

Managing and Growing a Cultural Heritage Web Presence

A strategic guide

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Mike Ellis



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Published by Facet Publishing
7 Ridgmount Street, London WC1E 7AE
www.facetpublishing.co.uk

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-85604-710-4

First published 2011
Reprinted digitally thereafter

Text printed on FSC accredited material.



Typeset from author's files in 11/13 pt Garamond and Frutiger by Facet Publishing.
Printed and made in Great Britain by MPG Books Group, UK.

*This book is dedicated to the three amazing people
I share a house and a life with: my beautiful wife
and two extraordinarily wonderful boys.
Your support and patience has meant everything.*

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Acknowledgements

There are some people I'd particularly like to thank for helping me out as I put this book together. First, thanks to everyone who filled in the questionnaire or took the time to be interviewed: your input has been invaluable, and I really appreciate the time that you took to do this.

Second, thanks to the following for help well beyond the call of duty: Chris Book for the daily walk, ideas and inspiration as well as for input into the section on mobile web technologies; Nick Poole for a superb piece of proofreading and insight; Seb Chan for his incredible ideas and understanding about how metrics really work in a real-world scenario; Andy Powell for his input on Open Data; Frankie Roberto for his valuable contribution in helping me think about marketing from a more holistic perspective; and Peter Ellis for his indexing and proofreading wizardry. Finally, I'd like to thank my mum, who has been a rock and an inspiration for the last 38 years.

Glossary

AADL	Ann Arbor District Library
AI	Adobe Illustrator
AJAX	Asynchronous JavaScript And XML
AOB	Any Other Business
API	Application Programming Interface
app	application
AR	Augmented Reality
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy
CMS	Content Management System
CMYK	Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black
CPC	Cost Per Click
CSS	Cascading Style Sheets
CSV	Comma Separated Values
DPA	Data Protection Act
e-GIF	eGovernment Interoperability Framework
FOI	Freedom of Information
FTP	file transfer protocol
GPRS	General Packet Radio Service
GPS	Global Positioning System
HEX	Hexadecimal
HR	Human Resources
HTML	HyperText Markup Language
ID	identification
IP	Internet Protocol
IPR	Intellectual Property Rights

IT	Information Technology
J2ME	Java 2 Platform, Micro Edition
JSON	JavaScript Object Notation
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
LBS	Location Based Services
MLA	Museums, Libraries and Archives Council
MMS	multimedia messaging service
Ofcom	UK Office of Communications
OxIS	Oxford Internet Survey
PDF	Portable Document Format
PESTLE	Political, Economic, Social, Technological, Legal, Environmental
POC	point of contact
PPC	Pay Per Click
PR	Public Relations
PSD	Photoshop Document
QT	QuickTime
RGB	Red, Green, Blue
RSS	Real Simple Syndication
RTE	Rich Text Editor
SEO	Search Engine Optimization
SLA	Service Level Agreement
SMART	Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-bound
SMS	short messaging service
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
TLD	Top Level Domain
TOV	Tone of Voice
UAR	Urban Augmented Reality
UAT	User Acceptance Testing
UGC	User Generated Content
UKOLN	United Kingdom Office for Library and Information Networking
URI	Uniform Resource Identifier
URL	Uniform Resource Locator
W3C	World Wide Web Consortium
WAI	Web Accessibility Initiative
WAP	Wireless Application Protocol
WCMS	Web Content Management System
Wi-Fi	Wireless Fidelity
XML	EXtensible Markup Language
ZIP	compressed file

Introduction

About this book

Running a web presence and making it grow in ways that benefit your organization is hard. Really hard. It is also one of the most fun and exciting things you can choose to do.

One of the reasons it is so difficult is that it requires a huge array of diverse skills. In turn this means one of two things: you either need to employ and manage a big team of people, get them aligned in one strategic direction and then make sure that you're all working together; or if you are trying to do this with a small team – or even just you! – you will need to understand a lot about a lot.

Both of these approaches are difficult in different ways. You either have a big team and it takes time to get them into shape and working together, or you have an almost endless issue with lack of resource.

Cultural heritage website management requires a range of skills. The process isn't wholly technical, and it isn't wholly artistic. The best website owners are those who have a high level understanding of what the web can do for an organization as well as a good technical grasp of what can be done and the best way of doing it. Knowing what content is likely to resonate with audiences – and where to get this content – is also a vital skill.

