

Get on board the digital express

Alison Atkinson advises that you refer to the timetable and check your destination before setting off on that new technology journey

People are increasingly looking for added value through new technologies, and may be wary of something perceived simply as another sales pitch.

Podcasts, blogs, RSS, wikis, social networking – there’s a whole range of new ways for individuals and organisations to communicate and interact. But before diving in (or running away) it is worth thinking strategically about how new technologies can be used to extend or add value to your marketing activity. If you’re not already familiar with these new tools, get online and have a play: listen to podcasts, subscribe to RSS feeds, make sure you know what a wiki is, write a blog, see what makes a forum work, and have a look at lots of sites (for example www.telegraph.co.uk; www.brooklynmuseum.org for their community section and www.vam.ac.uk for their user generated content (UGC) around special exhibitions).

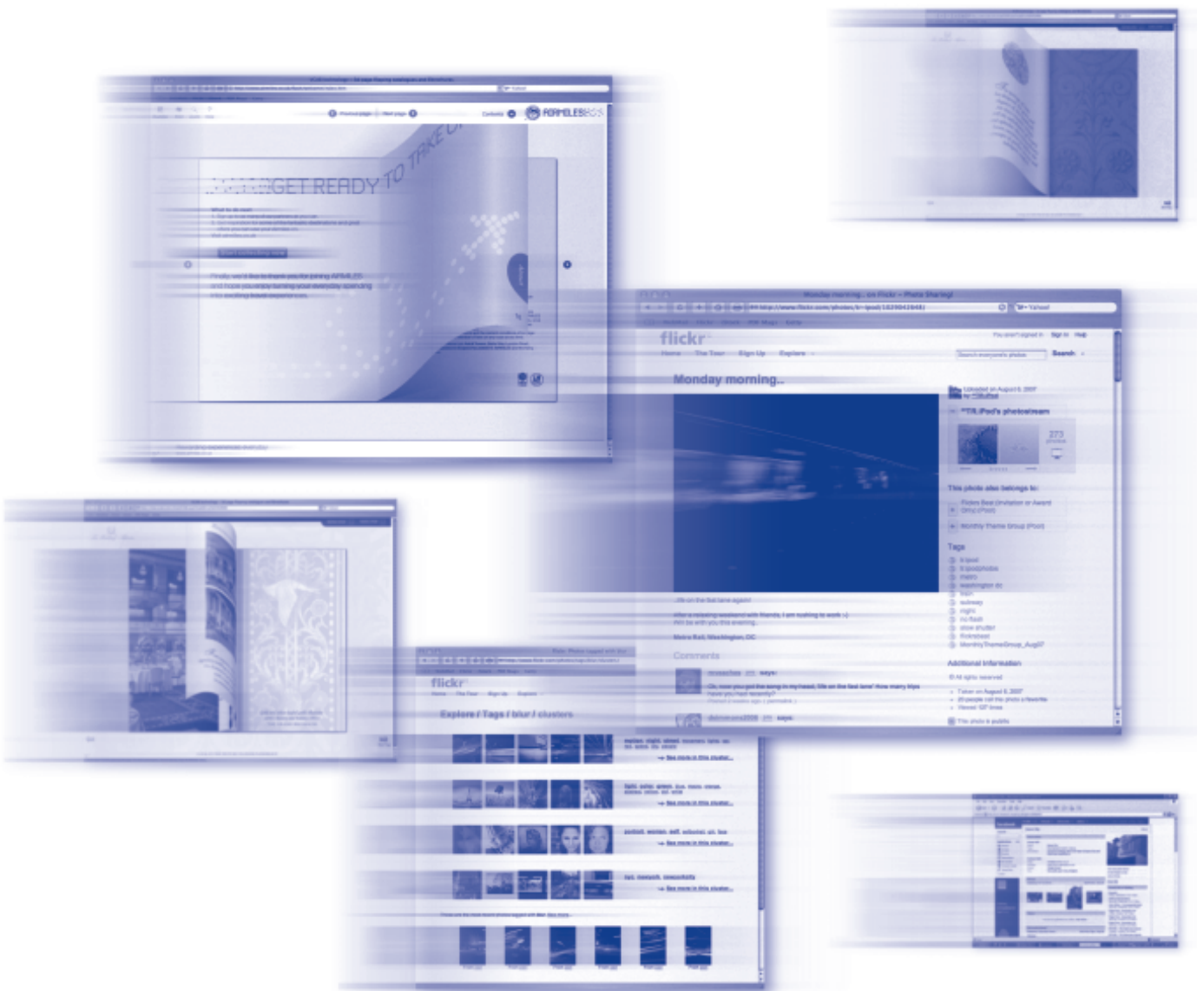
As with any new marketing activity, start by defining your objectives and target markets and how they fit within your overall marketing strategy. Think first about what content you have, or could create, and then which technology would serve it best. Consider what level of interaction you (and your organisation) are looking for. Are you looking for one-way communication (podcasts, videos, RSS feeds of news / special offers), to engage with your audience (comments on blogs, submitting content, live chat) or for visitors to interact with each other (forums, wikis, social networking sites)? How much control do you want (or need) over content? Many organisations choose to approve all user generated content before letting it go live on their site.

In general, e-mail, SMS campaigns and RSS feeds only reach subscribers

– excellent ways of keeping in touch with those who support you. It’s sometimes overlooked that podcasts and blogs aren’t found only by visitors to your website or subscribers, but that they also offer an exciting chance to reach new audiences through listings on directory sites and referrals. The excellent book *Promoting your Podcast* by Jason Van Orden (ISBN 978-0-9776895-5-2, Larstan Publishing) is an easy-to-follow introduction to this topic. Social networking sites have the potential to reach huge numbers of people with similar interests or demographics. As a marketing tool they work well in building up loyalty over the long term, rather than a hard-sell approach as this can clash with the social side which is a priority for many of the registered users. MySpace, YouTube and Facebook can be excellent places to host your video and image content to embed directly into your site.

Define what action you’re looking for from your visitors, what your targets are, and how you will measure the results. Examples might include: selling more tickets, gaining more repeat visits to your website, reaching new audiences, increasing e-mail bulletin or RSS feed subscribers, and offering your community the chance to add content to your site. Don’t forget to set up systems for analysing the results so that you can work out if your time and resources are being well spent. And if you find that your current web statistics can’t give you the data you need, consider moving to the excellent (and free) Google analytics.

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something perceived simply as another sales pitch. Is there a way you can provide further insight into the creative process behind your exhibition or performance? Perhaps an artist could speak or write about their work, or you could film a short part of a rehearsal? Do you have regular talks or discussions that would be of interest to a wider audience if they were recorded and released as podcasts or videos? How about following up with audiences by e-mail immediately after your event and asking them to send in their own review to post on your website? General forums are acknowledged to be difficult to run and many arts organisations have closed theirs down. Instead, how about asking your visitors to share experiences or images that specifically link to your exhibition or event?

Above all, it's essential to look at resources (especially staff time) and how the activity will be sustained.

Increasing the interaction with your community is a great way to open your organisation up and gain visitor loyalty and new audiences, but it also increases expectations of input and communication in the future.

There is no right and wrong, so don't be afraid to add some new activity to your marketing plans. And do share your experiences with your colleagues so that the arts sector can learn and keep abreast of new developments! One thing that's certain is that the opportunities for marketing are changing fast – so if you want to keep engaging with new audiences, you've got to know what's out there and make informed decisions about what's right for your organisation. ●



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