

Shared Digital Opportunities

A Report to the Newcastle Gateshead Cultural Venues Group
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1. Background

This short project is part of a larger collaboration and series of conversations around shared opportunities within the Newcastle Gateshead Cultural Venues Group (NGCV) that is being facilitated by Clare Cooper of Mission Models Money (MMM). NGCV comprises Baltic, The Sage Gateshead, Tyneside Cinema, Waygood¹, Live Theatre, Centre for Life, Theatre Royal Newcastle, Dance City, Northern Stage, Seven Stories and Tyne and Wear Archives & Museums.

Through a series of workshops with senior staff from the 11 group members this strand of the project is seeking to identify a series of actions that can be taken by the group to increase the value of their combined digital presence online.

2. Format of the workshops

The primary goal of the workshop sessions was to help the participants discuss very different views of what digital meant to their organisation and to locate specific projects that could both help collaboration between members of the group and generate increased value for digital within the organisations.

The workshops focused on exploring:

- Concerns and issues from the participants around digital
- What digital means to the participants
- Opportunities for developing digital within organisations
- Opportunities for collaboration between organisations

3. Issues raised by the participants

The previous audit of organisations had already identified many of the concerns within the Group but it was important to explore some of them again to set the discussion of opportunities in context.

Here are some of the major worries and questions that were discussed, together with some additional comments that were drawn out in some workshops but not others.

¹ Waygood stopped being a member of NGCV in June 2010 as it was no longer responsible for the building

We are paralysed by digital choices

By far the strongest message is that the organisations recognise the multitude of opportunities out there but have difficulty choosing between them, specifying them and freeing up resources to make them possible.

These concerns are shared by almost every organisation in every sector and tackling this requires moving from a traditional project mindset to an experimental mindset in which it is possible to try out a wide range of ideas without making a major or irrevocable decision. It is this agility that characterises those organisations that are “living digital”; they are more prepared to take risks and more prepared to fail faster.

Many organisations within other sectors are allocating an R&D budget (money and staff time) for experimentation from which these small projects can be funded. Often they will require only a few hundred pounds or days of staff time and this prototyping will enable a business case to be built for the larger deployment of an idea that might then follow.

Bigger ideas can often be broken down into a series of smaller experiments and each of these given a small amount of initial investment and attention.

This “beta mindset” works best when shared with audiences and staff directly and openly; engaging them in providing feedback and suggestions for improvement. This can however conflict with the polished finish of the rest of the organisation’s output and therefore may be best corralled into a separate space signposted as “the lab” or “our experiments”.

This has proved highly successful for many digital companies such as Google, Microsoft, Apple and Amazon who all provide experimental beta parts of their offering. Projects graduate from the lab to the main venue when they have proved themselves and failures are quickly shut down.

Digital is hard to buy

There are few other areas in which both buyer and seller cannot articulate what is wanted or needed for a project. We all expect digital agencies to have done similar projects before but the pace of change is so rapid that this is often quite unlikely.

Digital agencies want to please and willingly take on work only to discover a technical, data or budget reason why client requirements are harder than they thought. This is endemic throughout the industry and attempts to standardise what is offered tend not to match what clients want.

It is also true that as clients use digital themselves their expectations of what is possible or wanted increase and requests for proposals become laundry lists of functionality and features quite beyond what the budget will bear.

This can only be solved by much better communication between buyers and suppliers; transparency about what is possible and what is not. Organisations should articulate their goals and look to agencies to demonstrate how they have solved those goals for others. NGCV organisations would be encouraged to collaborate on this process, perhaps holding shared agency days in which competing agencies can discuss the needs of the whole group.

Building a digital business case is difficult

Digital projects are rarely a success overnight. Many organisations, however, fail to work out what success would be anyway; often seeing a website or a mobile phone application simply as a box to be ticked.

