

Simon Bedford, Producer, Hoipolloi

Online marketing without spending a fortune.

Simon Bedford is Producer for Hoipolloi (www.hoipolloi.org.uk), an award-winning theatre company based in Cambridge. His role at Hoipolloi includes producing and tour-booking shows as well as handling all of the company's marketing needs. In addition to working on projects in the UK including managing three runs at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Simon has also produced, marketed and managed Hoipolloi performances in Colombia, Finland, Russia, Australia and the USA. Previously he worked at West Yorkshire Playhouse and Symphony Hall, Birmingham. He is a trustee of Imaginary Forces and has provided guidance and support to companies such as Fat Content, Shams and Garlic Theatre.

Hoipolloi has been dabbling in social media for a couple of years, led by a desire to open and enter into a dialogue with audiences beyond the work seen on stage. The company was part of Arts Council England's AmbITion scheme which has enabled Hoipolloi to invest in improving their IT infrastructure and digital capability.

Hoipolloi recently updated its website to combine the company's blog, Twitter stream, YouTube videos, photos and podcasts in one place. In this session Simon shared what they've learnt and how they've achieved this with limited budgets and staff time.

Online marketing without spending a fortune

Hoipolloi is a small company, with a small staff: two full time and five part time (plus contracted in production staff, actors etc). It works to relatively limited budgets and therefore has become adept at obtaining the best outputs from small inputs.



This doesn't have to cost much money. Time may be another matter, but that is something to discuss later.

Hoipolloi has been going since 1994, based in Cambridge, touring work nationally and internationally. The guiding principles are to be comic, imaginative, accessible, engaging and this affects the way that Hoipolloi does its marketing.

The productions of *Floating*, *Story of a Rabbit* and *360* featuring the 'Hugh Hughes' character have been especially successful in recent years. It may upset some people to know that Hugh Hughes is a fictional character, but there is a pretence that Hugh Hughes actually exists in real life and the online and social media work are designed to reflect this.

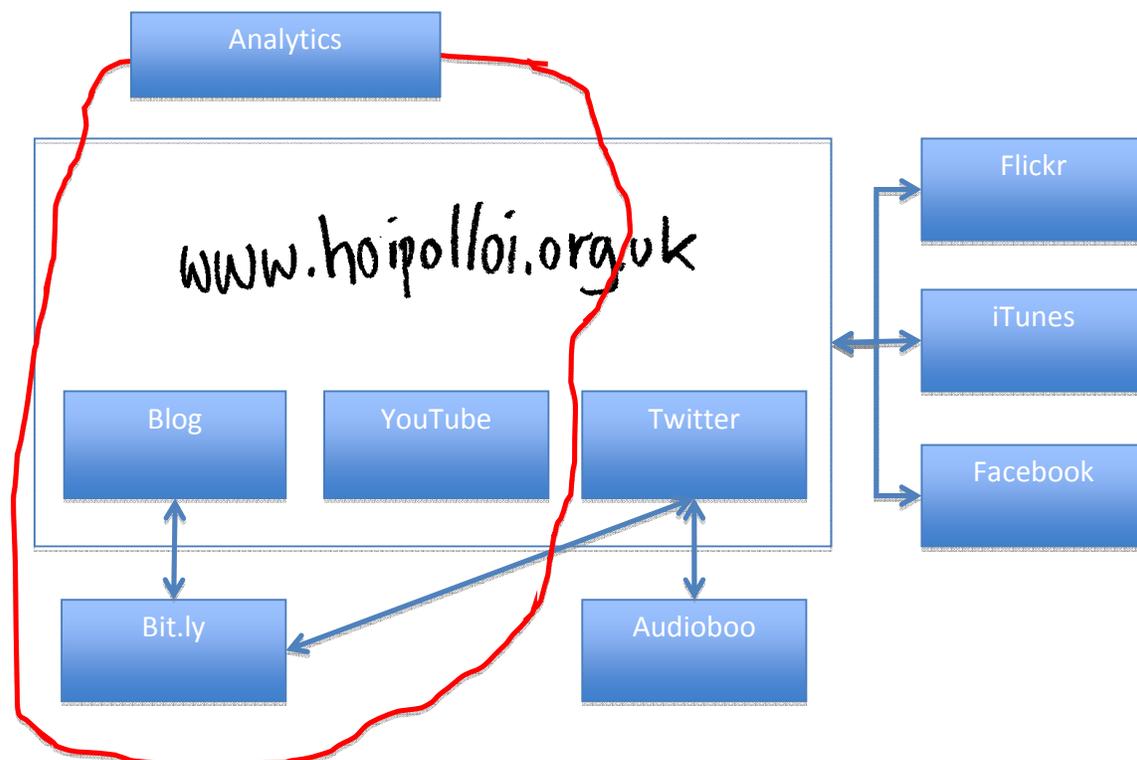
Over the last five years we've been dabbling in and trying out a variety of social media methods, continuing with those things that seemed to work. Much of this has been based

around extending the idea that Hugh Hughes is a real person. Following attendance at a conference of arts organisations and new media in the East of England in 2006, we felt enthused to become more ambitious about our online methods.

