

Blink Media and Pocket Culture

Interview with Lisa Roberts, Andrew Wilson and Abby Dix of Blink Media.

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Case study focus: UTILISING TECHNOLOGY

How might arts and cultural organisations use new technology to help engage new and existing audiences?

This case study looks at how one company is pioneering the use of mobile phone text messages to communicate effectively with arts audiences and participants. It focuses on the concept behind 'Pocket Culture' and three ground-breaking, mobile phone partnership projects with Pilot Theatre Company, Birmingham Rep and Illuminate, Yorkshire's year-long festival of culture.

Background

Blink are an arts organisation that initiate creative projects with film, new media and mobile technologies. They developed some of the first creative mobile technology projects, including The Guardian's Text Poetry in 2001. Since 2005 Blink have also provided Pocket Culture audience development strategies for a range of different arts organisations. Pocket Culture is a strand of Blink's work that uses mobile phone technology to enter into a dialogue and engage in two-way communication with existing and potential arts audiences. It offers a platform of audience development initiatives involving text messaging, picture messaging, Bluetooth and mobile blogging.

Why mobile phones?

In 1999-2000 mobiles transformed from being the thing that everyone hated (remember their association with Yuppies?) to the thing that everyone wanted to own. There are now more mobile phones in circulation in the UK than there are people. Almost everyone, from the age of eight upwards, has become reliant on this palm sized device in order to communicate. As well as making phone calls and texts, access to the internet and quality photo messaging is fast becoming commonplace. We really do have the world at our fingertips. And, rarely ever being more than a foot away from our mobiles 24/7, we are at the world's finger tips too. Just think of the possibilities if the cultural sector were to pick up on this form of marketing and engagement with people. In April of this year, Billy Elliot the Musical launched a new WAP service which allows users to catch the latest news from the show and book tickets direct from their mobiles. Subscribers can also download pictures and videos of the show. IT experts predict that advertising - which in recent years has harnessed the web as much as print - is now turning its attention to mobile phones. For more information about how arts organisations might consider advertising their product via mobile phones see Hannah Rudman's April 2007 article 'Online Advertising and mobile come of age' at <http://profile.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=user.viewprofile&friendid=109700322>

Democratic communication

But it's not so much the increasing capability of the mobile phone that interests Blink so much as the *way* it encourages people to communicate. Seven years ago, no one could have predicted that texting - which was initially developed to send details of faults to technicians - would become the people-made phenomenon that it now is. We have molded phone technology to meet our demands and lifestyles. Like diaries and blogs, texting is a very personal, optionally anonymous form of communication which

can encourage honesty and confidence. Like note passing in class, we can be succinct and bold without fear of immediate face to face confrontation. We can say things we may never speak out loud. We can participate more readily, more easily. Spelling is not an issue, and indeed a whole new language is being created and recreated. Texting (SMS) is a democratic, universal form of communication.

Mobile technology and the arts sector:

Whilst a mammoth amount of performative and participatory visual, musical and literary art is being created and distributed via mobile phones, Blink have seized on the potential of texting, as a unique, immediate communication tool between arts organisations and their existing and potential audiences. As well as providing filtered information to subscribers, it can encourage a two way dialogue in which the audience member or participant can send instant mini reviews, vote or comment on an issue. For example, when leaving a gig or theatre event, not everyone wants to voice their opinion. When taking part in a live face to face discussion, not everyone in a room wants to speak out. Mobile technology enables those voices to be heard, whilst the thoughts are still fresh. In this burgeoning age of 'personalisation', organisations are increasingly having to take account of what their individual customer's want. They are having to listen to and act on their suggestions. Pocket Culture uses mobile technology to broker these relationships.