Defining success should be shared by all the partners in the project including the digital agency. This can be in terms of audience reached, tickets sold, videos watched, email addresses collected or brochures not printed. Every one of these needs to be given a monetary (or other) value and this used as the return on the investment being made. Look for sharing benchmarks within NGCV and beyond.

Valuing the results of every digital project will make the building of business cases for future projects much more straightforward.

What if this is a big success, how will we cope?

Although it is true that a few projects have received so much attention that software and hardware has failed this is the exception rather than the rule. Any good agency should have a contingency plan for scaling up a solution but clients need to be aware that additional resources are likely to be needed, sometimes at short notice.

This is another reason why digital companies tend to experiment in Beta first. The initial promise they make allows them to fail; indeed they are public about using the test to prove popularity and scalability.

The most likely problem is high simultaneous demand and here it is worth discussing with the agency how to use scalable third party services such as Amazon content hosting, YouTube (or Brightcove) video streaming or Tickets.com ticketing services. These services have already been engineered to cope with massive traffic and can usually be integrated seamlessly into your own website or mobile application.

Be careful if agencies encourage you that they can host/serve everything themselves; this is usually a sign that none of their clients has yet experienced high demand.

New digital personalities

The personalities of organisations are changing as they respond to digital. Most organisations are becoming more open, transparent and easier to engage in dialogue but this move is hard to achieve without staff training and support.

The barrier between private and public personalities is being challenged as can be observed by the common practice of checking potential employee's Facebook profiles before hiring.

These challenges can only be addressed by restating the core (brand) values of the organisations and helping all staff understand how these are to be expressed online. Mistakes are inevitable and staff procedures will need to be relatively forgiving.

Making money is harder than it looks

The dotcom boom and occasional millionaires led many to imagine that digital was a license to print money. The reality is rather more down to earth as most organisations have already discovered. There are however significant amounts of value that can be extracted from digital projects. Our own clients have often gone, through experimentation, from small budgets to generating significant online income; whether that is ticketing, ecommerce revenue, donations or sponsorship. The key is to be clear what constitutes value for every project and to measure the outcomes.

4. Surveying the digital landscape

Digital is...

<p>highly competitive</p> <p>downloads versus streaming archives</p> <p>new forms of expression</p> <p>visitors researching mobile</p> <p>forcing us to redesign our business</p> <p>allowing us to improve</p> <p>conversation</p> <p>iPhone/iPad apps analytics</p> <p>generated virtual unreal location just a means to an end</p>	<p>measurement social marketing changing brands, organisations and identity</p> <p>allowing new audiences to participate</p> <p>changing relationships with customers moderation</p> <p>streaming versus downloads</p> <p>experimenting asking the audience enhanced the crowd</p> <p>personal</p> <p>piracy</p>	<p>ROI hard to buy/sell technical issues such as PCI selling (tickets)</p> <p>a distraction</p> <p>tracking and</p> <p>different not different expensive a threat</p> <p>mashups a new venue</p> <p>user</p>
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Our discussion of what constitutes digital demonstrated clearly the widely differing perspectives from which the landscape can be viewed:

- digital as the product of a cultural process (a DVD or installation),
- digital as a means to an end (using online to allow artists to collaborate),
- digital for marketing and communication (effective uses of the web or social networks),
- for operational improvement (reducing printing costs)
- for audience engagement (user generated content or discussion).

In defining opportunities for collaboration it is useful perhaps to separate these dimensions.

It is easy to take a technological perspective and we spent some time with each group discussing mobile, social platforms, ticketing, ecommerce, iPad, tracking, analytics, streaming and changes in behaviour such as crowdsourcing, piracy and paying for content.

As a tool to help the group take ideas further it is worth re-presenting some of the engagement mechanisms:

How many of these is your organisation engaged with?