From this point, we decided to build a few things to try out our ideas. One of the first things to be launched was a **blog** using free software; the only resource required being the time to write it. Next came the **YouTube** channel, initially as a way of using the vast amount of video that had been created by the company, again hosted for free. Then **Facebook** arrived and became a crucial part of the company's networking. **Flickr** has had a role and maybe hasn't been used as extensively as it could be. There were **MySpace** pages, but these have gradually been sidelined. Sitting over the top of all of these was **Google Analytics**.

This all worked well to a certain degree, but the problem was that they were too disparate and not connected.

The next stage therefore was to try and bring all these things together. Hoipolloi was one of the first companies to be part of the AmbITion scheme and through this and a small Grants for the Arts award it was possible to upgrade the company's equipment, IT infrastructure, redesign the website and integrate the different elements.



Since February 2009, all these elements have been brought together on the website. Many parts were buried deep in the site, but this made it much easier for a visitor to explore, go to the online location they want to and to cross-reference the different elements. It's obvious what's there, with regularly updated content from social media sources being updated automatically through embedding.

Bringing this together on the website including a little bit of website and programming was produced for about £1000. The different social media elements are free, so the main cost is staff time.

YouTube

Hoiolloi uses YouTube a fair amount, with trailers, interviews, simple 'on location' films etc.

[a compilation of different material produced for YouTube was shown, available on the Hoiolloi blog at <http://hoipolloitheatre.blogspot.com/2009/11/ama-digital-day.html>]

The Hugh Hughes work is original and not always the easiest to sell and therefore this material helps to create context which the audience can understand. Any venue that Hoiolloi is touring to can use this material, embedding it into their own sites direct from YouTube. When West Yorkshire Playhouse put it on their site, our views rocketed. The great thing about YouTube is that it also gives excellent background analytical information about viewers/views.

Facebook

This is one of the things that has worked best for Hoiolloi. An audience member formed a 'Hugh Hughes Appreciation Society' (<http://bit.ly/hughfacebook>), completely independently of the company and without the company's intervention. Hoiolloi, with the creator's permission, adopted the site and it exists now as a fan site with the occasional input from the company. It's important not to interfere too much because it is an audience site and it's their space and that is a large part of its success.

When one of the shows was toured to the USA, a newspaper posted an unfavourable review, but immediately lots of followers came on and told them why they it was wrong. It's important to let it go and have its own life. There are 453 friends there who are enthusiastic fans of the company. They can be called upon when needed.

Twitter – what's the point?

This is a relatively new part of Hoiolloi's work (www.twitter.com/HelloHoiolloi) but has a very different angle. It can be updated very easily online or on a phone which costs very little.

On a basic level, it's an easy way of updating news on the site. It also helps with the creation of new content, so Shon Dale-Jones [artistic director] can write things for Twitter through the Hugh Hughes character (using different tags so that there is a separation of 'voices'). He can also turn his random thoughts into a little podcast on his iPhone using audioboo and posting that on Twitter.

It's also really important to be active and curious. There are 900 followers on the Twitter stream, but many of these are theatres, arts organisations etc so there is plenty of opportunity for conversations. The Twitter search is very powerful, enabling you to find out what people are saying about you, your associates, competitors etc. It's a rather interesting way of monitoring the word of mouth that you might not otherwise know about.

There are many free applications which enable you to enrich the way you use Twitter. Tweetdeck (www.tweetdeck.com) for example helps you arrange your Twitter feed in

different ways and have established searches set up. Bit.ly (<http://bit.ly/>) is also a fantastic way of shortening the url down to a reasonable length for a 140 character Tweet.

Keeping track

Google Analytics is amazingly useful. As an example, we discovered a massive 'spike' on the blog one day when we were at the Liverpool Everyman. Further analysis showed that the contributors were mainly from Liverpool and a quick call to the theatre office at Liverpool Everyman established that they had put out a competition for press night tickets in which the answer could only be found on the blog. Following on from this, the tickets sold on that day were four times higher than the previous days – so it had a direct effect on ticket sales.

Or recently Daniel Kitson, who is a big fan of the Hugh Hughes work, very kindly sent out a message to 10,000 of his followers about the company and again the effect on visits to the website and then on ticket sales was considerable.

The future

We aim to build this up much further, probably investing more time and financial resources to it, until we can say we are truly a company producing work online as well as the stage.

Not everything we have done has been very strategic, but we played around and kept using the things that worked. Connection between the different elements is important. Key to our success has been the total buy-in of everyone in the company especially with few resources.

Questions/discussion

How much time does it take to manage?

SB. I spend at least a day a week on this, but we're helped a great deal by our intern, who is responsible for working on the blog and the artistic director who contributes content. We try to make a personality come through – to make it interesting.

Your appreciation society was set up by a fan. Do you think this contributed to its success?

SB. Yes, I think the point is that it is their space. We have our own Hoipolloi group on Facebook and that is not as successful.

I was interested in your comment about having a Digital Producer.

SB. We have ambitions to be a company producing work online as well as for the stage and a Digital Producer will therefore be important to this.

I noticed that you have an RSS feed. Is that useful?

Yes, we don't use it very well, but you can get the latest blog updates if you subscribe.

Do you sometimes find you need to limit your time using social media?

It can be problematic for sure and if you have the technology you can do it at any time of the day or night, so of course, there is the temptation never to stop.