

Case study



# Manchester Literature Festival's 2013 digital marketing campaign



Photo: Lemn Sissay at Manchester Literature Festival 2013 © Chris Bull

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*Manchester Literature Festival (MLF) is the city's largest literary event, taking place every October since 2006. More than 215 writers, performers and other artists took part in the 2013 festival, which consisted of 80 events held in venues across the city from October 7-20. This year's programme was particularly strong, including best-selling and perennially popular authors including Carlos Acosta, Malorie Blackman, Roddy Doyle, Helen Fielding, Neil Gaiman, Jo Nesbo, Patrick Ness, Audrey Niffenegger and Joanna Trollope.*

Our goals with digital marketing for the 2013 festival included:

- Engage our loyal audience more meaningfully
- Expand our audience in new areas with the help of more social media activity
- Spread digital marketing resources across the calendar – start promoting events earlier, with more effort to link to ticket sales
- Update our website to improve user experience and create an online home for the festival that better fits our current needs.

## **1. Digital marketing activity**

With a small, part-time marketing team, strategic cross-promotions with partners, relevant outside organisations and other stakeholders play an especially important role in our marketing activity. This year our online marketing benefitted from strong support from:

- MLF 2013 venues including Contact, The Royal Exchange, National Football Museum
- Programming partners including Comma Press, the Universities, Commonword and Creative Industries Trafford
- Media including *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Skinny* and *Creative Tourist*
- Sponsors and funders including Arts Council England, HSBC Premier, Metrolink
- Publishers and authors connected to the Festival
- Highly engaged individuals (staff and volunteers, repeat ticket buyers and members of the local literature community)

Additionally we arranged individual promotion and cross promotion for specific events – for example, contacting Manchester Climate Change Monthly and the British Mountaineering Club to promote our Shackleton's Man Goes South event to their audiences, or developing a reciprocal marketing agreement for our Lemn Sissay/Martin Luther King event with Apples and Snakes and The Southbank Centre (who were also running similarly themed events) that covered inclusion in e-newsletters, Facebook and Twitter.

We had 3,943 individual subscribers on our E-newsletter list last year. In 2013 this increased 12 per cent to 4,916. We sent out 14 E-newsletters this year, with themed editions (e.g. Poetry, World Literature) going out weekly in the immediate run up to and during the festival.

## 2. Website

This year saw the launch of a new festival website developed for us by PagePlay. Response to the new website has been excellent, and overall we feel it is attractive, simple to navigate and easy to update ourselves. According to our statistics, 65,273 people visited the website ([Manchester Literature Festival](#)) last year. In 2013 we had 78,787 visitors, a 17 per cent increase year on year. We note that this figure is artificially low as our new website wasn't transferred over to our old URL until a week after we went live with the 2013 Festival programme, so we lost a week's worth of data tracking in what is always our highest traffic time.

Analytics suggest our web audience is becoming more engaged. Our stats tell us that people are spending more time on each visit than last year, and are viewing more pages on the website during that visit (for the first time our bounce rate has dropped below 50 per cent, widely seen as a benchmark).

Beyond the main page, the event listings and brochure download pages, the pages that received the highest traffic were individual event pages for (in descending order) Neil Gaiman, Audrey Niffenegger & Jeanette Winterson, Sylvia Plath, Jo Nesbo, Great Gatsby, Family Reading Day, Helen Fielding and Manchester Crime Scene. This is consistent with ticket sales as many of the most popular events online sold out quickly.

## 3. Twitter

Twitter is one of the areas where we've been able to achieve a lot this year. We currently have 5,715 Twitter followers (@McrlitFest), up from 3,051 at the end of last year's festival – a dramatic increase of 87 per cent year on year. Like all other organisations, we are benefitting from Twitter's rapid growth, but a much greater investment of staff time in Twitter this year seems to have paid off.

Engagement has improved with wider use of the #MLF13 hashtag and many more people tweeting about the festival. (See [our Storify page](#) to get a sense of Twitter activity.) This year Twitter has really come into play as a sounding board; a digital backchannel where our

audience is sharing excitement about, and responses to, our events. It has also increasingly served as a point of contact for audience queries about ticketing, venues and events. We were able to spread the word about ticket availability, letting people know when events were close to selling out. We were also able to use it more proactively this year to promote events with slow ticket sales on a day-to-day basis.