Engagement	Features	Examples
Publication	Replacement for traditional brochures and news publications	BBC News
Content distribution	Provide media to be downloaded or streame	iPlayer, YouTube, National Theatre Live
Selling	Presenting physical or virtual products that can be bought	Amazon Book Store, TicketMaster
Enabling a market	Allowing buying and selling between members of the audience	eBay, Amazon Marketplace, 99 Designs
Discussion	Supporting conversation between audience members	Facebook, Twitter, Forums, Blog comments
Dating	Enabling like minded people to meet and make contact	Facebook, LinkedIn, Match.com
Service	Aggregating data (or service) from other organisations to fulfil a comparative information need	Google, Which? NationalRail
User generated content	Audience encouraged to generate and submit content or ideas	YouTube, Blogging, Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, 99 Designs
Mobile	Every one of these may be transformed by being delivered via a mobile device	BBC News, Ocado, Facebook, Twitter, Google
Location based	Deliver content or service based on where the user is right now.	Twitter, Google, 4Square
Assessment	Provide feedback or reviews on work submitted by users	Hot or Not, 99 Designs
Tracking	Measuring (and learning from) user activity	Google Analytics, Crazy Egg

It is key to realise that you don't have to build any systems yourself to allow your organisation to experiment with any of these engagement models.

5. Activities inside organisations

At each workshop we discussed what each organisation thought they would be doing digitally in the next 12-18 months. Here are some of the identified activities and some comments and suggestions on each.

Activities	Comments
Launch a new version of our website	<p>Websites are still being considered like brochures with a big bang approach to redesign. This should be the last major redesign with future versions evolving from this starting point.</p> <p>See your new site as a place for experimentation and evolve it, test it, ask for comments, improve it.</p> <p>Make sure that your web agency manages the transition from your old site protecting all of the inbound reputation links that you have already accumulated.</p>
Get more customer feedback	<p>Look at using “mashups” with third party services such as Kampyle to keep costs low and turn around time quick.</p> <p>Instead of running annual visitor surveys offer quick feedback opportunities all over the site.</p>
Add additional products to ticket sales online	<p>Well worth trying if your booking system will allow non-event products to be added</p> <p>Make sure that you are tracking every part of your ecommerce process to see where people drop out of the funnel. Make small design and text changes to see if you can improve the conversion rates.</p>
iPhone Apps	<p>Think about the service that you are trying to offer people on the move.</p> <p>Making your website mobile friendly may be cheaper and more effective in the short term.</p>
Capture the show and allow people to download or take it away.	<p>As National Theatre Live has demonstrated this should perhaps be seen as a large project rather than a small one.</p> <p>Work out what success looks like for this opportunity and make sure that the value and insights created match the effort being spent.</p> <p>What other audiences could be reached with the same material? What partnerships could be facilitated because of this experiment? Should a package of content be created by pooling resources with others locally or nationally?</p>

Activities	Comments
Measure and value what we do	<p>Digital is the most trackable medium yet devised and yet many companies fail to use the data they create to inform decisions or changes to their online presence.</p> <p>Make sure that Key Performance Indicators have been defined and that measurement is against these indicators.</p> <p>Simplify analytics reports so that they can be shared with all of the appropriate staff in the organisation.</p>
Search engine optimisation	<p>Many of the existing sites have been poorly optimised for the most significant source of traffic: search.</p> <p>Review your existing or new site and make sure that titles, urls, content layout, images and link structure have all be designed to maximise visibility of words and phrases your audiences actually use. Measure demand before deciding what these words are as they cannot simply be generated in a brainstorming meeting.</p> <p>Remember that onsite optimisation is only half of the task and that generating inbound links is the other. Write content that is worth linking to and encourage others to link through your social activities.</p>
Customer segmentation, targeting and CRM	<p>For many retailers this is key, with microsegments defined based on Acorn or Mosaic profiles or detailed spending pattern data.</p> <p>Many arts organisations however will not necessarily benefit from this level of segmentation.</p> <p>Broad segmentation on the other hand is generally worth considering: mining your past customers to inform them of forthcoming similar events that would be of interest.</p> <p>Many organisations struggle however because of the additional content and collateral that has to be produced and may be better communicating slightly more often with less precisely targeted messages.</p> <p>Make sure that visitors can choose the level and channels of communication through which they receive these messages.</p>

