Online Marketing Tools and Small Arts Organizations: A Case Study on the Centre of Visual Arts and Research (CVAR) in Cyprus

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Abstract

As the world wide web and the social media platforms and tools grow bigger by each minute in an online world characterized by Big Data and data spaces, cultural organizations, especially the small ones, struggle to make the most of the new opportunities. The Internet, and specifically the websites and social media, have become essential components in a new marketing mix for cultural organizations. In this paper we explore how these tools contribute to a small arts organization's marketing strategy, what needs they satisfy, what advantages they offer, and what factors limit their effective implementation.

Using the Centre of Visual Arts and Research (CVAR) in Cyprus as a case study, this paper explores the deployment of online marketing tools by small arts organizations. Looking specifically at the museum's website and social media presence, this research outlines CVAR's online presence, visibility and relationship with wider audiences. The study – conducted between late 2016 and early 2017 – has the explicit aim to help CVAR achieve its marketing goals; it is one of few such studies using Greek or Cypriot museums as a setting. To evaluate CVAR's website, we conducted a survey via an online questionnaire that is based on the Minerva Framework. To evaluate CVAR's social media presence, we interviewed the museum's social media managers and conducted a content analysis of CVAR's Facebook and Twitter accounts. Results indicate that CVAR's online presence has an informative character but requires overall development using a more marketing-oriented and strategic approach towards supporting museum's online presence, expanding audiences, seeking new sources of income, addressing sustainability issues and prospects, maintaining and/or developing educational roles and specific schemes, and supporting the local communities. The conclusions drawn from our CVAR website and social media study can contribute to the reshaping of the online presence of small arts organizations.

Keywords

art organization, social media, websites, online marketing tools

1. Introduction

In a competitive and globalized 21st century, non-profit cultural organizations are increasingly adopting online marketing tactics to attract public interest, expand their audiences and claim a better financial share from the available national funding [1] [2] [3]. Art-related non-profit organizations, especially small ones, need to promote their aims and objectives, taking into account the limits of their human and financial resources, specialized expertise and influence in wider society. To establish and maintain their branding and reputation, as well as to reach and influence diverse audiences, small arts non-profits often rely on digital tools [4]. Websites and social media campaigns enable them to present and communicate their mission, aims and objectives in an affordable way, as well as to claim their place in the global online cultural community.

With these factors in mind, this paper is the first to examine the website and social media presence of the Centre of Visual Arts and Research (CVAR). CVAR started out and remains a relatively small cultural organization, founded by the art collectors Kostas and Rita Severis in 2014 in Nicosia, Cyprus. It hosts a collection which numbers thousands of the founders' items, including paintings, traditional clothes, photographs and other artefacts. CVAR also has a library of 6,000

books, as well as rooms for activities, workshops and seminars. Since its founding, the museum has used its website and social media accounts to shape a recognizable identity and attract wider audiences. In this paper, we examine how the website and social media have affected CVAR's marketing strategies. Our research questions relate to the ways in which the website and social media are integrated into the overall marketing strategy, the needs and goals they cover, and to evaluate the strategic online marketing of the organization.

2. Small cultural organizations and the rise of web tools

For more than 50 years, museums and cultural organizations have used diverse technologies to record and organize their collections and to communicate events, starting with documentation systems and databases, and moving to onsite exhibition applications and the use of the Internet via websites and portals [5] [6]. Over the last decade, the rise of Web 2.0, which also witnessed the emergence of social media networks, has revolutionized the way cultural organizations communicate by providing major new channels for interaction with their audience [7] [8].

2.1. Websites

Museum websites evolved from simple webpages in the 1990s containing basic information to 21st century online catalogs that include digital representations of objects, virtual exhibitions and downloadable multimedia content [9] [10]. Websites have developed past the stage of being mere publishing tools [11]. A website can now be the digital showcase of a cultural organization, as well as the driving force for its marketing [12] [2]. It is a communication tool, providing opportunities for interactive dialogue between the organization and its members, and an important medium for the exchange of ideas among members [13]. An effective website can deepen the relationship between its users and the organization, transforming users and members into visitors, volunteers, even staff and donors [14].