Live tweeting has been a particularly successful element of our social media approach this year, with good response to our live Twitter coverage from MLF events judging by activity like favouriting and retweeting. One of our followers tweeted: “your live tweeting has been excellent for those not able to make it to events. Means still feel part of it. #bravo.”

#### **4. Facebook**

Our Facebook audience has also increased this year, though somewhat more slowly than Twitter. We went from having 1614 people like MLF’s Facebook page in 2012 to 2077 people at the end of the 2013 festival – an increase of nearly 30 per cent. Engagement has improved notably on our page as well, with many more people “liking” and reposting our updates, especially during the festival.

Our approach to writing updates has changed, with more attention paid to writing content to promote a link that is being posted and putting the material into context for our audience. This year we also started “liking” other organisations for the first time, which is a useful tool for cross promotion as we can now easily see and share updates from like-minded organisations that will be of interest to our audience, and vice-versa.

#### **5. Blogging**

The 2013 festival marked a new approach to blogging at MLF, and a new identity for the blog, now called [Chapter & Verse](#), that will enable it to eventually become more of a year-round destination for good content about literature activity in the region. We had a good response to our Tweets and Facebook posts sharing blog content, with many readers sharing them to their own networks.

In the past, our blog has focused mainly on commissioned and edited audience reviews of our events, written by a team of volunteer bloggers. This year we reduced the number of events covered by our volunteer blogger team in order to be able to free up more time for creating blog content before the festival such as our “Meet the Team” series of posts about MLF staff and partners. Focusing less on review-style content helped us provide better

coverage in the run up to the festival across other social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. It also allowed us to devote more time to the blog in the pre-festival period rather than the festival/post-festival period which has seen the biggest share of activity in past years.

## **6. Outcomes**

In nearly every respect, the 2013 Manchester Literature Festival has surpassed previous years' Festivals, with more events than ever before and a total audience figure up nearly 20 per cent from 2012. A greater proportion of our events were sell-outs than ever before: 38 (48%) of this year's events sold out and the overall attendance was 79% of capacity. Satisfaction with the festival was also high; according to our Audience Survey results 98% of the audience rated their overall experience of the festival as very good (79%) or good (19%).

We were also successful in expanding our audience. According to Audience Survey statistics 59% of this year's audience had not previously attended a Manchester Literature Festival event and 23% had not attended any other live literature events in the past 12 months. All signs suggest that digital marketing, particularly social media activity, was an important factor in both of these areas – helping us attract a larger, more diverse audience that is becoming more deeply engaged.

## **7. 2014 and beyond**

Next year, tracking and performance should improve when Chapter & Verse blog moves to a Wordpress site fully integrated within the MLF website. We believe this will be better suited to our needs than the current blog hosted within our Content Management System, which has a limited functionality that does not enable users to comment on and easily share blog posts, and doesn't allow us to schedule posts. Once it's on Wordpress will also be better able to assess how people are engaging with the blog, which will help us make decisions about how to allocate staff time.

In the future, it would be wonderful if we were able to make this blog more of a year-round destination for people interested in literature events, books and the literary scene in Manchester and the surrounding area, perhaps by involving a team of guest bloggers who could contribute on a permanent basis, resources allowing.

We'd like to do more with our audience – actively engaging them by publishing interviews with festivalgoers and key stakeholders on the blog in a mooted series called “My Festival.” We'd also like to start producing audio interviews or short multimedia segments to promote the festival for publication on our website and promotion via social media, something that we had hoped to start this year but didn't have the capacity to implement.

In conclusion, Cathy Bolton, Director of Manchester Literature Festival, says: “our increasing investment in digital marketing is really starting to reap benefits, enabling us to reach new audiences and engage more effectively with our loyal supporters. Using social media to deepen our conversations with literature lovers informs all aspects of the festival, from programming and production values to marketing and box office, helping us to make the best use of our limited resources.”

For a full summary of social media moments, key press coverage, blog posts and audience commentary please see our [Storify page for the 2013 festival](#).