Activities	Comments
<p>Make sure that all social channels reflect the same branding and personality</p>	<p>This can be low cost and highly effective and is already being done by organisations such as Seven Stories (see their Facebook page) within the group.</p> <p>Linking up your website, Twitter feed, YouTube channel and Facebook presence in a clear and structured manner will allow visitors to choose which channel they use and see them all as a coherent whole.</p>
<p>Change the style of content from push to conversation</p>	<p>This is key and can evolve over time but content planning needs to be in place. Think about how each piece of content engages rather than simply informs the audience.</p> <p>Ask more questions. Create a bit more debate. This will have implications for moderation but this is rarely the mammoth task that is feared as bad submissions are few and far between. Consider making registration necessary for commenting.</p> <p>Consider using a shared ID such as Facebook, Twitter or Open-ID to make registration quick and easy.</p> <p>Do take the time to read and respond to comments and input from your audience.</p>
<p>Go behind the scenes/expose the voices of artists</p>	<p>When thinking about new more conversational content this is often highly effective as it deepens the audiences insights into both the work and the organisation.</p> <p>Visitors will come back when they see you as a source of unique content.</p>
<p>Build or improve an Intranet</p>	<p>Every organisation needs to improve internal communication as well as external and so an intranet is a great idea. Too often, however, this becomes a task on the scale of a new website with bespoke software and lengthy deadlines.</p> <p>Consider instead experimenting with one of the cheap and available 3rd party systems such as Ning, Huddle or Basecamp. These will each suit different organisations as they organise and present information such as calendars, messages and documents differently.</p>
<p>Increase video and other rich media content</p>	<p>Make sure that video is hosted cheaply using sites such as Vimeo or YouTube. Experiment with different types, lengths and quality of video and ask the audience what they want to see.</p> <p>Make sure tracking is set up so that the value of each video project can be measured.</p>

Activities	Comments
Offer online learning materials	Potentially hugely valuable but need to be piloted carefully. Online learning is harder than it looks (especially assessment) and one-to-one mentoring scales poorly as audiences grow.
Improve event visibility	Consider publishing your events in a standard calendar format using third party systems such as Google Calendars. This makes it very easy for a user to manage your events within their own personal calendars.
Experiment with ecommerce	<p>Look at third party marketplaces such as Amazon or even CafePress (mugs, t-shirts, mousepads) to allow a low cost initial experiment. Prove the value first and then build a business case for a more integrated shop.</p> <p>Even larger organisations with an existing ecommerce story can experiment with ideas such as prints on demand through 3rd party relationships such as mediastorehouse.</p>
Develop our social marketing channels	<p>This requires planning a calendar of activities, defining the rules of engagement and working with staff to share out the responsibilities.</p> <p>Define a follower acquisition strategy that purposefully goes out and finds followers/fans who are interested in your organisation.</p> <p>Creating a joined-up social media strategy will pay dividends as it will drive traffic to your site and a loyal audience.</p>
Replace activity in a non-digital area	<p>Releasing the budget for digital becomes easier if the costs can be found elsewhere. Consider reducing the print-run or ad spend on traditional media but take care not to move too fast.</p> <p>The value of your existing print calendar may be much more about what your brand means to your audience than simple a few sheets of paper.</p>

6. Opportunities for collaboration

The final part of each workshop looked for areas in which collaboration or knowledge sharing could take place and produced a very practical list of possible actions:

