take control of technology, don't be controlled by it.

Digital media has the opportunity to raise your organisation's game, so embrace it and learn to use it to your advantage. The aim is to make sure that the whole organisation is pulling together to make technology service purpose in delivering yours.

- Look back on your reflections through the session
- Think about what you would like to achieve
- Think about what you will do differently
- Note down two or three next steps which you're committed to undertaking



Orian Brook, User Fellow, University of St Andrews
Rethinking drivers of cultural consumption

Orian Brook is a freelance audience researcher, currently developing statistical models for performing arts attendance at the University of St Andrews. She is also a research associate for Audiences London where she has also held the post of research director. At Audiences London she was responsible for projects such as Snapshot (comparison of data from 35 London venues), CultureMap and the Diversity Monitoring project. Previously she has worked for Barbican Centre, Southbank Centre, ENO, Soho Theatre and harmonia mundi. She has published for Cultural Trends and was nominated for Market Research Society's Research Excellence and Effectiveness Awards in 2003.

This session was based on the statistical modelling that Orian has undertaken as part of a research project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The findings challenge some of our preconceptions about audience behaviour and the key indicators or drivers to attendance / participation.

Rethinking Drivers of Cultural Consumption

Orian is interested in undertaking a more robust analysis of box office data, that is more interpretive and builds on the collection of data by various audience development agencies. Some arts venues remain obsessed with ethnicity, whilst others obsessed about income/class; are these selected factors (which have been handed down to us) the real issue? We could do much if our box office data was more illuminating and surveys could be relied upon; we know that respondents want to give the most helpful answer, so it is very difficult to be able to rely on the answers we get from surveys.

