

Pilot theatre: developing relationships with audiences through digital media

Overview

This case study looks at how Pilot Theatre's use of new media channels in development, production and marketing of its live performances helps the organisation to attract and engage young theatre-goers. In particular, this study focuses on Pilot Theatre's regular video podcasts and the use of various digital platforms to create / promote their new work, Looking for JJ.

Background

Pilot are a national touring theatre company, currently resident at York Theatre Royal. The organisation has a strong track record of using technology – ten years ago, the company was the first to provide a CD-Rom version of a theatre programme, for their production of Lord of the Flies.

Pilot Theatre have a digital strategy which has at its core the company's live theatre work. Pilot Theatre's website wraps around this, with other digital projects connected to the website on a spoke-and-hub model: Facebook, MySpace, iTunes and Second Life. The company has a reputation for integrating technology into its work, without fundamentally altering the uniqueness of the live theatre experience. Marcus Romer (Artistic Director) sees parallels between the creative process of developing a play for performance and the creative process of using digital technology – using experimentation to find new ways of doing things.

'What I think Romer is on to is that the fact that theatre doesn't have to sacrifice its unique selling point - its liveness - to play with new technologies, and that it shouldn't try to be cinema.'
Lyn Gardner, *Guardian Arts Blog*, 7 June 2007.

Origins of the project

At its core, Pilot Theatre is interested in creating networks and communities of people both creating and consuming work. The theatre is also constantly looking for ways to build and extend relationships with its existing and potential future audience.

Pilot Theatre also recognises the increasing interest amongst audiences for two-way dialogue with the organisation, ways to personalise their experience and a more participatory way to consume theatre.

The organisation is therefore constantly experimenting with ways to create connections with the audience and involve a wider network of people in the creative process.

Objectives

Podcasts:

- To help existing content reach a wider audience

- To develop a closer relationship with the audience by sharing more information with audience, in a richer format
- To provide a 'face' to the organisation, by including staff discussing their work.
- To provide another entry point for users to access the organisation.
- To allow users to 'pull' relevant content from Pilot, rather than having to push this out to whole audience.

Looking for JJ:

- To involve the audience in the creative process – co-creation
- To provide insight into the creative process of writing and producing a play
- To enrich the final piece with audience input and review
- To engage a wider audience through existing digital media platforms which young people are already using
- To create digital experiences which both stand alone and act as part of a wider project, acting as a first point of contact with Pilot Theatre for new or remote audiences.

Process

Podcasts: The inspiration to produce video podcasts came from the availability of the technology itself. By playing with the software, staff identified this as a good way to distribute information about Pilot Theatre's successes and upcoming projects: easy and low cost to produce, easy and low cost for users to access.

Pilot Theatre have so far produced seven podcasts. These are created by compiling existing content (eg digital video files and music files produced as part of theatre projects and performances) and carrying out short interviews/ recording introductions with staff using equipment already owned by Pilot. This content is then edited together by a member of staff.

Because Pilot Theatre commission original work, they own the copyright for any commissions. Any additional contributors to podcasts are asked to sign permission, and those involved are encouraged to adopt the ethos of the theatre – to share their work to inspire creativity.

These podcasts are available for users to watch directly from the Pilot Theatre website (using free media playing software), or to subscribe to the podcast via iTunes – which is also free software available to download from the internet. The podcasts are free and anyone can subscribe.

The first few podcasts are fairly low quality compared to later ones, as staff were getting used to the technology. However, Pilot Theatre have decided to retain these early experiments on the website as an archive to allow people to see the development of the resource.

Looking for JJ: The issues explored in Anne Cassidy's novel include the nature of multiple identities amongst young people, and how this is expressed through various means – which has obvious parallels with the use of MySpace and other internet-based communications. Pilot Theatre created a MySpace profile for Alice Tully, the lead character, and used the social networking site to share drafts of the script and invite comments from interested audience members and peers. The site was designed by a 15 year old to give it the correct feel and ensure the tone was right - this site also aims to generate interest in the work from potential young audiences, whilst making its purpose clear (ie not actually pretending to be a young person).

The full script is also available on the Pilot Theatre website (to download or read online), and casting details were displayed on the site so that potential cast members could gain insight into the project before applying.

Although the play has not yet been performed, draft education packs are already available to download in PDF format from the website, and a promotional video is available on YouTube to generate interest in the play and provide a taster to potential audiences.

Resource implications

Podcasts take about half a day of staff time to make. Staff used existing materials and cheap / free extra content (eg interviews with other staff), and edited it together using free or low cost software. As described above, Pilot Theatre own the rights to commissioned work and are therefore free to use this material in podcasts.

There is no cost in setting up a MySpace profile besides time, and communicating online with interested people has saved the money and time it would take to have physical meetings. Similarly, putting the script online saved staff time during the audition process.

Outcomes

Video podcasts:

Podcasts have allowed Pilot Theatre to develop a deeper relationship with a committed sector of the audience.

Because the podcast subscriptions are run by iTunes, Pilot Theatre do not know the number of subscribers. However, web visits to the Pilot site have doubled in the past year, with around 50,000 page visits a month, with 4,000 downloads of the site's various resources.

Looking for JJ:

The long run up for the show has generated interest both from creative peers, people interested in working on the project and potential audience members.

The looking for JJ YouTube video has received around 800 views to date – months before the play is staged.

Providing artistic content on digital platforms means that audiences are able to have artistic experiences via media which suits their needs – they don't need to come to a performance to experience the project.

The casting process was speeded up by providing the script online. This meant that actors were able to decide whether they were interested in being involved or not rather than turning up cold to auditions, and were able to contribute to the creative process straight away audition, as they were already familiar with the work.

Key success factors

Podcasts:

- Existing video and audio content that could be repurposed for the podcasts means lower cost
- Video is a very engaging medium for audience, and one that they are familiar with
- Use of pull technology means that subscribers do not need to make an effort to keep in touch

Looking for JJ:

- Continually evolving content keeps audience returning
- Involving a wide network of people has enriched the creative process.
- Using multiple web-based media has allowed Pilot to create a community of interested people who may not have been involved otherwise.

Next steps

Pilot have recently employed their first Online Laureate – a writer in residence, creating work in digital spaces.

The organisation is currently developing an area in the virtual world Second Life and have issued a design brief for the space. Pilot are aiming to stage performances in Second Life, which will enable geographically remote audiences to experience live shows, and also enable Pilot to work creatively in a space with people from all over the world without the time, expense, inconvenience and environmental impact of real world meetings.