Cultural heritage organizations are equally diverse. The content is about as good as it comes: compelling, personal and rich. The people who look after this content – curators, archivists and librarians – are

passionate about what they do, and are about the most interesting people you could hope to meet. At the same time, these organizations aren't always the best at moving quickly, at responding to what they often perceive as being 'risky'. Out there on the web, small companies are born, grow and are sold on in about the same time as it takes to get a cultural heritage exhibition or collections management system commissioned, built and live on the web. Sometimes this can be frustrating, especially if what you're trying to do is actually quite simple from a content or technical perspective but made difficult by politics or stakeholders or just plain old 'institutional treacle'.

There is also – as always – the issue of money and resource, as beautifully articulated by Dan Zambonini in Figure 0.1:¹

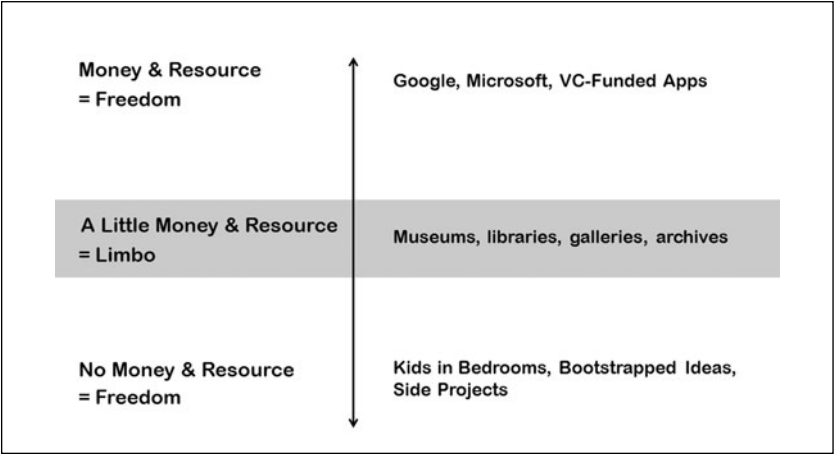


Figure 0.1 'A little money & resource = limbo'

As this diagram illustrates, if you've got huge budgets and teams or – at the other end of the scale – there is only one of you, you can move quickly. If you're somewhere in the middle (as many cultural heritage institutions are), with some people and some money, you're often in a 'limbo' state – stuck somewhere where you are unable to make things happen rapidly.

One of the key themes running through this book is the examination of the means by which you – as website manager, owner of website or interested staff member – can move yourself into a position in which you become more empowered. In some scenarios, this empowerment will

come from recruiting great people into a well rounded team. In others, perhaps those where big teams (or any teams!) aren't possible, this empowerment will be more about finding tools, techniques and approaches that will enable you to start making incremental improvements to the way that you and your organizational web presence works. These improvements may seem small when taken in isolation, but together they all point to a more strategic, complete and satisfying approach to the web.

What this book is not

There are many, many books out there to help people with the technical aspects of building websites. And there are thousands if not millions of web pages offering advice and techniques on how to write good cascading style sheets (CSS), make your website viable economically or appear higher up in Google. This isn't one of those publications. Each of these issues will be covered, but not from a tactical angle. The tactical stuff will always be more up to date online, and you'll probably get better advice by talking to peers than you ever could by reading, anyway. Instead, this book will look at the strategic issues, hopefully providing some insight into the day-to-day activity of keeping your sites up and running with fresh content as well as the longer term horizon of growing as your content, visitors and working environment changes.

There will be some technical information, but it will be less specific than the kinds of advice you'll find elsewhere. If you want to know – for example – which is the best content management system (CMS) to use, you won't find the answer here. If you want to know how content management can make a difference to the ways in which you work, and some of the challenges thrown up by a content-managed approach, you're in the right place.

In order to ground the content in the 'real world', this book has been written with the help of research from managers who are managing cultural heritage web presences on a daily basis. There is no one way to do this, of course, and certainly no one 'right' way, but the hope is that by understanding how other people do it, you'll come away enlightened and inspired. You should hopefully also gain some insight into how

people like you are dealing with the challenges of different sized and shaped organizations, or how a one-person team manages to do extraordinary things on zero budget.

Website

There is an accompanying website for this book which you can find at: **<http://heritageweb.co.uk/book>**. Here you'll find examples, templates and other downloadable information that you can take back into your organization and adapt for your needs. Throughout the book you'll find direct links to relevant places on the site. You can follow these, or just go to the address above and search by chapter, topic or keyword.