Suggestion	Comments
<p>Divide up some of the small projects between the partners and let them report back to the whole group.</p>	<p>Being overwhelmed by possibilities is one of the overriding messages from the group.</p> <p>Consider identifying a set of possible experiments and allocate them around the group so that each organisation is championing one or two of them.</p> <p>Define each experiment publicly and encourage input from others in the group. Set 2-3 month deadlines for each experiment and report back successes and failures.</p> <p>Experiments might include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Designing an iPad/iPhone app or site • Reputation building for SEO • Experiments with PPC or banner advertising • Segmenting emails to different groups • Follow/fan acquisition • Google calendars • User generated content • Artists or behind the scenes videos • Ecommerce • Improving and measuring visitor journeys through a site • Member get member activities • Offering on-line courses • Intranets • Search engine optimisation • Recommendation engines: other people who liked X also liked Y • Usability reviews • Landing page optimisation
<p>Make sure that lessons from both successful and unsuccessful experiments are shared</p>	<p>If experiments are properly documented with goals and measurement in place then the whole group can benefit. Of course some experiments will need to be repeated by more than one organisation and may fail or succeed differently in different contexts.</p>
<p>Share workshops on key topics such as SEO, PPC and analytics</p>	<p>These could be arranged regularly to bring staff up to date in the potential for these technologies.</p> <p>Link workshops to identified experiments for the maximum effect.</p>
<p>Develop shared social networking guidelines through shared staff workshops</p>	<p>Social networking provides an even more urgent opportunity for sharing good practice.</p>

	<p>Developing staff guidelines, follower acquisition strategies, content plans and tracking methods could all be done together.</p> <p>There should also be agreement to support each other within these networks by signposting interesting activities being done by others.</p>
Share the employment of a blogger, journalist or content writer	<p>There was a clear message that organisations needed specialist help but usually the cost of that help was prohibitive if on the shoulders of one organisation alone.</p> <p>By sharing staff the whole group (or a subset of organisations) could grow their activities incrementally.</p>
Agree on standards for publishing and exchanging data such as events	<p>Event calendars and newsfeeds offer the most obvious quick wins.</p> <p>By agreeing to use standard data formats it is easy to aggregate this information.</p> <p>A “what’s on in the North East” feed could be put together very easily by joining together the individual feeds.</p>
Help each other identify “white label” services that can be used to experiment with some additional ideas such as retail, t-shirts and print on demand	<p>Many digital services can now be created using third party “white label” partners for ticketing, retail, analytics, hosting, blogging, commenting, reviews, calendars, recommendations etc</p> <p>Work together to identify suitable partners and use these as the basis for some of your experiments.</p>
Help each other’s web visibility through partner pages on websites	<p>Search engine position is highly affected by inbound links from trusted sites.</p> <p>Agree to add a NGCV partners page to each organisation’s site that includes a keyword rich link to other NGCV sites. These should be different on each site (to make them natural) but could be coordinated.</p> <p>There are no down sides to this strategy and it is perfectly in keeping with search engine linking guidelines.</p> <p>Track visitors who come through these referrals and increases in search engine traffic over time.</p>
Agree to promote each other more often in email, social media and offline	<p>Every organisation should look for more reasons to promote each other through social and email activities. Many organisations already do this on a bilateral basis but it would be worth doing this more often.</p> <p>Make sure that landing pages and tracking have been set up for every campaign so that the effectiveness can be measured. This will allow the real value of this sharing to grow.</p>

Suggestion	Comments
Swap time and expertise between the organisations or allow staff to work together on a particular experiment	<p>This could have a significant multiplier effect on activities as shared experiments will have more visibility and more importance to at least two organisations.</p> <p>Allow staff to become expert in their own experiments and then share that expertise across partner organisations in return for reciprocal input.</p>
Help each other to further develop their digital strategies by discussing common key performance indicators	<p>Co-ordinate KPIs. This means developing and comparing the same metrics in order to provide insights into how activity X helped organisation Y achieve Z.</p> <p>KPIs could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • overall visits • loyalty • depth of engagement • conversion to action • sources of visitors
Create a series of integrated themed days involving multiple partners online	<p>Plan and run specific days or weekends to grow overall interest in the NGCV group online.</p> <p>This could follow the model developed by #followfriday or #followmuseums.</p> <p>Perhaps organise an online treasure hunt that encourages people to visit many of the organisations sites.</p>
Run some pre-procurement workshops to help create better requests for tender	<p>Address the distance between buyers and suppliers by running some shared workshops before going through the tendering processes for new technology and work.</p> <p>Use the expertise of organisations who have already invested in major digital projects and learn from their mistakes and successes.</p>
Centralise procurement where possible	<p>Explore shared fibre bandwidth and get competitive quotes direct from bandwidth suppliers like BT, Virgin and BE.</p>

7. Lightweight digital strategy

It is beyond the scope of this project to define a digital strategy for any or all of the group members, but it is possible to make some suggestions around digital priorities.

