

# Your space or MySpace?

Hans de Kretser guides us through it

Now that even unborn babies have their own Facebook profiles (*Metro*, 13th August 2007) it's no wonder that during a recent AMA seminar tour about online marketing, the topic that interested most people was social networking for arts marketing. Delegates wanted to know whose organisation had the most friends on MySpace or Facebook; what were the merits of different social networks; who's poked who; who's got the best widgets and much more besides. (If you don't know what these terms mean, you need to join the party and set up your own Facebook profile or MySpace site – it's easy and free.)

Our newfound obsession is no surprise when a recent survey\* revealed half of all Broadband users log on to social networking sites such as Facebook, MySpace and MSN Messenger. The average amount of time spent on virtual networking is nearly three hours a week (the average Briton spends 15.8 hours a week online). It has overtaken online shopping, banking and downloading music as the most popular online activity. Only surfing the net and e-mailing is more popular. Women use social networking sites more than men, 56% compared to 46%. Nearly 75% of those visiting social networking sites are aged between 18 and 29 years. But older groups are also logging on.

So, in an attempt to pick up on some of the discussions among delegates on the seminar tour, here are ten considerations when building your online social networks.

## 1) Have a strategy

Don't just respond to 'We should have a MySpace page' but consider carefully how you want your online social networks to work for your organisation. Scottish Ballet has a MySpace, Facebook and Bebo site to target different audiences.

## 2) Have resources in place

You need to nurture your networks and this requires skills, time and enthusiasm as well as staying power. Be quick to engage in any debates and discussions. Alan Stacey from Talawa Theatre Company wants all his colleagues to engage with their MySpace site and Facebook group to share the workload and to reflect broader views and experiences across the company.

## 3) Target niches rather than large volumes of 'friends'

Consider setting up different groups for target different audiences. The Sadler's Wells hip-hop festival *Breakin' Convention* had its own MySpace site separate from the newer Sadler's Wells MySpace site. Online communities are about seeking out others who share a passion for the same thing.

## 4) Be transparent

People are very marketing savvy and can quickly see through an attempt to pretend to be something you're not, e.g. a fan club. Rob Martin at the Lowry prefers to tap into established third party networks that have an interest around a forthcoming show or exhibition. A well-chosen advocate may have more credibility than doing it in-house.

### 5) Observe rules of engagement

Different social networks will have different (sometimes unwritten) rules. Observe these rules to avoid causing a negative reaction. Remember some networks are more commercial than others but most people go there to socialise so watch the tone of your copy – soft sell rather than hard sell. People don't mind being marketed to if it's done in the right way. Someone said that as long as you have relevancy and likeability people are happy to listen. While MySpace is often used to sell, consider setting your organisation up as a group on Facebook rather than an individual like DanceCity in Newcastle.

### 6) Don't expect it to be easy

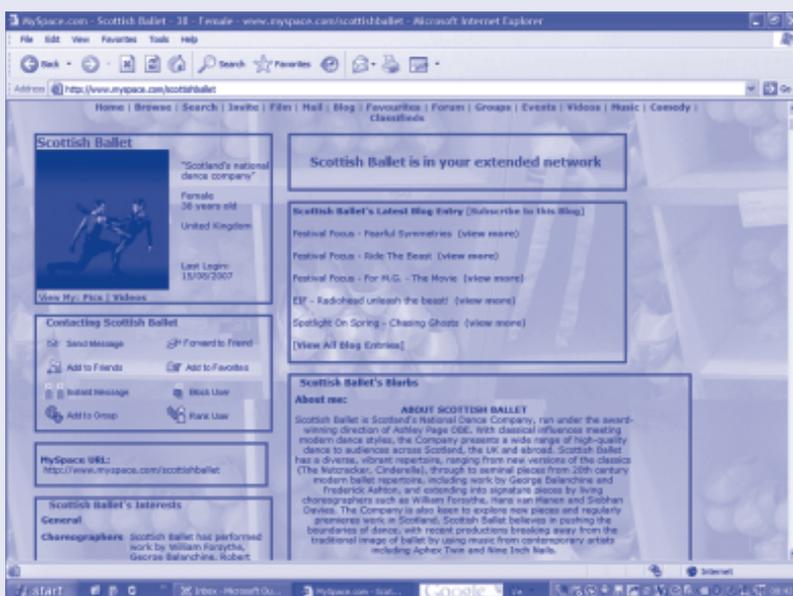
Commit to spending the same amount of time networking online as your organisation might do offline. It takes effort to ensure that content is genuinely interesting and engaging. In many ways we are trying to entertain people when they interact with us online and that can be challenging.

### 7) Don't shy away from criticism

Your social networks need a bit of credibility and reality. Don't be afraid to allow people to offer constructive criticism on blogs and message boards. You always have the right of reply. And if it's really bad, you can delete it. Social networking sites are not the place to practice an all-controlling approach to communications.

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### 8) Measure your success

Social networking/media is a maturing medium and there aren't many clear ways to measure success. It's not necessarily about volume of 'friends' but about successful outcomes. Decide what they are for your organisation: what do you want to achieve and how can you measure its effect?

### 9) Give things away

Offer free downloads, competitions and ticket offers which will help to build relationships and keeps the fickle returning. The Donmar Warehouse Theatre have a group on Facebook for special offers. Why not commission a developer to create an application on Facebook? Applications are fun things to do and share between friends. With Facebook profiles are forwarded virally. Existing applications include sending fortune cookie messages, virtual flowers or even casting 'magic' spells.

### 10) Keep it fun

Social networking is here to stay; but let's face it – it's always been here. People have always found a way to congregate and form communities. It just so happens that we have this thing called the internet so we can all socialise without leaving our homes. But why not do what one arts organisation has already done, and have a Facebook or MySpace night where your online friends can meet in real life? Now that's social networking!

### Today's leading networks

- MySpace is still the leading general social networking site where people can post videos, music and blogs and customise how their online space looks – it has 6.5m UK visitors.



- Bebo is popular with teenagers and teenagers with 4m UK visitors.
- Facebook is the fastest growing network – originally for students, now hardworking city workers are known for spending all their time here with 3.2m UK visitors (June 2007). Lots of fun applications to distract you.

### On the horizon

Google and Yahoo are also developing their own social network sites. We'll soon have 'Yahoo Mosh' and 'Google Socialstream'.

### More networks

For a list of many other networks, their current members and what communities they include check Social Networking on Wikipedia (<http://tinyurl.com/k2jhx>) ■

\* YouGov survey of 10,513 adults in Britain carried out in May 2007.



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