The unique features of websites present opportunities for cultural organizations to develop a public directly from Internet users whom they treat as target visitors. Some cultural organizations, however, do not avail themselves to these opportunities and continue to use websites exclusively for educational and informational purposes [9]. Bernstein believes that museum websites should be focused on marketing [13]. Therefore, the design should be based on meeting the needs and expectations of Internet visitors. An organization needs to have a good understanding of how to design and orient its site to meet its goals [9] [15]. Aldridge and Tomlinson (2004, cited in [13]) also propose that the design of a website should meet the needs and expectations of each class of user, in order to enhance their relationship with the organization.

Websites have the power to expand the reach of even the smallest cultural organization. They also allow people who may not be able to visit the museum physically to engage with it in new and innovative ways [5] [9]. A strategically designed website is also vital for building a brand at the local, national and international levels [9] [16].

2.2. Social media

Social media networks, a hybrid form of marketing according to Mangold and Faulds [17] combine the characteristics of traditional marketing tools, where information is shaped by the organization and directed at the client, with the potential of virality, where the content and frequency of information exchanged among users is decentralized and beyond the control of the social media managers. Social media can also be considered hybrid in the sense that 1) they are made up of mixed technologies and tools allowing instant communication in real time; and 2) they can be accessed on media and platforms with global capabilities (e.g., Facebook, YouTube and blogs).

Social media have become a global phenomenon. Scientists from different fields have begun to study the impact they have on economic, social, and personal behavior and thinking [18].

Constantinides and Fountain use the following definition, which outlines social media as Web 2.0 applications: "The Web 2.0 is a collection of open source, interactive and user-controlled web applications expanding the experiences, knowledge and market power of the users as participants in business and social processes. Web 2.0 applications support the creation of informal users' networks facilitating the flow of ideas and knowledge by allowing the efficient generation, dissemination, sharing and editing / refining of information" [19].

The same authors go on to highlight the impact of social media for marketers noting that: "Web 2.0 presents businesses with new challenges but also new opportunities for getting and staying in touch with their markets, learning about the needs and opinions of their customers as well as interacting with them in a direct and personalized way".

The impact of social media on traditional practices is enormous, as they have changed the one-way nature of communications to one that is interactive, promotes active participation and, therefore gives more control to the public [20]. Social media provide multiple points of communication and can contribute to building and maintaining a community of members. This multi-level communication model has replaced traditional communication between the museums and their members [14]. Social media provide opportunities for more personalized and interactive forms of communication, contributing to the deepening of organizations' relationships with the public [20].

Unlike other marketing strategies, such as membership programs, that provide benefits of both the material (free entry or e-shop discounts) for users and non-material for managers of the social media accounts (such as a sense of social responsibility and association with others), social media networks tend to offer only non-material benefits [21]. Social media platforms have a number of benefits for organizations. They are low cost, they offer opportunities to reach new audiences, they speed-deliver messages to the public, and they can promote engagement between the organization and its audience [21] [20]. On the other hand, the use of social media tools presents challenges, particularly in terms of transparency, responsibility, reliability, time and privacy for managers. Perhaps the biggest challenge is that they require a significant time investment to be implemented effectively [22].

Kidd studied the use of social media in cultural organizations and categorized them into three organizational contexts: (1) for marketing, to promote the image of the organization; (2) for inclusivity, so as to develop a real-life and online community; and (3) for collaboration, which goes beyond communication and promotes engagement with the public [23].

Technological developments, applications and ideas introduced by social media have favored the appearance of an active, critical public that both consumes and produces content. The consumer becomes a "prosumer" (i.e., a producer-consumer), breaking the barrier between the markets and the public, opening a dialogue with enterprises, and generating products and services responding to their needs [9] [24]. In the cultural sector, the use of social media has also led to a new type of consumer, the cultural participant. Social media technology allows people to easily communicate their views on cultural products, promoting the product more efficiently than the cultural organization itself. This enables people to create and share their own artistic creations and allows anyone to be an artist, changing the prevailing view about artistic hierarchy [25] [6]. Therefore, Web 2.0 emerges as a global network where information can be created jointly both by individuals and also by organizations [3].

