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Optimizing Digital Marketing: Is digital a part of your marketing mix?

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Marketing and communications for arts and culture organizations was once less complicated than today. Just ten to fifteen years ago, most arts and culture organizations focused marketing strategies and tactics on traditional print and radio advertising campaigns for single ticket sales, brochure mailings, and telemarketing for subscription and membership campaigns. This was supplemented by standard public relations outreach in the form of press releases for each program, production, exhibit or event.

Until recently, marketing and communications programs were mapped out across a year and were not often adjusted. Securing the cover page of the "Life" or "Arts & Entertainment" section of the city's newspaper was the crowning achievement of these efforts — and media coverage almost always generated interest and revenue. The newspaper's full-time arts reporter would attend programs, exhibits and concerts. The reporter would subsequently write reviews and publish them in a timely fashion, which often served to further drive participation and revenue. Today, marketing programs may retain many of these elements, but the era of fixed plans has passed.

Is digital a part of your marketing mix?

Today, it should be. For arts and culture organizations, digital marketing represents the opportunity to analyze marketing campaigns and understand what is working, and what is not, in real-time. The one-size-fits-all approach is dead. Long live tailor-made solutions!

If an organization does not yet have a digital marketing plan, it is not alone. Using digital marketing without a specific plan is common across all industry sectors. Yet without a plan, insufficient resources will hamper efforts from the onset.

Many arts and culture organizations have not yet established digital marketing plans that prioritize opportunities, detail costs and account for the use of both external and internal resources. For some, digital marketing was tacked onto traditional marketing or public relations programs without full consideration of the use or abuse of resources, or most importantly, without measurable results in mind. Adequate planning to develop a consistent and increasingly sophisticated program was also neglected.

It had been “just enough” in the past to add a Facebook page here or a digital ad there without fully examining the potential for each opportunity. Many organizations also applied digital marketing across the board without analyzing cost-of-sale and potential returns, ignoring new channels and tactics that are foundational to effective campaigns. When approaching digital marketing, or fine-tuning an existing plan, organizations should consider these three elements as part of a larger strategy:

1. Retargeting

Website analytics offer a wealth of information to arts and culture organizations. Have you wondered how many people come into contact with a website and are not “converted” into a stakeholder: a volunteer, a donor, a ticket buyer? The answer is probably close to 90 percent. It is rare that visitors to websites find what they need and progress to the next step of connecting with a volunteer coordinator, making a donation or buying a ticket in one visit.

Retargeting is an approach that keeps your organization’s brand top-of-mind by frequent advertising. It can bring visitors back to finish what they started in the first place. For example, when a visitor abandons a shopping cart for a music festival, he or she will see recurring ads for that organization on Facebook or YouTube.

Today, organizations can use their website’s behavioral data to serve ads to people who have visited their websites to achieve a range of objectives — retargeting them to purchase a ticket, make a donation or redeem benefits. However, it is not the equivalent of digital ad buys. Retargeting serves personalized ads to only those people who have visited a site in search of precise information — from within other sites, apps and programs. Truly, retargeting is the newest form of direct marketing.

Retargeting also offers metrics to assist an organization in directing its digital marketing plan. If an organization does not have internal expertise in this area, there are a number of local and national companies that can help prioritize effective campaigns within a range of budgets.

2. Social Media

It’s universally acknowledged that social media is a powerful tool for arts and culture organizations. Few sectors of the nonprofit industry lend themselves more easily or more intuitively to the social sphere. With platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, YouTube and Vine, organizations can generate significant exposure for their causes and brands. Consider the following when fine-tuning a social media program:

- Avoid the common hazard of trying to be everywhere, engaged and active on all social media platforms and broadcasting identical content through all channels. Evaluate the resources invested in current platforms and determine which are more effective based on priority objectives. Research new options and select the social media platforms that strongly engage the typical

stakeholder. Learn where prospects and current stakeholders are already spending time and meet them there.

- Do not forget about human resources. Some organizations misjudge the time required to manage social media. Assigning new social media channels to an already busy marketing or public relations manager, without a thoughtful dialogue, will inevitably result in weak outcomes. While social media is 24/7, employees are not. Consider that every social media initiative requires a team with the right training and expertise to position it for success. And, if an organization does not have a social media policy in place that applies to all employees, set a goal to establish one at the beginning.

Social media also enables organizations to listen to what stakeholders are saying, while monitoring what issues are trending within stakeholder communities. By listening, organizations can remain current with concerns that are important to those they serve, well beyond geographic boundaries.

3. Content Marketing

Content marketing is the creation of content ranging from blogs and articles, to videos and news releases, which has value for audiences. This free content is a tool to convert prospects into stakeholders and engages them with an organization's mission. For arts and culture organizations, content marketing can be a springboard to connect with stakeholders in multiple ways, inform key demographics, foster dialogue and build relationships. Well-written content that has value can spread virally across social networks as it is shared, generating powerful word-of-mouth.

Before examining an organization's content marketing program, consider the following: Do staff have the time, training and expertise required to create excellent content? Is the organizational mindset prepared for fast turnaround times and open to sharing ideas? If the answer is no to either of these questions, this is an opportunity to review processes and policies that create roadblocks to advancing a content marketing program.

- Self-promotion, for example, is a particular offshoot of content creation that is worth mentioning here. People do not want advertising; they want valuable and interesting "insider information" that illustrates relevancy. People want to engage with organizations and causes they care about; they appreciate the opportunity to build a relationship.

Optimizing Digital Marketing

While using electronic media to promote programs or market performance is nothing new, the tools and scope of digital marketing are constantly in flux. Smart organizations focused on optimizing earned revenues know that digital marketing offers options for targeting, retargeting, testing and tailoring messages. However, it is a challenge for arts and culture organizations to determine where, how and when to invest limited resources in this channel — and how to maximize staff time for even greater returns. Establish priorities, create a plan, make a calendar, measure results and adjust campaigns, as needed.

Conclusion

Arts and culture organizations have the opportunity, and the challenge, to connect with audiences and stakeholders through a growing number of channels. More than just engaging with key audiences, organizations can, and must constantly, tap into the wealth of data now available to adjust their plans in-progress.

Creating a digital marketing plan — or enhancing a current plan — is not the Herculean task it may appear to be. The challenge lies in identifying and prioritizing opportunities, allocating resources and creating a structure in which digital marketing will flourish. With firm goals in-hand, an organization can more easily navigate the adoption of digital marketing that synchronizes with its mission, vision and values, and achieves results.



Vice President Margaret Williams is a sales and marketing expert based in ACG's Denver office focused on Earned Revenue Enhancement. Ms. Williams partners with nonprofit cultural institutions, educational organizations and public agencies across North America to optimize earned revenues, improve the efficacy of sales and marketing programs, build audiences and enhance patron loyalty. In addition, she supports arts and cultural organizations with professional interim management services, providing leadership during times of management transition. Ms. Williams' extensive experience includes successful leadership roles with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra, Omaha Performing Arts Society, Rocky Mountain Arts Association, and Colorado Symphony Orchestra, where she provided expertise in direct marketing, social media, customer service, and optimizing use of technology and branding together to increase earned revenues. Ms. Williams is an Adjunct Professor of Arts Management and Arts Entrepreneurship at Southern Methodist University in Dallas.

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