

How to evaluate success online?

Culture24's Let's Get Real report challenges assumptions and provides an insight into the way cultural organisations go about trying to measure the success of their business



Developing effective ways to define, measure and evaluate the success of online activities is an issue faced by all parts of the cultural sector. Organisations regularly invest in cultural websites, social media activities and online services without a clear idea of specifically what the services are trying to achieve, or their intended audience.

While cultural managers are increasingly interested in showing evidence of online success, funding agencies and government departments currently lack the expertise to offer guidelines or set standards for measurement. For many organisations this results in a confusing mixture of statistics and reporting which is time-consuming to provide and reveals little about online user behaviour, engagement and satisfaction.

The *Let's Get Real* report was the outcome of a year-long action research project to address these issues, co-ordinated and led by Culture24 and actively involving 17 different UK cultural venues, five agencies and a university. The budget for the project was only £29,000, but it was made possible by the willingness and enthusiasm of the project team and the participants to share data, experience and resources openly in order to improve the effectiveness of their digital output.

The results, published in October 2011, should be looked at in the spirit in which the project was undertaken – open, questioning and aspirational. They offer an insight into the place where many of the UK's leading cultural organisations currently are

when it comes to understanding and making use of the data that they collect from their online activities. The real insights lie not in which tools or platforms the report evaluates, but in the shift in thinking that needs to happen at a deep level within every cultural organisation. The lessons can be found through careful analysis of the data against each organisation's primary objectives. Here are some of the key findings:

Be clear 'what' you are trying to do online and 'who' it is for

It is not enough to see the web as a global machine, reaching out to everyone. Vast quantities of information are now available on everything, necessitating filtering, sorting and curating. Unless each cultural organisation can say exactly what they are trying to do and specifically who their product or service is designed for, how will they know if it has worked or how to measure it?

We need to segment our online audiences as we would for any exhibition, performance or workshop, remembering that our digital strategy should not be separate from our overall mission, but rather a tactical strategy, which sets goals, measurements and investment. This tactical strategy should serve to fulfil the overall mission in direct ways for different audiences, be they learners, tourists, artists, seekers or shoppers.

Focus your online investment

The web has been shifting from an information medium to a communication medium and social media is now dominating the time



Let's Get Real project partners at the kick-off meeting in Brighton 2011 © Culture24

that users spend online and shifting the way that websites are found. However, despite this, search is still the single most important source of visits to most organisations' websites.

The arrival of mobile platforms has accelerated many online behavioural changes. Mobile is growing many times faster than social media traffic, but the majority of cultural websites are not yet optimised for mobile platforms.

If we wish to develop our audiences we need to change the focus of our investment in our online platforms; invest in SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) first, then mobile versions of websites and then social media. This shift is particularly important in the current environment of restricted funding.

Recognise the value, and the limits, of social media

Social media should be integrated with the wider strategy for the web and the organisation as a whole. If the value of social media is solely reported quantitatively – either through crude measures of reach, or referred traffic to the website – there is a high risk of the investment being seen as ineffectual in the medium term.

Social media needs to be far more tactical, even at the overall brand level. It is worth asking what the value of social media really is to you. Is it about brand recognition more than anything

else? Do you have wider objectives about audience development, learning and two-way communication with audiences, not just marketing?

Social media engagement isn't about spending money; it's about what you do and say. It's about having the right content in the right channels to engage the right audience in the right way. This can mean big opportunities for institutions with limited resources if they can get this right.

Question whether the web is enabling you to reach new audiences

In order to create a more joined-up approach to audiences, we need to connect our online audiences with our offline audiences, and implement audience segmentation models into online analytics tools. This means rethinking the purpose and role of our 'brand' websites and the separation between that and dedicated microsites or online projects such as games for children, projects for teenagers and so on.

One of the closely held assumptions about cultural engagement online has been that it allows us to reach out to new audiences and extend the reach of public programmes beyond those who traditionally engage with the arts. The online Mosaic profiling exercise that was undertaken in partnership with Experian Hitwise challenges these assumptions and raises the question

of whether we are actually reaching new audience segments online, or just engaging with a larger number of the same type of people.

The data suggests that the cultural sector needs to more effectively market its online offerings in order to grow usage beyond traditional audience segments. An opportunity exists here for organisations to more effectively engage UK residents who are not currently using their websites, in much the same way that non-visiting and under-represented communities are targeted by specific campaigns for offline education and public programmes. ■

This is an edited extract from Culture24's Let's Get Real report that can be found with other resources at <http://weareculture24.org.uk/projects/action-research/how-to-evaluate-success-online/>

What's next?

Culture24 has gone on to lead a follow up Phase 2 action research project that will focus on how we define the nature of engagement online and the impact of mobile technologies on audience behaviour. They are working with 22 organisations including Tate, The Photographers' Gallery, British Museum, V&A, Watershed, Globe etc. The final report is expected in spring 2013.

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