Organisational change

In many ways, this is a process of initiating organisational change. It suits those organisations who are open to hearing and learning about themselves, who want to harness the thoughts of their audiences in order to constantly refine and develop what they do. Technological developments are building communities in new ways, through desk top machines or hand held devices. In Africa, the \$100 wind-up laptop scheme (like the clockwork radios) is revolutionising the way impoverished people interact with the rest of the world. The Apple iPhone, due to be launched in October 07, provides TV, music, phone and internet facilities in one. Soon people really will be able to work, rest and play wherever and whenever, using a hand-held device. The danger is that the arts sector will miss a major trick if it doesn't learn to access people through *both* these mediums. Web based audience development strategy is no longer enough; instead, a 'digital strategy', which combines both online and mobile mediums is fast becoming the future. Blink design bespoke Pocket Culture mobile phone services including listings, mini event reviews, text blogging, mini downloadable films, music, ringtones and visual images from forthcoming shows. The following three projects give a flavour of what is possible:

Illuminate: Listings service

Illuminate was a year long festival of culture spread across Bradford, Hull, Leeds Sheffield and York. Because the festival covered such a large area and lasted for twelve months it was vital to keep the momentum going. Prompting people via text based information alerts seemed a pioneering approach. Funded by the regional marketing organisation Audiences Yorkshire, Blink masterminded a free Pocket Culture texting service. The list of subscribers, who initially signed up in return for free tickets, represented all age groups and grew to in excess of a thousand people. They received timely updates and prompts about selected events in their area, and were given the chance to enter competitions and submit text reviews.

Pilot Theatre : Text to Podcast Initiative

Pilot is a national touring theatre company resident at York Theatre Royal. As a very technologically savvy company, Pilot had utilised the web to offer podcasts, blogs, live chat ,U-Tube production

promotions and an on-line discussion forum, but not mobile technology. In a six month long partnership with Blink, they ran the 'Text Yer Heart Out' Pocket Culture campaign to encourage text reviews from audience members at Roy Williams' 'Sing Yer Heart Out For the Lads.' The texts were then used to form the basis of a podcast with Roy and Pilot's Director Marcus Romer at the end of the tour. Over sixty reviews were submitted. Here are a couple of examples:

I think sing ya heart..is a vry gud play it is very touchin. Me as a black gal i once felt lyk standin up and shout at dat dude e p.c's brother. At e same tym it makez pple realis wt an effect it gv on pple of difrn races. X x chidox x frm leedz

The play was a dramatic, realistic portrayal of the small minority of uneducated bigots that still use football as a voice to put their "views" forward. It is also provides a snapshot of the views of a small minority in everyday society. Superb play, spot on casting. Simon in Leeds.

Marcus Romer says, 'We make theatre to raise questions and provoke response and debate. Blink's 'Text Yer Heart Out' campaign provided an immediate outlet for those responses to be succinctly stated, and also heard directly by the production team. Sometimes we encouraged our audiences to engage with particular issues by asking for text replies to specific questions such as 'What advice would you give to Barry?' and at other times we kept it open. We see mobile phones as just one of the constantly evolving myriad of ways we have to engage with people. Technology doesn't frighten us. Instead it allows us further ways to connect and communicate and interact with our audiences.'

Birmingham Rep: G-Listings text information service for young people

The Generation Festival is Birmingham Repertory Theatre's festival of new writing for, with and by young people aged 12 - 25. It's producers wanted to undertake focused marketing to young people. In addition to a comprehensive website with regular blogs and a myspace page, they commissioned Blink to develop a Pocket Culture news, gossip, offers and listings text messaging service called 'G-Listings'. They also encouraged audiences to submit text reviews which were uploaded onto their website.

As their first pilot venture into audience development using mobile technology, staff at the Birmingham Rep felt the project was a learning curve with very useful results. It enabled them to build up the beginnings of a mobile database, receive some fascinating event reviews, and most importantly, develop the know-how for next time. Undertaking a project of this kind requires a long term commitment; it will not work as a quick-fix marketing solution. It represents new territory for arts audiences and they need to be reassured that it's not just a gimmick.

'We jumped at the opportunity to utilise contemporary methods to market to young people. We're always on the lookout for new and emerging technologies which can add impact to our marketing mix, and the Generation project was an ideal testing ground for SMS technology. We learnt a lot through this pilot scheme, in particular we underestimated how much time it would initially take to capture data in the form of mobile numbers. Next time we would consider offering substantial incentives to tempt people in. As a forward thinking marketing department we are eager to engage with people through mobile technology as part of a wider campaign. We recognise that traditional methods of communication such as print are becoming outmoded and we want to utilize mediums which encourage a dialogue.'

www.pocket-culture.co.uk / www.blinkmedia.org / www.pilot-theatre.com