

SOCIAL MEDIA BUTTERFLIES



Arts organizations in Syracuse and across the country are increasingly relying on social media as a way to reach new and younger audiences. But whether it's working is anyone's guess. Although many websites and workshops aim to help nonprofits best use these digital platforms, there is little hard data to suggest that views lead to visits or that more followers will mean more funding. But even without that evidence, arts and cultural organizations are rushing to the Internet, preferring to figure it out along the way rather than be left behind.

"We're always looking for information on how social media and the arts can work together," says Kelundra Smith, public relations manager at Syracuse Stage, "but there's that 'learn as you go' aspect as well." Smith and Syracuse Stage are not alone. The communications specialists and public relations managers of arts organizations in Syracuse are tasked with predicting and interpreting social media trends, and trying to stay ahead of the curve.



Kelundra Smith of Syracuse Stage: "You always have to be aware of the use of a medium."
Michael Davis Photos

A June 2011 study by researcher Devon Smith, director of social media for a Washington D.C.-based digital engagement agency, attempted to analyze this task. "The Tangled Web: Social Media in the Arts" took an in-depth look at more than 200 arts organizations, documenting their presence on social networks, the frequency of their updates and the types of content being shared. By comparing those trends with levels of audience response, the data created a snapshot of this transitional time.

The study showed that Facebook is overwhelmingly the most used social networking site among arts organizations across the country, with more than 90 percent of those in the study having active profiles. Local groups mirror this trend, with nearly all of the key players keeping an active Facebook page. Smith says the familiar interface and the ability to easily share photos, videos, links and text make Facebook the most popular tool for engagement at Syracuse Stage.

As was the national trend, most area organizations are also active on Twitter and YouTube. But Syracuse's arts and culture organizations appear to be slightly more engaged than the usual three networks. Many arts groups in this region are embracing or experimenting with other networks,

including Pinterest, a photo-based bookmarking site; Foursquare, a location-based social network; and Flickr, a photo sharing and archiving site.

While the study helps arts organizations place themselves within the wide range of social media involvement, it also identifies the methods that seem to lead to better audience interaction. The study found that the arts organizations that tweeted more than four times a day had higher levels of audience engagement on Twitter than those that tweeted less frequently. Facebook pages that are updated multiple times a day and have a Welcome tab have more "fans" than those that do not. Uploading more than one video per week to YouTube, the study shows, leads to higher per-video view counts.

While these findings provide some general guidance, the differing purposes of arts organizations and the constant addition of new social networks means that many arts organizations simply have to figure it out on the fly.

"It's sort of a trial-and-error thing, as it is for most organizations," says Matthew MacVittie, who maintains all aspects of the Onondaga Historical Association's Internet presence. "We're really looking for increased awareness and engagement of our audience," he says of OHA's online goals. He thinks it's working, but he admits there isn't a spreadsheet or graph to demonstrate their success. "It's more of an overall feeling."

Social Studies

Some social networking sites have built-in metrics intended to offer a snapshot of engagement success. Twitter keeps track of the number of "followers," who have opted in to each account's updates, and YouTube lists the number of "subscribers," who receive alerts when an account adds new videos. On Facebook, page administrators can look at the number of "fans," or people who have "liked" an organization's profile.

But these numbers (reported as of press time) provide no context. What does the difference between the Westcott Theater's 9,163 Facebook likes and the Landmark Theatre's 5,186 likes mean in terms of attendance, if anything? Is the difference between Community Folk Arts Center's 1,395 Facebook likes, ArtRage Gallery's 801 likes and Syracuse University Art Galleries' 2,086 likes a matter of location, awareness, venue size, quality of programming or audience age? With just a number, it's almost impossible to know.

Some social networks offer additional analytics about site traffic and visitor interaction, and there are paid services that provide more detailed reports, but Smith says even those reports aren't much help in determining the overall effect of online efforts. "Sure, we watch our analytics," she says, "and you can see that someone liked a post or commented. But what's difficult to measure is whether this post or that post prompted someone to buy a ticket. That's what's difficult to gauge."

In the arts and culture sector, the task of gauging the effectiveness of these profiles—as well as setting up and maintaining them—is often added to the growing list of responsibilities of existing public relations or communications employees.



Matthew MacVittie of the Onondaga Historical Association: "The biggest challenge is finding time and resources to allocate to these projects."

