

The role of social media in press and PR

Amber Massie-Blomfield takes a look at the crucial role social media has to play in building dialogues with the communities we affect – essentially, in managing public relations.

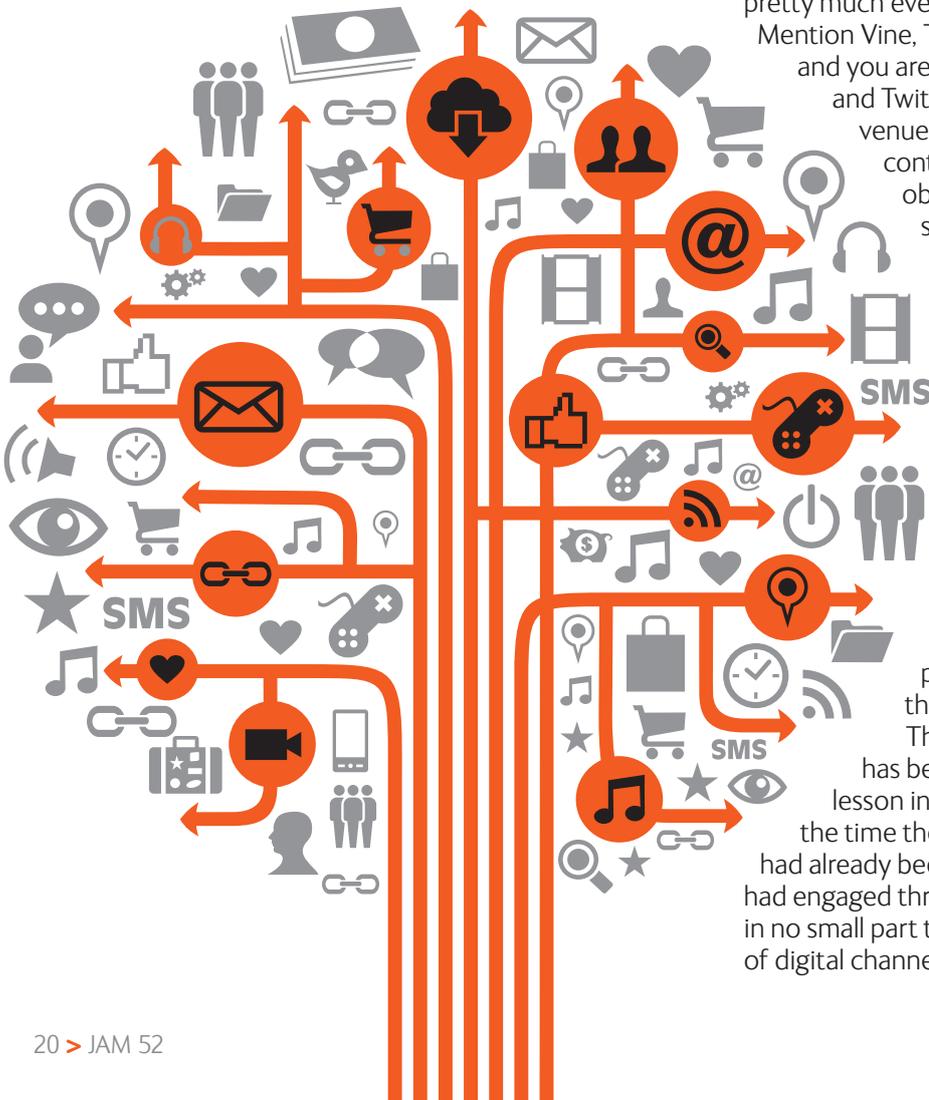
Two things are true if you work in arts communications. One: you are surrounded by creative people. Two: you are, in all likelihood, strapped for cash, and looking for ways to build relationships and extend your audiences and influence as cheaply as humanly possible.

These operating conditions should lend themselves extremely well to brilliant, original use of social media. Social is, after all, quite often free or extremely cheap to use, and the things that gain traction are not those with the most money thrown behind them – they are the things that inspire people, intrigue them, or make them chuckle (cf: the lolcatz phenomenon).