In this book. . .

The book is structured into ten chapters, each of which can be read alone or as part of a whole:

Chapter 1 looks at what you have now and begins to put some framing around your current operating environment. We'll look at the strategic landscape of heritage organizations online – and focus in on where you are in this context.

Chapter 2 gets down to the nitty-gritty of online strategy – ways that you can start to put your site into some kind of wider context. This chapter looks at some techniques to help you take charge of your site and begin to step outside of the reactive mode that often overcomes many website owners. It looks at the best way of articulating strategy, how to go about getting stakeholders on board and provides some simple templates to help pull your strategy into shape.

Chapter 3 delves into the content on your site; how to begin to get it into some kind of shape, how Web Content Management Systems (WCMSs) can be brought to bear on the content you have, and some of the challenges that you'll face when trying to keep your content fresh. We'll also look at what it means to have content *outside* your site, and how this makes your website into a web *presence*.

Chapter 4 looks at how you can most effectively get people to come along to your site by marketing it. We'll consider online marketing, social

media marketing and offline marketing, and try to understand how you can make as much impact as possible with restricted time and budget.

Chapter 5 considers policy and guidelines: the scaffolding that sits underneath your bigger vision for the site. We'll look at how best to determine policy priorities for your web presence, and then how to begin to articulate these in ways that support your online strategy.

Chapter 6 looks at traffic and metrics. Here we'll tie in various elements of your strategy approach – we will, for instance, put the question 'What does success look like?' into a strategic context – and then examine some of the tools and techniques that can help guide both you and your stakeholders in determining whether your online presence is demonstrating signs of this success.

Chapter 7 gives an overview of the social web, and places this in a heritage context. We'll look at a measured social media strategy and the various channels that you can use to reach out to new and exciting audiences. We'll also look at scenarios where issues like authority and brand are potentially threatened by these approaches, and examine ways in which these issues can be mitigated.

Chapter 8 focuses on the specific challenges thrown up by website redevelopment projects. Here we'll spend some time looking at how to go about writing the key documents you'll need to work with external agencies: website briefs, functional and technical specifications and project documents.

Chapter 9 looks at some of the incoming technologies which you – as someone who looks after a cultural heritage web presence – should be aware of. These include machine readable data, feeds, Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) and mobile.

Chapter 10 looks at how you can adapt and evolve your approaches as you go along, taking on board user and internal feedback and feeding this back into your strategy framework.

Reference

- 1 www.slideshare.net/dmje/the-benefits-of-doing-things-differently/71.

1

Evaluating what you have now

Introduction

Before you can begin to understand how to move your web presence forward, it is important that you understand what you have now. This not only means having a full knowledge of your current website(s) – their size, scope, number of authors, amount of content and so on – but also having a clear view of the current landscape within which your heritage organization operates, both online and offline.

The role of institutions on the web changes constantly, and has been changing since they first started being online. Initially, organizations often find themselves online almost by accident, usually as a result of an enthusiastic staff member spending some of their spare time uploading basic web pages to a server somewhere. Very often, the growth of a site follows an organic path, particularly in its early days: as enthusiastic and web-literate staff members arrive at the organization, interest and competency grows; then as they leave, the site stultifies.

Typically, sites move from this early phase into one where organizational perspectives about the web shift from niche activity into something else – if not core, at least *more* core to the day-to-day activities of the institution. As organizations began to understand the potential the web offered to widen reach and access to their assets, so the activity of ‘doing the web’ became more central, too. The stakeholders in these institutions now mostly (although not always – we’ll come to that later. . .) see a strong web presence as being an integral part of the other activities they carry out day to day.

To make things more complicated, the ‘new organization’ online isn’t any longer an X-paged walled-garden entity which has boundaries and well understood rules. Instead, with the advent of Web 2.0 and other third-party services, museums and heritage organizations are moving towards a much looser aggregate of pieces of content and functionality. Even if you don’t actively engage in setting up these third-party sites, you’ll probably find that someone else has – and here is one of the biggest challenges that the social web brings. Getting a handle on ‘external’ content like this is an increasingly important part of any web manager’s role. Again, we’ll look at this in more depth in Chapter 7 ‘The social web (Web 2.0)’.