For this initiative, OHA (@OnondagaHisAssn) tweets daily excerpts from a diary or personal letter of a Syracuse-area individual who lived during the Civil War. The tweets go out 150 years, to the day, after the events occurred, and each tweet ends with the author's initials. The idea, MacVittie says, is to create a personal connection to local history, and to make that information accessible to a younger audience.

But outreach to younger audiences isn't just about the medium; content plays a role, too. And without any explanation of the Twitter Project in the account's bio, the tweets may lack the context that would make confused followers care enough to stay.

"Either you're interested or you're not," MacVittie said, admitting that "The Twitter Project" doesn't have as broad an appeal as general historical news or other content that could be shared on the OHA's Twitter account. But while it may not have a widespread appeal, he said, it does give the Twitter account a focus and consistency, and that's what they were going for.

"You always have to be aware of the use of a medium," Smith agrees. "We have to remember that each has a purpose, and make sure that we are constantly using it for that purpose." Figuring out that purpose might be the bigger challenge, she says, and it's a challenge she faces with Syracuse Stage's Foursquare account.

"In terms of Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare and, soon to be, Pinterest, that's all me," Smith says of Syracuse Stage's online presence.

With no designated public relations or communication position at the OHA, that responsibility falls to MacVittie, the assistant curator of history. "The biggest challenge," he says, "is finding time and resources to allocate to these projects."

Another major challenge facing arts organizations is choosing which social networks, applications and platforms to use, and which to avoid. It's a decision influenced by trends, by the purpose of the organization and by the time and resources required to maintain the profile.

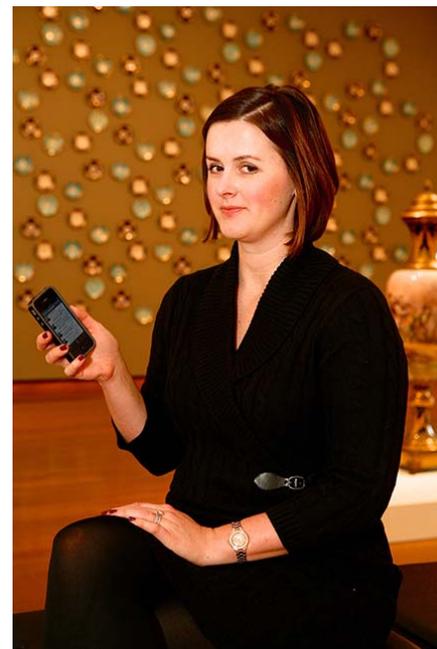
"The trick, especially for a nonprofit, is deciding what you're going to do with it," says MacVittie, explaining that the OHA ranks "intended use" above "popularity" when deciding which networks to adopt. This, he says, is why the OHA has steered clear of LinkedIn, a profile-based network aimed at making professional connections, and Foursquare. Although they aren't opposed to joining once a clear plan for use has been developed, they aren't going to sign up just to sign up, he says.

"Sometimes I feel like with a lot of arts organizations or even other businesses, they'll say, 'Everybody is on this, everybody is on that, so we have to get on it or we'll be behind,'" Smith says. "But if you're on it and you're not doing anything, how much good is that?"

MacVittie says the OHA prevents that kind of wasted energy by having a very specific project in mind for each new media network or platform that it adopts. Its most ambitious project to date, "In Their Own Words," is more often called "The Twitter Project."

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Sarah Massett of the Everson Museum of Art: By attending conferences and reading industry news, you can always find ways to improve your use of social media.

Check-in Mate

Foursquare, founded by SU alum Dennis Crowley, is a location-based network that allows users to “check in” to businesses and other places on their mobile device. Foursquare users are awarded points for check-ins, rewarded with badges for checking in to certain types of locations, and can even be granted a “mayorship” for checking in to a location more times than anyone else.

Businesses and organizations can offer specials—often a discount or free gift—that are unlocked only when visitors check in or become the mayor of their location, or the person who has checked in the most times. The mayor of the Everson Museum of Art, for example, gets free admission to special exhibits. During its community open house earlier this year, the Landmark Theatre offered Landmark mugs to the first five people to check in and post a picture.

These specials are intended to draw in visitors, but “The Tangled Web” found “no statistically significant difference in the number of check-ins or unique visitors for those venues offering a special.”

