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Social, Local, Mobile

Putting the audience at the heart of the message

Over the last few years, the term SoLoMo, short for 'Social Local Mobile', is being used more and more. As buzzwords go it's particularly obtuse but at its heart is an important concept that will become increasingly important to arts organisations. Having an effective social local mobile strategy simply means understanding the changing customer behaviours that have been brought about by smartphones and tailoring your approach accordingly.

Like desktop computers before them, smartphones have, in a relatively short period of time, gone from being a luxury item for the few, to something that is part of the fabric of our modern world. In the UK the number of people that have smartphones has, for the last three years, grown around 10% year-on-year and currently stands at around 60% of the population¹. Aside from calling people on them, what do we use these phones for? The explosion in social media has conveniently coincided with the time of the hand held device and indeed it's the smartphone that has been responsible for a large part of its growth. We are now able to keep in touch with our social networks on the go, looking to our friends for entertainment, conversation, information and recommendations. Our smartphones also help us to navigate the physical world around us, whether to get directions or find local places to eat, drink or visit.

So while SoLoMo sounds like the latest here-today-gone-tomorrow fad, it's actually much more fundamental than that. As an organisation, it means recognising the part that smartphones play in customers' lives and ensuring your digital strategy takes that into account. There are essentially two parts to this, getting the foundations right on current platforms and considering if and when you might develop your own mobile app.

The first place to start is to ask yourself how does your current website perform on a mobile device? As more and more people access the internet via a phone or tablet, it's vital to ensure that the experience of visiting your site from a mobile is a positive one. As Google software engineer Yoshikiyo Kato explains: "Smartphone users are a significant and fast growing segment of Internet users, and at Google we want them to experience the full richness of the web." Indeed, Google are so clear of the importance of having a website that works effectively on mobile devices that they have a dedicated site, howtogomo.com, to help organisations work out the best approach. An increasing number of websites are being built to be responsive, which means that it is designed to create a great user experience, whatever device the visitor is using. If there is no budget or resource to create a responsive website, the second option is to produce a mobile version of either all, or part, of your existing site. Whichever option you choose

¹ Source: newmediatrendwatch.com

Google says the three essentials for a mobile friendly site are that it is fast loading, includes mobile friendly features (no tiny buttons, limited scrolling functionality) and that there is quick access to key information, contact details, opening hours and so on. If users have a frustrating time accessing your website on a mobile device, it is highly likely they will simply give up and go elsewhere.

The second foundation of SoLoMo to consider is Social. In this context it refers to the fact that so many individuals use their social connections to help them make decisions about where to go and what to do and many of us of course, share where we are and what we're doing with the online world. While you can't control what is being said about your venue, event or exhibition, being active as on social media as your organisation is hugely important since in doing so you're making it easy for customers to talk to you online and it gives you a platform from which to engage with those customers. And of course social media, when done well, is hugely powerful when it comes to building loyalty and word-of-mouth. Carry out an audit of your current social media activity and ask yourselves some questions to ascertain its effectiveness: Are you identifying your most loyal advocates and engaging with them? Is your own activity adding value to the online community or simply broadcasting marketing messages? Are you regularly monitoring what visitors are saying (in social channels) about you?

The Local part of SoLoMo refers to the way in which people will use their phones to orientate themselves in a physical location. If new to an area they may be looking for the best places to eat or the most interesting places to visit. While some people will ask their social networks for this information, others will turn to search engines. Google is constantly trying to improve the relevance of its results and when searching on a mobile, one signal it will look at is the searcher's physical location. For this reason it's vital that your website is optimised for local search and if you have a physical venue, ensure that you correctly implement NAP (name, address, postcode) in all online local directories and that the NAP information is in exactly the same format each time. In addition, Google+ Local is likely to become increasingly important for any organisation that has a venue, it is being integrated much more clearly into search results and includes the social element of reviews and recommendations from visitors.

One final point on the foundations of SoLoMo is to consider your presence on specific SoLoMo apps, such as Foursquare or Yelp. While still relatively low in terms of mainstream adoption, these types of platforms are picking up users fast and they can be hugely powerful when used by people looking to make a decision on where to go or what to see. For those with a physical location, on Foursquare you should claim your venue and ensure all factual information is up to date. You may also want to include a special offer to be redeemed by a visitor when they 'check-in' at your venue.

In addition to getting the foundations of a SoLoMo strategy in place, you may, further down the line, want to consider other ways to harness the digital device in your customers' pockets. Developing a standalone mobile app is becoming increasingly popular and can be a great way to engage with visitors. However, the digital landscape is littered with the corpses of failed apps that probably

seemed a good idea at the time but in reality failed to gain the interest of the target users. A few tips to think about if you're in the early stages of developing an app; first and foremost, what is your objective? Do you want to provide useful information in a specific format? Reach a different demographic audience to your usual one? Or perhaps you want to introduce your existing audience to more of your shows or exhibits? Whatever the purpose, it's important not to get carried away in the excitement of the technology and in doing so, forget about the objective. Ideally you should keep it simple, focus on one concept. It's also great to get individuals from outside of the marketing department involved in the initial brainstorming, sometimes they have the best ideas. And while you're in the process of having it built, ensure you have a clear strategy for marketing and promoting the app, it's not a case of 'if we build it they will come'.

Developing an effective social local mobile strategy is something that takes thought and consideration but if you get it right it will pay dividends. Whatever you do, think local, be social, go mobile.

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