

Building a loyal online community



A Q&A with **Rowan Hoban**, co-founder of JustSoFestival by **Katie Moffat**



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JustSoFestival is an annual weekend-long camping festival for children and their families. The event's website describes it as follows:

"The festival provides a magical experience where art, music and literature are embedded and entwined in a beautiful and wonderful landscape. We provide a broad range of musical, theatrical, visual and aural performances, workshops and installations within a safe, natural and magical setting. Every clearing and glade holds a new way to unleash creativity. Families discover and delight in the spectacular within the woodland environment during this weekend camping event."

In the four years since its inception, JustSoFestival has almost doubled in size, from a capacity of 2,600 in the first year, to a sell-out of 5,000. With no money spent on paid advertising, the festival has grown purely through online and offline word-of-mouth, which has been nurtured and amplified by the festival organisers through their own online activity.



How did you start off, given that you had no track record and existing customers?

We built the website ourselves and we set up a Facebook page and a Twitter account. We just started by engaging with people that we thought might find the idea interesting. I think the key was that right from the beginning we had a very clear vision of what the event and experience should be and how it should look and feel and we tried really hard to communicate that in everything we did.

What was the biggest challenge in the beginning?

It was definitely tricky that first year, since we had no images of the festival itself, we obviously couldn't show people exactly what it would be like. So we talked a lot about the vision for the event and used imagery that tried to convey that vision. Visuals were and are so important, we're deliberately very focused on having the same look and feel across everything so that's it's instantly recognisable as JustSoFestival. We are also very flexible, if we want to change anything on the website or any marketing material, we just do it; we don't design by committee.

What have you found to be the most useful digital platforms and tools to promote the festival?

I think we've always been more comfortable with Facebook so we use it the most. It feels to us that Twitter is more for us talking to peers whereas with Facebook it's clear that we're talking to our audience. The visual nature of Facebook works well for us too.

We do use Google Analytics but still it's always hard to know exactly where people come from, in the past, when we've asked them, 85% say word-of-mouth.

We haven't ever paid for digital advertising because if we have budget we tend to want to spend it on programming.

Also, I don't think bigger audiences online necessarily means better, when *The Guardian* were media partners we had a banner ad that sent loads of visitors but it didn't convert to ticket sales.



Do you work with bloggers?

Yes we do, previously when we had bloggers contact us, we'd look at their blogs and make a decision on a more ad-hoc basis, 2013 was the first year that we asked bloggers to apply for tickets. Now that we're bigger as a festival we needed to be a bit more structured about who we give tickets to. We do work very closely with certain family bloggers who have supported us from the start and having those loyal advocates is really great.

How do you maintain interest in the festival all year round?

Having lots of content from past festivals makes it easier but to maintain momentum with our email marketing, we do two different versions. We have a Festival News newsletter through which we share information about the latest programming, ticketing or other event news but we also send out a newsletter called *Tales from the Wild*, which is more of a curated piece. We highlight any interesting events or family activities that we think our audience will like.

What tips would you have for anyone else trying to build an online community from scratch?

It's important to take the time to really understand your audience and then imagine you're talking to that one person. Be very clear about your vision and single minded in communicating it.

Look at others who are doing similar things to you and learn from their successes; watch what they do and how their audience engages with the content they are sharing.

More information:

www.justsofestival.co.uk

www.facebook.com/justsofestival