Smith speculates that this is because check-ins are a passive method of interaction: Organizations have to rely on the audience taking the initiative. And while more than 400 different people have checked in to Syracuse Stage on Foursquare, establishing more than 1,100 total check-ins, Smith believes the theater could be doing more.

Figuring out exactly what else, however, is yet another challenge. For this, many arts organizations are turning to the experts. Professional societies for public relations, communications and other media fields sometimes offer social media guidance in the form of newsletters, guides and conferences. Associations for specific types of organizations—groups for theater companies or orchestras, for example—often offer sector-specific guidance in the same ways.

Sarah Massett, the public relations manager of the Everson Museum, says she has attended the annual BizBuzz Social Media Conference in Syracuse, and she goes to other social media conferences and seminars whenever possible. Massett, who is in charge of updating all of the Everson’s social media accounts, says these events help her learn new ways to meet the needs of their audience.

“You usually walk away with at least one thing you learn,” Massett says. By attending conferences and reading industry news, she says, you can always find ways to improve your use of social media.

But in the time between conferences and seminars, cultural institutions in Syracuse are on their own. Like other arts organizations across the country, they continue to adjust their social media initiatives using a combination of Web analytics, national trends, audience feedback and plain old intuition.

“We’re just going to keep trucking along with Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and Flickr, and soon Pinterest,” Smith says of Syracuse Stage. “And maybe Foursquare.”



Admittedly, not everyone is up on the latest online lingo, or hip to the newest social media site.

Here is a guideline to help you make sense of the mayhem.



Foursquare:

A location-based mobile service that allows you to check in to places you visit, and awards points and other achievements for continued and strategic use.

Check-in:

To digitally announce that you are at a specific location on Foursquare. The service is location based, so you will see suggestions like “Smith Family Market” or you can create your own, like “Jon Smith’s Awesome Apartment.”

Mayor:

The person whom Foursquare has designated as the person with most check-ins at a given location. Mayorships can be stolen if another person checks in more times than you.

Badge:

A small circular Foursquare award for an achievement on Foursquare.



Pinterest:

A photo-based bookmarking site that allows you to pin any photo you see onto one of your bookmark boards, usually named by category.

Board:

A categorized list of visual bookmarks or "pins" on Pinterest.

Pin:

To add a photo and its associated link to your "Pin Board" on Pinterest.



Twitter:

A micro-blogging site that allows users to "tweet" a message of 140 characters or less to all their followers. Users can also tweet photos and short videos.

Tweet:

The 140-characters-or-less messages sent out via Twitter. Can include photos or videos. You can also "retweet" someone else's message to your own followers.

Tweeter:

Someone who tweets, preferred over "Twitter-er."

Follow:

To add someone's Twitter updates to the list of updates that you see. You can follow others without them having to follow you back, and vice-versa. You can "unfollow" at any time.

Handle:

A Twitter username. Preceded by the "@" symbol. Example: The *Syracuse New Times*' Twitter handle is [@SyrNewTimes](#)

Mention:

To include another user's handle in your tweet. They are notified of the tag. If you start a tweet with someone's handle, the tweet only shows up on feeds of those who follow both you and the user you mention. "@SyrNewTimes: A big thank you to @jonnyBsmith for sharing his story with us!" vs. "@SyrNewTimes: @jonnyBsmith Thanks for sharing your story!"

Trending:

Topics being tweeted about at high volumes on Twitter. You can view "trending topics" and sort by location to see what is trending near you.

Hashtag:

Term used to tag or categorize tweets. Preceded by "#" symbol. Users create hashtags as they go, and sometimes use them ironically. #twittertips or #duh.



Facebook:

A profile-based social networking site, designed to allow users to connect with friends and share photos, status updates and more with one another.

Friend:

To add someone to your friends list on Facebook, and be added to theirs. Users can accept or ignore each "friend request." You can also "unfriend"

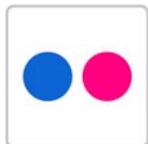
someone.

Like:

To click the “like” button on a status, photo or other piece of shared content on Facebook. There is no “dislike” button, so the like button is sometimes used ironically.

Status:

A publicly shared message on Facebook.

**Flickr:**

A photo-sharing website that allows you to create albums of photos, share those albums with others and view others' albums.

**Youtube:**

A video-sharing website that allows users to upload videos, view others' videos, subscribe to specific users' videos and more.