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Who is this How To... guide for?

Staff responsible for ensuring the widest distribution of the information generated inside their organisation to those outside their organisation. This is not about publishing and broadcasting but it is about opening up access and accessibility, supporting openness and transparency. This guide will help reduce the work in distributing information and in joining-up the data to make a real difference.

Joined up thinking, joined up data, joined up systems

Most of the time, the problem with information is that it is kept in something. Think about What's On: It might be in the organisation's planning system; it could be in the copy prepared for the brochure; it could be in the ticketing system; it might be in the website Content Management System (CMS); it might be in the emails to outlets for listings. It is not unusual to find all this information separately typed each time – and with the added risk of typos and crucial date/time mistakes. Yet it could all be generated from one source and fed around to

wherever it needs to go and whoever wants it.

Most of the time, the problem with customer information is that it arrives from different points of contact, through different channels, into different databases. Think about the record of customer behaviour in an organisation which charges for admission: The ticketing system will have a database which will record what tickets people buy. The website will have a separate database of people who register for Newsletters. The email system will have a separate database of customers extracted from the previous two sources and emailed. The Friends' scheme will have another database recording their memberships. And it can go on through participants in education projects, donors, sponsors, volunteers, and so on. In one organisation there were 12 separate databases with customer information. Yet it all needs to be joined up so we can see the 360 degree view of the customer and their relationships and inter-actions with the organisation.

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Customer Data Input

Perhaps the most valuable data you can ever capture from customers is that which they volunteer themselves. Since 'recognition' of the customer on the web can only be achieved to an extent by the use of 'cookies', the use of 'Registration' and 'Log-In' are the most valuable tools. In marketing terms, this is "Permission Marketing" and people will give you their preferences and interests, sign up for e-zines and Newsletters, and volunteer helpful information about themselves, with age and the details of the children in the family very important for personalisation and tailoring of content.

The question is: where does this information go? Some websites load it into the website CMS, and then it has to be exported to other software; however, some ticketing systems have a simple 'widget' that enables the data on the website to feed 'live' into the ticketing system database. Since this can open a 'session' on the ticketing system, the customer can be given their ticketing history, enabled to edit their record, and given the opportunity to create a truly personalised My

Page. Yet organisations struggle to achieve this with their suppliers and developers.

The semantic web

The inventors of the world wide web did not envisage it working this way, since open sharing was their intention from the start. Tim Berners Lee is therefore spearheading "the semantic web" which will enable data views – assembling the data from all sources – so getting the data out of the silohs. But there are already tools which make a difference in distributing and joining up content.

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Data Feeds

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds are used by many arts organisations to send data out. This may seem like 'push' but in fact it is 'pull' in the sense that recipients have to choose to receive the feed and then read it. There are various versions of RSS and a similar 'Atom' which is usually called RSS too.

Essentially the feed is an XML-based format for lists of hyperlinks – URLs back to web pages – with related information – metadata – to persuade people to open the link. Many feeds include the whole content, so What's On listings, new press releases and announcements, e-zines and bulletins. And the full range of media can be accommodated, including pictures, video, podcasts.

You can of course have multiple feeds of distinct character of content and separate RSS buttons for your blog, podcasts, etc. Some arts organisations have a What's On this week (or month) feed, and another for announcements of events going on-sale or of events approaching sell outs, and another for their latest news.

