

Case study

# Village and community reps: social media - but in the real world



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## Background

Over the past two years we have recruited a team of volunteer village and community reps to help us to spread the word about the Drill Hall in their village or community. They are our real-life version of social media.

Our reps put up monthly event highlight posters, talk about the Drill Hall wherever they can and bring comments and ideas back from their communities. Every six to eight weeks they come for lunch and we discuss forthcoming events, ideas and issues.

## Goals

We set up the scheme because we have an ambitious mission statement that, instead of listing what we do, tells everyone why we are doing it. The reps are part of our determination to be connected with our communities – an arts centre run by real people for real people. We say:

*'We believe that the arts change people's lives for the better. We are committed to using our venue and programme to help people feel connected, challenged, inspired, valued and happier... We want real relationships with our audiences and partners, built on listening, responding and sharing ideas. We want people to feel that the Drill Hall is as much their venue as ours.'*

So this scheme is about extending our family, a way of communicating our promises in a way that turns them from an abstract concept into something people can understand, communicate and take some ownership of.

## Target audience

Fourteen communities have reps, with three represented by couples. We don't choose which communities should be represented – in effect, they do simply by coming forward. Three of the communities are big housing estates to the north of the City of Lincoln, one is in its historic heart and the rest are outlying towns and villages.

## Recruiting reps

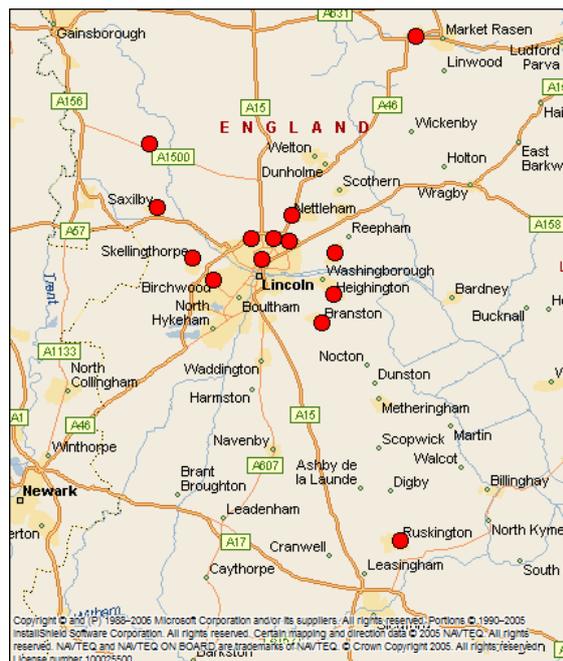
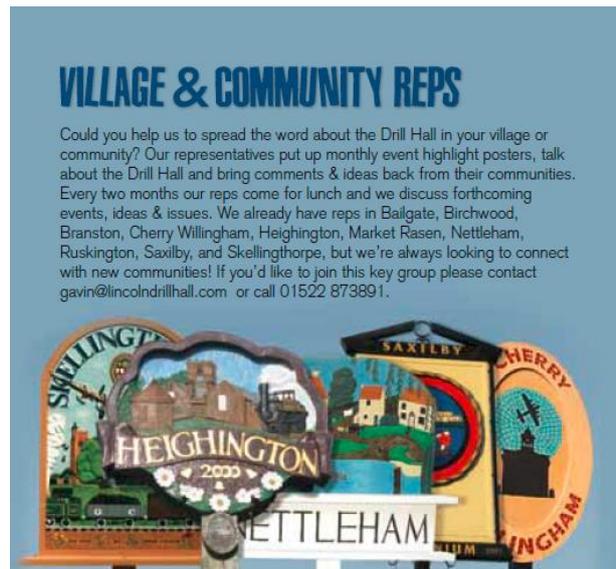
A couple of were introduced to us by existing reps. Of the remainder, half responded to posts on Facebook and the rest to a piece in our season brochure.

As you can see, we simply ask them if they want to help. We don't pay them, we just give them lunch. So why do they do it? They love having a voice, giving us feedback from their communities and loads of ideas which we take seriously. We reward them by being honest and divulge information we would never give members of the public so we can have a full and frank discussion about ways to improve.

Their ages range from the mid-40s to the early 70s. We would like some younger reps but already have Young Cut, our group of cultural entrepreneurs aged 13 to 19, and places for two youth members on our board of trustees so our younger audience members tend to gravitate towards these opportunities.

## How it works

Reps can commit as much or as little time as they like. They do what they can, publicity-wise. All of them have located sites for our monthly highlights posters where lots of people will see them. We give them laminated posters for outdoor sites. One couple keeps all the City's hotels stocked with leaflets and others put them in focal points for their communities like doctors' waiting rooms. They are all well-networked and, if they are members of other groups have a regular "Drill Hall News" item on meeting agendas.



Every six to eight weeks, we sit down to lunch for 90 minutes and discuss – well, everything. They talk about the feedback others have given them and their own experiences at Lincoln Drill Hall and other cultural experiences in the City. It gives us a good picture of what is going on elsewhere.

The reps give us specific ideas for events or more general requests for more of particular programme strand. But they appear to take the quality of events for granted, mainly giving us feedback about all the other aspects of the Drill Hall experience: front of house, box office, the café.

There are exceptions. We recently presented a production of Macbeth staged completely in the dark with the action happening in and around the audience. We had an energetic and enthusiastic debate about experimental theatre and the role of our studio space which focuses on challenging theatre. Although some did not enjoy the production, they certainly enjoyed talking about it, commenting “It must have worked – we’re still discussing it.”

Some big issues arise time and again and as a team we can move towards solutions. Public transport in rural Lincolnshire is poor with last buses leaving well before shows end. We are now working to connect those struggling with transport in and out of the city with a new voluntary sector service where members of the public use their own cars to provide a taxi service.

## **Costs**

The major cost is the regular lunch meeting, although everyone orders the food and drink from our own café and takes it into the meeting room. The monthly highlights posters cost very little as we cannibalise artwork from other communications and print and laminate them in-house.

## **Outcomes**

Season-on-season our audience is steadily growing and broadening. On average, our occasional attenders are coming to one more event a year than they used to. There has also been a big increase in our income from the café with people now using the Drill Hall as a place to meet friends or just chill out. The reps have helped make this happen but it’s difficult to pinpoint exactly how much as we have so many different ways of ensuring we deliver on our promise to “offer special moments by the bucketful!” But we do know for sure that working at the Drill Hall would be less rewarding and much less fun without them.

## Key points for effective practice

- Support the group, giving them the information they need and an effective communication tool (for us, it's the monthly highlights poster) – and, yes, this takes time
- Reward them by empowering them
- Take their ideas and feedback seriously
- Don't have unrealistic expectations: keep it low key and don't be pushy. The impetus for the growth of our family of reps comes from the group itself
- Keep it manageable