As museums began to strategically adopt Web 2.0 tools, Srinivasan et al. introduced the term "Museum 2.0" [26]. This term attempts to describe the use of Web 2.0 tools to create an environment in which museums improve people's lives, as well as build and strengthen diverse communities by promoting social interaction between community members. Web 2.0 and social media are recognized by cultural organizations as key tools through which to interact with visitors in the future [27]. They can replace traditional one-way communication models with more interactive ones, encouraging participatory communication between museums and their audiences

[28]. These tools further allow museums to create new learning opportunities based on engagement and involvement of members and visitors, thus transforming their museum experience [6].

The integration of Internet technologies into the consumption of cultural products has been recognized as an important trend in the cultural sector [29]. It enables museums to redesign traditional products and promote new cultural experiences involving a global network of potential visitors [30]. In achieving this aim, cultural organizations must deal with two major challenges: (1) how to exploit social media to build a relationship with the public in order to communicate their message, and (2) how to enable consumers to participate in the creation of cultural products [3]. These challenges add to the need of a deeper understanding of how cultural organizations use digital resources, a key question in the success of cultural organizations in the Information Age [31].

3. Websites and social media as marketing tools

In the for-profit sector, the Internet has long been considered a valuable marketing tool and an important part of business strategy [32]. Non-profit organizations, such as museums and cultural organizations, on the other hand, have been slower in adopting the technologies available [9]. This is partly due to the conservative nature of the cultural sector, which focuses more on its "product" rather than on its "customer" [33] [34] [35]; workers in this sector have also been slower to accept new technologies by [16]. Moreover, non-profit cultural organizations require targeted strategies, deviating from the marketing strategies in the for-profit sector. Another challenge, of course, is lack of funding [36] [34].

Given the growing requirement for museums and other cultural organizations to achieve a good understanding of the public's needs and expectations[37] [38] [39] [40], more research is needed on the use of websites and social media. Visitors now expect a more sophisticated and satisfying experience from the museum and expect technology and the Internet to be used to provide these experiences [41]. Combining both conventional and online actions, cultural organizations can more effectively achieve their goals, including extroversion, accessibility, visiting, education, research and funding [42].

4. Methodology

To analyze CVAR's online presence, specifically their website and social media activity, we opted for the following methodological approaches. For the website we used the Minerva Framework to examine the organizations's website regarding the perceptions of the site developers and an online survey with the visitors. For social media we focused on CVAR's Facebook and Twitter accounts, and opted for a content analysis and interviews with CVAR's social media managers. Below, we provide more details of the chosen methodological approaches:

1) We chose to base the survey on the Minerva Framework of the European Commission, after considering various frameworks for evaluating websites [43] [44] [45] [46]. The framework sets out principles that determine the quality of a cultural website, which include the requirements of being "Transparent, Effective, Maintained, Accessible, User-centred, Responsive, Multi-lingual, Interoperable, Managed, [and] Preserved". Based on these principles, we prepared a questionnaire and in May 2017 sent it to CARDET, the organization that had built and were also running CVAR's website.

2) An online user survey was conducted between November 2016 and April 2017. By documenting the impressions and expectations of the website's users, the survey was a means of evaluating CVAR's website from the perspective of online visitors. We aimed to identify features of the website with the greatest impact.

3) CVAR's social media accounts underwent content analysis. We collected data from the museum's Facebook, Twitter and YouTube accounts between November 2016 and April

2017. Data related to the frequency and type of CVAR's communication with its online audience.

4) Finally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with CVAR employees and volunteers who manage the social media accounts (May 2017).

The limitations of the methodological approaches were the following: the employees from both CARDET and CVAR had limited experience in participating in this kind of research because they could not answer technical questions (specifically the Minerva Framework and interviews respectively); additionally, we had no quantitative data on CVAR website traffic that would allow us to shape the profile of the organization's online visitors.

5. Results

Our four-fold methodological approach explores the ways in which CVAR has integrated the tools such as websites and social media into their communication practices, and assesses the impact of these tools.