And yet, somehow, the arts world seems to lag behind pretty much every other industry when it comes to social. Mention Vine, Thinglink, Storify or Pinterest in a meeting and you are often greeted with blank faces. Facebook and Twitter are more often than not viewed by venue directors as a box-ticking exercise, and content quite frequently seems limited to the obligatory notifications of tickets going on sale, and self-celebration on successful shows – is there anything more irritating than having your Twitter feed clogged up by incessant re-tweets of poorly spelt missives from satisfied customers? Guilty venues: you know who you are.

I exaggerate for the sake of effect, of course. In certain quarters, there are signs that our industry is seeing the light. The popularity of conferences in the arts sector such as the AMA's annual digital day (*Digital first?*, Sadler's Wells 7/11/2013) and *Shift Happens* which are dedicated to exploring the meeting point of digital and the arts, demonstrates that there is a hunger to do more, better.

The huge success of *The Book of Mormon* has been hailed by the *Guardian* as 'a gospel lesson in social media marketing', because by the time the print reviews came out, its success had already been assured by the huge community that had engaged through Facebook and Twitter – thanks in no small part to its celebrity champions. And the use of digital channels to share Vicky Featherstone's first



I have the feeling that as the media, and our ways of consuming it, becomes more fragmented, blurred and personalised, the traditional roles of ‘marketing’, ‘PR’ and even ‘artist’ will become less and less relevant

season at the Royal Court: *Open Court*, hinted at the huge opportunities for social to widen access to the arts, by creating a dedicated online platform where audiences could simultaneously watch performances and engage in conversation about them. Although the format was somewhat rough and ready, the enterprise must be applauded for proffering a genuine proposal of how the live might meaningfully interact with the social space.

But by and large, we are struggling to keep pace. When was the last time you saw a write up of an awesome theatre social campaign on *The Drum*? Or genuinely felt your experience of a show was enhanced by your online engagement with it?

There are a number of reasons why we are lagging behind, but in part I think it comes down to a basic misapprehension of the role of social media in the arts business model. In short, there’s a tendency to treat social as a marketing tool, working to drive ticket sales. My contention is that by reframing it as a function of PR, we would change the way we use it – to much greater effect.

The true definition of public relations is oft debated. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations defines it as ‘the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics’.

James Grunig, the godfather of public relations theory, talks about the ideal model of PR practice being a two-way symmetrical model, with as much information flowing into the organisation as out of it, and the PR person taking the role of cultivating and facilitating the conversation.

Viewed in this light, it becomes obvious why social sits more squarely in the PR stall. As the name suggests, social is about the exchange of ideas and the cultivation of relationships, and the platforms provided by the internet offer a space for this to happen more quickly, cheaply and easily than ever before.

Subsidised arts organisations are not like commercial organisations. While selling tickets is of course crucial to what we do – and recent Conservative rhetoric about the role of the arts certainly suggests they are viewed more as ‘businesses’ than ever before – arts communications must also be driven by a consideration of the broader social, political and educational impact of the activities we represent. Social media has a crucial role to play in building dialogues with the communities we affect – essentially, in

managing public relations.

However, while this etymological exercise may go some way to redressing the emphasis in how social is used in the short term, the media landscape is in the midst of a period of huge change. Recent Ticketmaster research suggests that one in five audience members now write their own reviews of the shows they’ve seen, and the dismissal of *The Independent on Sunday*’s entire team of arts critics is further evidence that the way in which we learn about the arts in the future isn’t going to look as it did in the past. Traditional media relations has tended towards a top down approach – if you get headlines, they will come – whereas we are now seeing a trend towards public dialogue being formulated from the ground upwards, with journalists anxiously checking their Twitter streams for the latest breaking news.

Ultimately, great communications is great communications. That extends from the interviews your artists give, to the design of your poster, to the pictures on your Instagram, to the work on your stage. I have the feeling that as the media, and our ways of consuming it, becomes more fragmented, blurred and personalised, the traditional roles of ‘marketing’, ‘PR’ and even ‘artist’ will become less and less relevant.

Use of media will be defined by the most appropriate platform for the message and content that is to be shared, regardless of where that originates within the organisation. We must also be prepared for our audiences to take a much greater stake in the conversations about what we do, and adopt a position that allows a fluid, transparent response, as the circumstance demands.

Social media is, after all, a means of having a conversation, and the best conversations happen when everyone has a voice. ■



Amber Massie-Blomfield

Head of Communications
The Albany

e amber@thealbany.org.uk

tw @ambermb