Since most search engines – Yahoo, Google, etc. – and browsers can read feeds, and there are also feed aggregators, the first step is to provide an RSS feed button on your website and/or blog. And of course you need to market your Feeds and persuade people to sign up. Some arts organisations give links to explain to people what RSS Feeds are: <http://www.newtheatrecardiff.co.uk/english/rss.asp>

Then you need to get the information from your website into your feeds. Fortunately some of this is automated and only needs you to edit the results, since the Content Management System may contain a feed library and there are web scraping tools to compile one. There is a good explanatory resource at <http://www.mnot.net/rss/tutorial/>

XML (Extensible Markup Language) feeds or 'schemas' are different from RSS in that this is essentially a machine-readable computer language which enables data to be communicated between databases. Since there are tools available to query, extract data and map its conversion from a database into XML, this makes it easier to take data from one database and re-publish it in another. There is a detailed technical

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guide at <http://www.xmlfiles.com/xml/>

The most obvious example is taking What's On performance data from a ticketing system database and using it to populate the CMS database of the website. Most ticketing systems already use XML feeds to transfer information from the ticketing back-end to their Internet ticketing module. Venues using event diary planning tools can also communicate data automatically to all distribution points. Examples of this joined-up communication of data internally include the Glasgow Concert Halls and the New Wolsey Theatre in Ipswich.

There are huge benefits to arts organisations from using RSS feeds and XML schemas in terms of efficiency and time-saving, as well as accuracy, especially if a "truth database" is created, a true comprehensive data view. And there can be financial advantages from supplying feeds. Some newspapers and magazines, hotel chains and restaurants are willing to pay for comprehensive What's On feeds if it saves them the cost of buying in data from others or compiling it for themselves. And these are then opportunities to reciprocal links and click-throughs back to your website.

'Live' on the web

Website visitors want absolutely up-to-date information and the immediacy of real-time transactions. RSS feeds and XML schemas will ensure that web pages can show the 'live' current information, including for example ticket availability. Some ticketing system suppliers now supply comprehensive suites of web modules to enable website developers to assemble their own purchase process and data flow while still connecting back 'live' to the ticketing system. By making the website the data cross-roads where the latest news is instantly available, content arrives as it is created, and relevant information is fed to customers who want it, the website becomes more valuable to its users and rises up the search engine rankings.

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Search Engine Marketing and Optimisation

This Guide cannot encompass everything about search engine marketing, except to say that what works changes regularly. The search engines seek to get better, refine their tools, and serve up more reliable results to the public, and therefore to you. Google predominates, and their free Google Analytics is a powerful tool for both understanding how your website works for users in practice and for tracking user behaviour to see whether you are serving up relevant and effective content.

Your first step should be to find out what people typed in to get to your web pages, since this **keyword research** is the foundation for understanding what the customers' think they are looking for. Did they then find it and were they converted? This will help find the negative keywords where people came wrongly to your website, and you can identify these to avoid click-throughs.

Many arts organisations are using **Google AdWords** and after some tuning can make them effective. Remember that simultaneously in the arts lots of organisations will be using the same generic terms – theatre, plays, drama, for example – so it is necessary to be as specific as possible in relation to your organisation and What's On. While this will deliver traffic, it is not helpful if the AdWords don't lead to relevant content on your landing page. Pages need to be as specific and as focussed as possible so the AdWord click leads straight to the right information, instantly recognisable as relevant. Bidding on generic terms or expensive competitive words may not deliver value for money, especially if click-throughs you pay for are unlikely to lead to conversions.

The obsession with **metatags and keywords**, and keyword density, can be unhealthy since what is important is whether your pages carry relevant content and people can find those pages from your content, titles and descriptions. Search Engines have moved on from relying solely on keywords and ranking pages according to their recurrence. There are many websites and offered solutions to help with Search Engine Optimisation (SEO): just look on Google, but check the dates of any articles.

Planning for SEO instead of for users is unhelpful now, since it is what users do which most affects results. The website and every web page needs a title and a sensible content related description with appropriate keywords and tags. Each item of content needs the same. And in offering rich media content, give it tags to at least explain what it is, if not making it accessible. User generated tags count for more. And balance images and graphics with truly valuable descriptive information.

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There is one important conclusion here: if it takes seconds to make something available for the widest distribution, make sure it is up-to-date and accurate. But it also only takes seconds to take something down, to change it for something better, to 'polish' to make it more effective.

If you have got the information, then use it, distribute it.