Step	Comments
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<p>Define value</p>	<p>Work out what really matters from all of your digital activities and assign it a value.</p> <p>Perhaps have 2-3 different aspects that generate value.</p> <p>Consider qualitative as well as quantitative measures of value: visitor satisfaction, artist engagement, new audience involvement. Be tempted to try and turn all of these into numbers.</p> <p>This is extremely hard and must be undertaken by a group of stakeholders. It is not a precise figure but without some sort of model it will be difficult to justify any digital expenditure.</p>
<p>Improve your overall digital presence</p>	<p>Improve your website by all means but look at the other channels such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube too.</p> <p>Look at your competitors and make sure that your site is at the same level.</p> <p>Make sure that your agency understands the realities of search engine optimisation.</p> <p>Engage your staff in the generation of social media guidelines.</p>
<p>Focus on unique content</p>	<p>Nothing is more important than content and service. Everything else is secondary (SEO, PPC, Twitter, mobile, all of it) as without good content you have no reason to have an audience or create value.</p> <p>Work out what you can do that others cannot. This is where digital is both a channel and a form of expression.</p> <p>Work out how you can engage your audience in generating appropriate elements of the content.</p> <p>Design visitor journeys and experiences through the content.</p> <p>Build on the strengths of each channel and on third party services that can provide some of the functionality</p> <p>Study your analytics to see what people are searching for that they find/like and that they do not find.</p>

Step	Comments
Build audiences	<p>Almost every item of content needs to provide audiences with an opportunity to take an action and in taking that action the visitors should become closer to the organisation: become a fan/follower, leave a comment, buy a ticket etc.</p> <p>User generated content is one of the best ways of visitors identifying that they belong and they are likely to tell others of their contribution.</p> <p>Design specific member get member activities, incentives and competitions.</p> <p>Support your staff in building this audience.</p> <p>Allow visitors to use their existing profiles and identities when commenting or contributing.</p>
Generate and measure value	<p>Regularly (every 3 months max) report back on the measures that were established at the start of the project.</p> <p>Review and modify metrics if necessary.</p>
Experiment and optimise	<p>Set out a calendar of activities to guide the generation of content and the development of audience.</p> <p>Modify that calendar in the light of successes and failures.</p> <p>Do lots of small experiments rather than one large project.</p> <p>Study the visitor journeys using analytics and tracking software to look for points at which visitors leave your site and try to improve these areas.</p>
Learn from others and share knowledge	<p>Share your goals, experiments, successes and failures with others in the NGCV group and divide the work between you.</p> <p>Experiment with things that others have found a success swapping or sharing time between staff.</p>
Celebrate success	<p>Take your staff with you Involve your staff every step of the way particularly in audience development.</p> <p>Meet regularly to listen to their experiences with digital outside work.</p> <p>Invest in letting them experiment.</p>

8. Concluding remarks

This project has been hugely enjoyable because of the level of engagement from the NCGV members. It is clear that this forum provides a stable platform for the development of a wide range of digital activities because of the strong commitment of every member.

I have set out in this report a vision of a further level of collaboration in which the 11 organisations set out a shared plan for experimentation, establish success criteria, swap staff time and monitor each others' progress.

I hope that these insights will prove to be a catalyst for activity and that in 12 months time all organisations will feel that they are even more digitally engaged than they are now.

I would also welcome further involvement in projects going forward.

Jonathan Briggs, 28 February 2010