

“How to evaluate online success?” - A new piece of action research

Culture24, September 2010

The Issue:

How to measure and define the success of cultural websites and online services is a problem common to all parts of the cultural sector - museums, archives, galleries, arts organisations, libraries, publishers etc.

In particular there is:

- No official agreement on which tools or software to use
- Limited knowledge of how best to use those tools that are available (such as Google Analytics)
- Lack of understanding about what can easily be tracked via online activities
- Knowledge gap in awareness of changing online user behaviour
- Confusion about how to evaluate success within social media networks

Funding agencies and government departments lack the expertise to offer guidelines or set standards. The result is a confusing mixture of statistics and reporting that reveals little about genuine user satisfaction.

Action Research:

Culture24 have commissioned and are leading a new piece of action research to address these issues. Technical expertise is being provided by Seb Chan from the Powerhouse Museum who is a sector expert in this area. In order to ensure the research relates directly to the actual activities and problems cultural institutions are dealing with online, Culture24 are actively collaborating with a range of 23 organisations and agencies from across the cultural heritage and arts sector.

Project Partners:

Culture24 have set up a collaborative funding arrangement with all partners, each demonstrating their commitment through the contribution of £1,000 per organisation. In addition, further matched funding has also been secured from a number of cultural sector agencies with vested interest in the research outcomes. These are: DCMS, Arts Council of England, Heritage Lottery Fund and Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLA). Support has also been secured from the University of Leicester to support an associated PhD programme.

Confirmed partners

Powerhouse Museum
British Library
National Gallery
Science Museum
Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery
Tate
British Museum
Kew
National Maritime Museum
Imperial War Museum
National Portrait Gallery
Watershed
Royal Shakespeare Company
National Museums Scotland

National Museum Wales
Design Museum
English Heritage
Roundhouse
DCMS
Arts Council of England
Heritage Lottery Fund
Museums, Libraries & Archives Council (MLA)
University of Leicester

In addition, Culture24 are in conversation with NESTA about how the research could feed into their own wider cross sector projects programme and how they could help to publish and disseminate the research findings to the wider sector. This may be through implementation and further monitoring of the results or by hosting a launch event at their premises in London.

Aim of the research:

Culture24 wish to help the sector to improve the way that online cultural activities are evaluated so that we can better understand online user behaviour and hence improve the quality and reach of all of the sectors online services.

The research project will seek in particular to:

- Explore what common ground there may be between organisations in trying to evaluate online activity
- Benchmark current activity across the sector in such a way that any future changes can be clearly identified and mapped
- Consider what lessons can be learned that might help to shape some advice or recommendations for the wider sector
- Highlight examples of good practice, begin to define what they mean and how they can inform good practice
- Make recommendations for software and configurations standards
- Help to define a better understanding of audience behaviour online
- Create, test and publish simple guidelines for organisations
- Help organisations with the process of clearly defining their target audiences
- Improve understanding of user segmentation

The end result will be a published report with a series of recommendations to funding agencies and governments, with a set of guidelines and key issues for sector organisations. The research will look at online web metrics plus social media metrics.

Shape of the research:

The research will fall into three phases:

Phase One: Research & Mapping

Analyse the current online statistical information available across the collaborating institutions

Compare and contrast the systems used between organisations

Research good practice in the commercial online world

Clarify key objectives and target audience for each organisation's online activities

Research user behaviour

Research systems available for social media metrics

Phase Two: Analysis & Interrogation

Examination of all research and evidence from the mapping

Analysis of intention vs actual outcome

Honest assessment of current practice, with an analysis of both good and bad examples

Phase Three: Recommendations & So What?

Publication of all research and analysis

Published recommendations to funders and government agencies to inform future strategy

Suggesting guidelines to sector organisations for software tools and configuration methodologies

Beyond this proposal: A relationship with University of Leicester

Culture24 are working with the University of Leicester on a new "Scholarship in Digital Heritage". This PhD scholarship is offered to support candidates aiming to investigate museums' online performance and approaches for measuring the value and impact of online digital culture.

This research project will link to the work of this PhD student and will benefit from a shared approach to information gathering.

Background to this proposal:

Between 2003 and 2008 Culture24 carried out three comparative surveys across UK cultural websites, plus two international comparative surveys of cultural portals. This unique body of work and evidence clearly highlighted for us the lack of clarity about: what to collect, how to count it and how to interpret what it is telling you. There was also a clear inconsistency in the use of tools, with organisations counting and reporting different things using different systems.

In 2009, Culture24 called together a meeting of national/regional museums, research/educational organisations and strategic agencies to explore the possibility of a joint action research project. This proposal has been directly informed by the outcome of the meeting and by the input and ideas of the group.

Further input has come from a series of 'web metrics' workshops that Culture24 have held in the both the UK, New Zealand, Taiwan and Luxembourg as part of our international work with the Culturemondo network.