5.1. Evaluation of the CVAR website

The quality of a website is difficult to fully define and understand. According to Brajnik, it depends on three groups of factors related to the site's functionality, performance and development [44]. Web designers, developers and users can easily identify when a website is lacking in these [46]. Patterson and Radtke underline that websites must approach the information they manage in a way that is light, layered and linked [11]. Hill et al. state that a website must have three features: magnetism, stickiness and elasticity [12]. Studies such as Selim's focus on evaluating specific categories of websites [46]. In the cultural field, it is also worth mentioning the efforts of Pallas and Economides, who developed the MUSEF [45], and of Blas et al., who developed MILE [43], both of which are tools to assess the quality and impact of a museum website.

For our approach, we used the model proposed by the Minerva program to evaluate the CVAR website. The Minerva Framework defines common principles for websites of small and medium-sized cultural organizations, such as CVAR. Garibaldi also used Minerva as an assessment framework with which to study modern art museums in Italy [24]. It is based upon ten quality principles: "Transparent, Effective, Maintained, Accessible, User-centred, Responsive, Multi-lingual, Interoperable, Managed, [and] Preserved" [47]. Each principle contains a series of criteria, ranging from 6 to 17 per principle. A set of tests and questions based on these criteria were complemented by ourselves in cooperation with the CARDET company that developed and maintained the CVAR website to gain further insight into the quality compliance of this site.

As mentioned, the evaluation of the CVAR website was based on the ten Minerva project principles. Compliance with each principle was assessed by a series of questions answered by a website evaluator. Our questionnaire was filled both by us and by staff from CARDET, the company responsible for the design of the website. The questionnaire gave the opportunity to assess the compliance status of the CVAR website by measuring how many of the criteria were met for each principle. The results are presented in the table below.

MINERVA quality principles	Number of criteria for each principle	Number of criteria that CVAR's website satisfies	Percentage (%) of criteria that CVAR's website satisfies
Transparent	11	10	91
Effective	17	11	65
Maintained	11	3	27

Accessible	6	5	83
User-centred	8	0	0
Responsive	11	0	0
Multi-lingual	10	8	80
Interoperable	12	2	17
Managed	9	4	44
Preserved	15	15	100

Table 1: Number of criteria that CVAR's website satisfies for each principle

The data summarized in Table 1 show that the site has a low compliance across four of the ten principles of quality (marked in grey background), specifically, in terms of being well-maintained, interoperable, user-centered (human-centered), and responsive. The website also scores just below 50% in terms of being well-managed. On the other hand, the website scores very highly in terms of being transparent, accessible and multi-lingual.

Low scores in the user-centered and interoperability criteria are justified by the lack of interactive elements on CVAR's website, such as a discussion forum or blog, educational programs or activities, and overall no potential for interaction with the user. Another element missing is links to a wider network of cultural websites and information; the website does not support metadata collection tools or distributed search tools and technologies that would provide access to directories and databases. In general, CVAR's website is quite static, highlighting the need to increase scores in the low criteria and maintain good performance in the high-scoring ones.

5.2. Survey on CVAR's website

To get further insight into CVAR's website performance, we ran an online survey by compiling and distributing a questionnaire enabling users to evaluate the website. Our survey was similar to the one by Lopatovska, who examined the relationship between specific features of a website with visitors' impressions and the resulting impact on their intention to visit the website again [48].

We aimed to assess which features of the website were the most important to visitors. We included questions evaluating content, usability (site navigation), searchability, content handling, user interaction, effectiveness, and finally the overall impressions of the user and their intention to revisit CVAR's website in the future. The survey was available for the period between November 2016 and April 2017 and received 40 replies.

The overall impression of CVAR website visitors was positive, as 87% of online visitors evaluated the website positively, while 69% stated that a future visit is possible. In terms of content, users rated the website's text positively (95%), while the display of the exhibits is not satisfactory. Fifty-eight percent believed that the support material for the exhibits that provided was adequate. Users also judged the website's design (interface, navigability) positively. They stated that navigation was easy (92%), that they could go to any page of the website with few clicks (85%) and could easily return to the home page (90%). These positive judgments are important as the perception of the quality of information displayed on a website is influenced by its design [48].

The majority (75%) evaluated the search feature provided on the website positively. Lopatovska also underlines that it is important for websites to incorporate search tools, advanced search and filtering of results [48]. The majority of users believed that organization's content is limited (75%). This finding is important, as access to content is one of the main reasons users visit cultural websites [49] and the ability to manipulate the content is also linked to their intention to visit the website again[48].

