

(Draft) Let's Get Real Phase2

An outline plan for an action research project on understanding online success

The Big Issue

Developing effective ways to define, measure and evaluate the success of online activities is an issue faced by all parts of the cultural sector. Organisations regularly invest in cultural websites, social media activities and online services without a clear idea of exactly what they are trying to achieve, or who their intended audience is.

We are overloaded with things that we are now able to measure online. However, none of these are useful without a focus that highlights what 'success' and 'effectiveness' online mean for the cultural sector. Real insights that lie not in the tools and platforms used for evaluation, but in the shift in thinking that needs to happen at a deep level within every cultural organisation. The lessons can be found through careful analysis of the data against each organisation's primary objectives.

This project seeks to help gain insights into the way cultural organisations go about trying to measure the success of their business online and challenges any assumption that simply counting total visitor numbers or 'likes' really tells us anything meaningful at all.

Background

The starting point for this next phase of action research work by Culture24 is the 2011 'Let's Get Real' report and findings. This report was the outcome of our first collaborative action research project 'How to evaluate online success' which took place between June 2010 and Sept 2011 and involved 23 UK cultural venues <http://weareculture24.org.uk/projects/action-research/>

The frankness of this report and its openness to speak about the failure in the sector to really capture the attention of online audiences has been met with a very positive reaction. It has spiked the interest of the cultural sector in the UK and internationally with presentations about the findings at DISH2012, Museums & Web 2012, Bits2Blogs2012 and others. It was also the catalyst for a series of intensive Google Analytics workshops called 'Make It Count' in partnership with Google around the UK <http://weareculture24.org.uk/knowledge/conferences-and-events/make-it-count/> The report itself has also been shared widely with over five thousand downloads between October 2010 and February 2012.

How the project will work

This Phase2 project will be funded collaboratively by the participating organisations with each participant contributing £2,500 plus VAT. There will be approximately 15-20 partner organisations taking part, each putting forward one member of staff to act as the liaison point for the research. These nominated individuals should be directly involved in the delivery of the organisations digital offer either at an implementation or strategic level (preferably both). Ideally they will have responsibility for any other digital staff, freelancers or technical contractors. This will ensure that they are able to grant access to analytics data and implement any necessary changes as a result of the project.

The core of the project is centered on a series of four project group meetings and it is vital that partners attend all of these in order to get the best value from the project. Each of these meetings will be a facilitated workshop held in either London or Brighton. The exact nature of these workshops and any invited speakers will be agreed by the project group. The cost of any travel and accommodation to these workshops will need to be covered by each participating organisation.

In addition to attending project group meetings, each organisation will be required to facilitate Culture24 to carry out quantitative and qualitative data capture, along with benchmarking of their online services and internal policies. They will also need to contribute to the evaluation of the project itself and offer feedback on its impact and usefulness internally.

Culture24's role

Culture24's role is to lead and coordinate the project and they will bring in experts as necessary to support all stages of the project delivery. The lead contact at Culture24 will be Jane Finnis who will facilitate the workshops. Culture24 brings its expertise in project management, research and evaluation techniques to the project. Crucially we also bring our experience of analysis and strategic thinking that was critical in production of the first Let's Get Real report.

Culture24 will oversee all the research and liaise with any external partners or contractors. They will carry out the analysis of the project and will write, edit and produce the final report overseeing its production and distribution across the sector.

Others involved will be Seb Chan (Director of Digital & Emerging Media, Smithsonian, Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum) and Mia Ridge (Doctoral Researcher, freelance cultural heritage technologist). The project will retain its link with the University of Leicester and their PhD programme and will also explore ways to continue to work with both Google and Hitwise to ensure useful external reference points.

Methodology

The project approach requires the active participation of each partner to share their experiences in developing and understanding the impact of their online services with the wider project group. In practical terms this means a commitment to being open and honest about their successes and failures online, open to sharing analytics data from various channels and collaborating with the Culture24 team to facilitate the analysis of their internal in-house processes.

In between the four face-to-face meetings, an online project collaboration tool called Basecamp will be used to communicate with partners, present research findings and coordinate input from the group. Google Analytics will be used as the main tool for analysis of web traffic, along with a range of other metrics and insight tools as necessary. All participating organisations will need to have a google analytics code running on their live websites.

The project will seek to establish and disseminate best practice methodologies for understanding, recognising and evaluating both the success and failure of the sector's online activities. The research seeks to be a call to action to the sector to improve its audience development strategies and the use of online tactics.

Each participating partner will benefit from:

- Being part of a lively and engaged peer network with a shared sense of purpose. The network will act as a source of community, knowledge and support. It will also provide a space to compare and contrast data, allowing for benchmarking and comparison.
- Deeper insights into the use of Google Analytics for web reporting and how to set up their accounts in accordance with current best practice. This will help provide consistency in the configuration of accounts for reporting and can help to form the basis for a set of recommendations for reporting within the sector.
- An understanding of the relationship between the data available from analysis and tracking of web statistics and social media channels and its potential to help meet and fulfill specific key performance indicators.
- Time to reflect on their wider organisational goals and the role that digital activities can play in fulfilling these (or not). This could include looking honestly at both success and failures internally and the allocation of budget spend and resources in this area.
- Gaining insights in how to segment and separate different user behaviors, intentions and engagement, as well as defining targeted reporting for use by different staff members

Focus for this research

The starting point for this next phase of work is to:

- explore how to build engagement metrics and consider what this really means
- consider changes in audience behavior as a result of the use of mobile devices
- understand how to integrate the use of digital tactics into your overall strategic mission

The specific scope of the research within these themes and the priorities for the project outcomes will be directly informed by the input and ideas of the project group. This will be defined initially at the first workshop meeting. Each subsequent workshop will have a specific focus that will go more deeply into the agreed focus and priorities.

Timescale

The project will take place over a period of approximately ten months and will be framed by the scheduling of the four workshops and any necessary consideration during the data collection period. So assuming that all partners can commit and sign up by June 2012 and the initial project brief can be agreed the rough schedule will be:

- June 2012: workshop one, detailed scope and priorities
- July 2012 to September 2012: first research period.
- September 2012: workshop two
- September to December 2012: second research period
- January 2012: workshop three
- January to March: analysis period
- April 2012: workshop four, project conclusion

Exact dates and timings will be agreed in consultation with the full project group. The writing and production of the final published report would start after the final workshop has taken place and

all the key learning had been discussed and explored. The publication and dissemination of the final report is estimated to be three months after the project's conclusion.

Project conclusion and anticipated outcomes

The project will culminate in the publication of a report detailing the analysis of the key findings and the lessons learned by the participating venues. The narrative of each report will explore the value gained from the collaborative methodology and seek to pull out intelligence from any comparative data, citing this into a broader context for the whole sector. The finished reports will be published online and available for download.

We know from experience that the challenges and knowledge gaps for individual venues with regard to understanding online success are not fixed. Technologies change, software evolves, new platforms are launched and new devices come into the market. This type of collaborative action research provides a practical and in depth way for the sector to try and keep up with these changes. The research will shine a light on problems, provide context and space for debate and encourage honest appraisal and a better strategic integration of digital activities.

The publication of each report will take place at an associated conference where the findings can be debated. This approach worked well for the Let's Get Real report that was launched at a national conference hosted by Watershed in Bristol with sponsorship from Google.

<http://weareculture24.org.uk/knowledge/conferences-and-events/lets-get-real-conference/>

Speakers from outside the cultural sector will be invited to reflect upon the trends and findings in the report, along with sector case studies and failing forward lessons. These will be mixed with sessions looking at both the strategies and tactics of successful online engagement and audience development.

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