Lower Manhattan Cultural Council

Training, Networking, Talks: Arts Advancement Series

Boost Your Social Media Presence

Questions for Nico Daswani:
Internet & Social Media

Nico Daswani is an arts worker / cultural organizer, the Co-Founder of Create Culture, and is currently the Program Director at the Asian American Arts Alliance (a4).

www.aaartsalliance.org
www.createculture.org

In 2012, social media remains an evolving terrain in which artists and organizations must determine which platforms, levels of participation, and tracking methods are most effective and sustainable for their own needs. To inform this process, LMCC invited six artists and arts professionals who are effectively using social media to share their approaches, successes, and lessons learned.

1. *Briefly describe your work as an artist and any other roles or affiliations you have as an arts professional.*

   I am an arts worker / cultural organizer. My goal is to work towards placing the arts at the heart of civic participation and intercultural dialogue. I have developed programs including gatherings, residencies, tours, festivals and other events that aim to help people connect in meaningful ways. I am currently the Program Director at the Asian American Arts Alliance (a4), New York's cultural council for the Asian American community. Historically, a4 has been a central node for gathering and disseminating information for and about the community. So social media is a very important consideration for us. I am also the Co-Founder of Create Culture, a creative online platform for artists and arts workers across the world to present their work and culture, learn from others, and collaborate.

2. *When and how did you start using social media professionally? How and why do you use it now? Please be sure to name the platforms you use.*

   In 2008 I became aware of an online platform called Ning, which allows you to **create your own network.** This is what we used for Create Culture. The amazing thing about it is that for a monthly fee payment ($2.95 / $24.95 / $59.95 depending on the type of account) you get a full back-end infrastructure, templates, the latest add-ons and security updates, and it all lives on Ning's servers. We have more than 3,000 profiles on Create Culture with tens of thousands of images and videos. It would be cost prohibitive for us to run such a network if we had built it from the ground up as we would need to buy several servers, but this set-up makes it very accessible for anyone to become a network creator. The one big caveat is that Ning owns the information (but then so does Facebook), however you can export your member data. Creating the network is one thing, managing and growing it is quite another!

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I was happy enough with Ning that soon after I started as Program Director at a4 I wanted a4 to also have a Ning network. People are creating profiles, promoting events, posting opportunities and contacting each other so it is a (partial) representation of the community in real time. Since a4 acts as a platform for information sharing and dissemination, it seemed natural that we would move in that direction.

I have personal profiles on a4, Create Culture and LinkedIn. I actually cancelled my Facebook account recently. I did this simply because I felt I was already on enough platforms and the time I was spending on Facebook did not seem worth it. I did create a new Facebook account simply so that I can be an administrator on the Facebook pages for a4 and for Create Culture.

3. ***Do you use any tools or methods to track readership, website traffic, click-throughs, shares or other evidence that you are reaching and engaging people? If so, which tools and why?***

Measuring engagement begins by defining what you mean by engagement. We are in the process of trying to figure this out, and part of the challenge is weeding through all the hype about numbers (of fans, of followers, etc.) and trying to get to the bottom of whether people value what we do, if we help them in some way, and how we can anticipate how best new technologies can help us fulfill our organizational goals in the future.

For monitoring and reporting (to our constituents as well as to funders), I use three main tools: Google Analytics, Ning and Constant Contact. On Google Analytics, I look at metrics such as page views, unique visitors and bounce rate. I compare month-to-month and six-month periods to see if there are any significant changes. Constant Contact is what we use for our email newsletter. We look at open rates and click-through rates, and try different strategies for email subject headers to maximize open rates and for organizing the content of the newsletter to maximize click-throughs. Do not underestimate the importance of an email title!

Through Ning, I get data from each member who signs up, so I can export lists and organize people by discipline, borough and other metrics that are helpful when reporting on our constituents and when doing specific outreach. If we had more time and resources, I would like to investigate the value of each metric on Google Analytics and think more deeply about which metrics we should care about most. I don't think all these metrics are equal in importance, and they need to be interpreted more carefully.

4. ***If you have one great success story about using social media, please share it.***

There are a few. I use social media really as a tool for helping make connections offline, so I have many examples of people who did not know each other who then met online on one of my platforms, have struck up a relationship and gone on to meet and work on projects. Sort of like how a dating site works!

5. ***Please share the most important lesson you've learned using social media – or a "mistake" you think that others could learn from.***

I think the most important lesson I have learned using social media is that for it to be effective, you have to commit to having a deep engagement with you peers and audience. This means for example not just posting Facebook updates regularly about your events, or simply liking people's updates, but also spending time commenting on people's posts, helping make connections, promoting projects of other people, and basically being part of the community in the way that you might be offline. Mainly, it has to be genuine.

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I have heard about elected officials who now say that they disregard online petitions, even those with several thousand signatures, simply because they know how easy it has become to "like" or sign a petition for a cause and so they question the personal investment of the people who have signed. They also say that they would take more notice if they received ten letters in the mail about that same cause, because writing a letter takes more effort. We live in a society that is obsessed with achieving quick success, and many think that the Internet makes this more possible. I think this is an illusion. There is no silver bullet.

6. How do you manage and prioritize your time and effort on social media?

I have cut down considerably on social media in the last year, mainly in an effort to focus and contribute more meaningfully. I have a young family and so to a certain extent that decision was made for me. My colleagues and I are still active on our platforms, and when we have events or announcements we post these on Facebook and Twitter (on our organizational profiles and those of colleagues) and we try to promote peers and partners who are doing important work.

7. What do you consider to be important "dos and don'ts" for using social media?

Do:
- Experiment, try different strategies. I don't think there is such a thing as a social media expert, the field is too young, moving so fast, so take into consideration what some people advise, but don't be afraid to try new things and to go against the grain. Some things will work for you, some won't. For example, try putting a different subject header in your next newsletter (like try asking a question in your header), and see if your open rate increases.
- Try out new platforms and online tools, and don't hesitate to cancel them immediately if they don't work out for you, whatever the hype about them. You have to feel that the tool is right for you and that you can commit to using it for the foreseeable future.
- Lock up your privacy as much as possible. Restrict your accounts well and know that whenever Facebook and others introduce new "updates" the default settings are usually set on the lowest privacy protection.
- However big or small your network of friends/followers/constituents, focus on using social media to deepen your relationship with them rather than expanding for the sake of numbers. I know funders like numbers, but like all of us they too need educating about how to most effectively judge and measure success with social media.

Don't:
- Feel like you have to reply to every post, comment, tweet. It makes you look like you are not doing much else! And there are lots of other ways to spend your time (with your kids?).
- Check your Facebook account in your bed.
- Repeat information you hear on social media until you know the information to be true
- Forget to pick up the phone and call your friends/colleagues/constituents. I read a recent article in *The New York Times* where the writer argues that social media actually weakens our close relationships because we feel less the need to meet and be together because we see each other more online. I am not sure if that is true, but we should connect offline more nonetheless.