The existence of interactive functions is also an important factor that affects the overall impression of the user [50] [51]. Fifty-six percent of CVAR's online visitors thought that the website's interactive features were adequate, while 51% were satisfied with its e-services (e-shop). Also, the majority of users indicated the lack of connection of the website with other cultural organizations (92%). In contrast, they viewed the efficiency of the website positively, as 69% considered that it responded quickly regardless of the computer system and online connection. Finally, 74% indicated that the website was displayed correctly on all browsers, regardless of the operating system and portability of their device.

5.3. Content analysis of CVAR's social media

CVAR uses three of the most popular social media platforms to communicate with their online audience: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. At the same time, it maintains a Google+ account and has a membership on TripAdvisor without showing any activity on these platforms.
CVAR is a small, non-profit cultural organization with few employees and limited financial resources. As a result, social media management is a collective effort between staff and volunteers. In contrast to larger cultural organizations who tend to include social media management in their strategic marketing plans, CVAR does not have a dedicated marketing department [52].

During the research period (November 2016 to April 2017), CVAR was active on Facebook with daily posts. Tweets were published less frequently (two to three times a week), while occasional videos from major events were posted on the YouTube channel. In our research, we attempted to group Facebook posts and tweets by theme and aim. In the case of Facebook, we took quantitative data from Facebook Insights. We evaluated levels of audience engagement by the number of likes, shares, comments, along with the demographics of the users involved. Relevant permissions were granted by CVAR. We collected data in April 2017.

5.3.1. Results from Facebook

CVAR targets all population groups regardless of age, gender and nationality. Data collected by Facebook Insights revealed 4,318 Facebook followers of which 67 % identify themselves as women, 31% as men, and 2% do not define their gender. The majority of followers come from Cyprus (80%) and especially from Nicosia (74.5%). The predominant language of the organization's Facebook followers is English at 74%.

CVAR's Facebook posts serve two main goals: 1) reporting on and highlighting the organization's presence to the Facebook community, and 2) promoting events and activities. Seventy percent of posts, including reports, news coverage, shares, photos and videos appear to serve the first goal, as they highlight CVAR's presence. Thirty percent of posts directly promote CVAR activities or provide information on issues related to the organization. All posts aim to attract public interest and to increase public engagement with CVAR activities.

CVAR Facebook posts tend to contain text and/or photos, most often combined. Less commonly, the posts feature videos, hashtags and hyperlinks. The posts tend to be in line with social media management best practices, for example, messages are short (between 100–250 characters), as this length has been shown to attract a better response rate from the public [53]. Most posts contain photos in order to increase public engagement [54], but only a few use hashtags so as to link with relevant content elsewhere on the platform. The use of hyperlinks, facilitating the dissemination of information from other platforms, is also limited. Increased use of hashtags and hyperlinks would help the involvement of users in a wider online dialogue.

In terms of audience engagement, we recorded "likes" (number of people who like a post), "comments" and "shares" based on the type of posts. We noticed that event notifications gather more "likes" (26%) than photos (18%) and historical reports (17%).

Facebook users most often commented on posts that were about events and shares from other accounts. Therefore, these types of posts have the greatest impact on the organization's Facebook audience. Videos and photos did not collect large numbers of comments. Seventy-seven percent of shared posts are photos and videos. Specifically, videos accounting for 5% of the posts made up 62% of the shares.

During the research period, about 1,400 fans of the CVAR Facebook page reacted to posts by liking, sharing or commenting. This is 32% of the total number of CVAR's Facebook fans. Most were women (71%), coming from Cyprus (41%), and their main language was English (52%).

5.3.2. Results from Twitter

CVAR's presence on Twitter is not as dynamic as its activity on Facebook. Tweets went out two or three times per week, and generally coincided with the organization's Facebook posts. Therefore, it was evident that Twitter was considered a complementary information channel.

A large number of tweets were actually republications of third-party messages (i.e., retweets), which was the key way CVAR remained active on this platform. CVAR tweets were short (90 characters on average), following best practices that indicate tweets of fewer than a 100 characters have a better impact [54]. However, the public response to CVAR tweets was overall minimal, as evidenced by the number of retweets and likes. The hashtags used by the organization tended to relate to the local community. They included, for example, #Cyprus, and #Nicosia. As a final note, the CVAR Twitter account did not seem to be systematically including links in its tweets to its website and/or Facebook page.

