

Using new technology (and Ewan McGregor) to engage with audiences

Helen Black reveals the ideas behind the project that established TAG as the first company in Scotland with a presence on YouTube and their discoveries about using social-networking websites



It's easier than you think

TAG is part of Citizens' Theatre. Its work is specially created for children and young people. In the last couple of years, the company has increased its online presence through social networking sites, in particular YouTube, Flickr and MySpace.

TAG's video collection was launched on YouTube in October 2006 with nine videos, four of them featuring an exclusive interview with film star Ewan McGregor. There are now seventeen videos, most of which are also embedded on TAG's website. Although ultimately a success, these videos originated as a DVD project which failed. Considered by some to be a disaster, the videos may never have seen the light of day... but, first things first – how did TAG get Ewan McGregor?!

If you don't ask you don't get

TAG wanted to interview well-known Scottish people who had worked for the company. Ewan McGregor, who actually had no particular connection, was approached – as a wild card – through his agent, and while all the other celebrities turned down the opportunity, Ewan said yes.

The interview with Ewan was filmed cheaply by TAG's marketing assistant (an amateur filmmaker) and Helen using a borrowed video camera. Ewan lived up to his reputation as a nice bloke and the interview seemed appropriate for its intended use on the DVD.

However, when all of the content was brought together there were problems. The sound quality was poor, there weren't enough resources to edit properly and there didn't seem to be

adequate content. Opinions differed on how this could be taken forward, but eventually it was agreed that it couldn't be used as a DVD.

From useless DVD to fantastic opportunity

At an earlier stage, YouTube had been mooted as an option, but senior staff were reluctant because of perceived issues of quality and transience. Now, it seemed like the perfect solution.

The filmed material suited YouTube well. The sound quality problems were not as obvious, a short DVD became a lot of video clips and the style suited the site. It was free, TAG would save on DVD reproduction and distribution costs, and it offered instantaneous worldwide coverage for as long as the company desired.



The main steps in using YouTube are very straightforward:

- Create a free YouTube account and channel.
- Make your videos. If you have any budget, focus it on editing, as a good editor can make most footage look cool. Keep it friendly and personal.
- Ensure clips are: under 100MB and under 10mins.
- Upload, attract interest by adding tags etc.
- Test in private – set it up so that only you can see it initially.
- Embed on your own website (if you wish), using YouTube’s code.
- Launch for public.

Then make sure you promote your videos – put out press releases, tell your mailing list, spread word of mouth, create links from other websites and monitor use (views, links, comments).

Since TAG’s debut on YouTube, the company has branched out into other areas: behind-the-scenes footage, project feedback, production trailers and excerpts. Technical staff have even produced time-lapse photography of a set build (still to be edited).

Social networking: pros and cons

There are a vast number of social networking sites such as MySpace, Bebo, Facebook and Flickr. TAG’s experience with YouTube led to further activity in social networking. TAG made particular use of MySpace, due to its youth profile. Here are some of the pros and cons of using such sites:

Pros:

- kudos with target market
- interactive and responsive – can create a sense of belonging
- ability to reach niche markets
- international communication
- alternative voice – a chance to be more relaxed
- ease of communication – flexible and quick to change
- feels less like advertising – the public opt-in
- it’s free
- trustworthy – a more human engagement with your company than through a traditional website
- can be used as a performance space (e.g. videos online)
- drives traffic to your own website.

Cons:

- potentially invasive – people have created their own personal spaces and *marketing* can be unwanted
- potential for negative publicity – word of mouth can take on a life of its own
- informal can look unprofessional – ensure a good fit
- may be time consuming to learn/manage
- difficulty of achieving support from colleagues, including artistic director
- difficulty of finding the ‘right voice’
- copyright-image permissions require attention
- lack of technical knowledge
- surfing the trends – what happens when MySpace becomes ‘old hat’?

Social networking can be a valuable part of the marketing strategy but it’s important to be clear about why you are doing it and how it will be carried through in practice. Ask yourself: do I have the time? Do I have the inclination? Does it fit with my organisation? And finally, can I afford not to? ■



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