Often as a website manager coming into a new organization, you’ll find yourself in a position where you inherit a presence with this kind of history. In this or any environment, there are two things which will help you immensely when considering your web presence: first, finding ways of enumerating the physical, content and social assets of your online presence, and second, understanding how your particular context fits into the wider picture: the ‘landscape’ in which your content and assets exist. This latter consideration is one of the main areas where many sites (not just cultural heritage ones) often fail. It is all very well having a fantastic website, but if the audience – your audience – don’t want it, or if it doesn’t fit with their daily lives, you will almost definitely fail in your aspirations.

The web today

Before you can really begin to understand how your web presence can impact on, or play a part in, people’s lives it is important to look at how your organization fits into a much bigger picture online.

Multiple analogies can be brought to bear on why this is important, but for now let’s consider a newly opened shop, filled with wonderful and inspiring items. Never before have such items been seen: they are beautiful and engaging, and everyone who sees them is astounded at the quality and richness that they have discovered. There is a problem, however: the owner of the shop only has the money to open it twice a week. It is also situated in a quiet alley downtown: passing traffic is

minimal. The owner does what he can, but the small quantity of trade is barely enough to maintain him. Up the road, on the busy and high-rent high street, a global chain of supermarkets has opened a branch. It is full of low quality, low cost goods. Some things are even free. The supermarket is full of wide-eyed customers, dashing from aisle to aisle and filling their baskets with endless consumables.

This example, although hackneyed and rather obvious in the points that it makes, is actually rather useful at highlighting some of the issues that face us when trying to make an impact with our limited staff resources, time and budgets. Actually, in the real world, things are rather more extreme; it is – as we probably all know – incredibly cheap (often free) to create a website: we don't even have to find the minimal rent that the owner in our story has to find. We – as cultural heritage institutions – have wonderful and engaging objects. We have stories to tell that we think people will want to hear. But we're not the supermarket chain: we don't have anywhere near the budget, marketing power or brand that they have.

The point of this story isn't that the supermarket will 'win', or that the shop owner is destined to fail. Nor is it that you'll only find quality away from the rush and dash of the big brands. The point is that the web is mind-blowingly big: sprawling, changing, anarchic. Douglas Adams famously described Space like this: 'Space is big. You just won't believe how vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big it is. I mean, you may think it's a long way down the road to the chemist's, but that's just peanuts to space.'¹ This is an equally apt description of the size and scope of the web today.

Not only that, but the people who use the web use it in many, many different ways for a huge number of different things. More importantly – as we shall see as we go along – they will often use content in ways that surprise, too.

Let's have a look at some facts and figures in order to put all this into some kind of context. In June 2009, Microsoft launched a search engine called Bing² and in their accompanying launch blog post they said this:

In 1997 there were around 26M pages (URLs [Uniform Resource Locators]) on the Web. Today we estimate there are more than 1 trillion pages of content. In 1997 the Web was

mostly text. Today it combines video, images, music, with new data formats emerging every day. The amount of available data has grown exponentially. An average person would need six hundred thousand decades of nonstop reading to read through the information.³

In terms of audiences, Internet World Stats⁴ suggests that, as of the time of writing, around 1.7 billion people are 'internet users' (anyone over two years of age who has been online in the last 30 days). Granted, this is only 25% of the world's population, but the growth is exponential, with mobile usage expected to have even more of an impact on these figures in the future. By the time you read this, of course, the figures will have changed dramatically – but it is easy for us to predict that both the amount of content available and the number of readers will have increased rather than decreased.

One of the major challenges facing organizations online – and one of the main driving forces behind taking a more strategic approach to the web – is that this environment becomes increasingly competitive as time goes on. Finding ways to ensure that cultural heritage is represented and promoted online is our job; a job that begins with understanding what we have and how we might fit with the daily lives of our web users.

Content and technology trends

Content on the internet is changing in profound and radical ways almost every day. This makes it an exciting and dynamic place to work, but also a frustrating one. Getting a handle on which trends are merely fads and which ones are important or even groundbreaking is at first examination a thankless task.

Technology company Gartner coined the phrase 'Hype Cycle' to describe the analysis of emerging trends. Figure 1.1 shows how this cycle looks.

The curve is interesting because it suggests how people often respond to new technologies: first, there is a trigger as a new technology enters the market; second, there is a peak of interest as the hype takes hold, a peak that over-inflates the potential of the technology; then there is a trough as most people decide that the technology doesn't live up to the