5.4. Interviews with CVAR social media managers

In order to examine how the organization itself evaluates the use of its website and social media as a marketing tool, a questionnaire was sent to the organization's two social media managers. They were asked to answer questions about the purpose and goals of the organization's social media accounts, how they would assess their own social media capabilities, and what they would consider their strengths and weaknesses. Both CVAR social media officers are volunteers with studies in the field of cultural management and new technologies. The semi-structured-interviews took place in January 2017.

The main goal in using social media platforms, according to the two managers, is to update the audience regularly (possibly daily) on CVAR activities, promote new exhibits, and advertise educational programs. Also, to establish closer links with existing fans of the organization, to attract new visitors online, and to increase the level of real-life visits to the museum. In terms of activity, the managers mentioned that they post four to five times a week on Facebook and occasionally on Twitter and YouTube; part of this activity is replying to fans' posts and comments. Although they believe that their role is crucial to the development of the organization and the achievement of its broader goals, however the time they spend on social media is limited because there is no staff that deals exclusively with the handling of the organization's social media accounts.

The social media managers appreciate the effectiveness of using Facebook and Twitter as promotion tools. As tends to be the case with non-profit cultural organizations that have limited financial resources [21] social media platforms have become for CVAR the main channel for promoting events and boosting public participation. Daily posts contribute to increasing public interest in the organization and its activities, which translates to a corresponding boost in real-life supporters and visits to the museum. Therefore, engagement with social media is considered necessary and effective. The officers also point out that there's a need to explore tactics to be more effective in achieving their goals. Regarding limitations, they emphasize the difficulty of controlling

and managing information from social media accounts. They also note that social media platforms such as Facebook have a disadvantage in that they restrict the reach of promotional messages to those who are already fans of the organization's accounts, unlike traditional advertising media, which targets the general public. CVAR's social media managers, who do not use website traffic measurement tools, stated that their goals included developing knowledge and skills to become more efficient and effective at their social media management tasks in the future.

6. Discussion

Following the three-category classification of Patterson and Radtke [11], CVAR's website can be characterized as an information-sharing site with limited membership feedback (registration, online communication, etc.). While it goes beyond simply providing information (i.e., like a placeholder website), it is nevertheless not yet a fully integrated and interactive website. The website is used by the organization mainly for informational and, to a lesser extent, educational purposes, by presenting and promoting the museum's collections and activities. From the point of view of Lagrosen's classification scheme [55], which mentions three strategies for using an organization's website (avoidance strategy, content strategy and technological strategy), CVAR seems to follow the content strategy scheme. This strategy requires the availability of large amounts of information on the Internet, but not in an advanced virtual format. The advantage of this strategy is that it provides significant value to the public at low cost. Such an approach, however, focuses on the product rather than on marketing [9]. This is confirmed by the survey results, which show that the website is a means for CVAR to present its mission and to provide basic information to the visitor. The need for the website to become more interoperable, user-centered and responsive was also revealed by the Minerva Framework. Both research methodologies have illustrated that CVAR needs to consider how the orientation and content of the website could further respond to the needs and expectations of the public [31] [11], in order to function as a mechanism to become an effective marketing tool so as to attract visitors to the museum itself [24] [49].

In terms of social media, the findings of our study indicate an emphasis on Facebook but a limited use of social networking platforms in general, as well as an awareness by the volunteer social media managers that more work is needed towards the handling of the organization's of the social media accounts. The potential of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to firmly support the organization's goals is thus recognized, and the social media managers believe these platforms should take a more advanced role in CVAR's future strategic marketing plans.

7. Conclusion

CVAR's online presence (website and social media accounts) is focused on increasing the organization's online visibility and promoting its activities. Steps to encourage user participation are needed, for example, introducing interactive elements and taking user-centered actions, as well as disseminating cultural content with links to similar content from other sources. The organization aims to reach a broader audience via social media activity, a goal that is limited by a lack of resources, which is typical of a small non-profit cultural organization. Finally, a more holistic and strategic approach to marketing is needed, one that is not limited to the tactical/communicative line of promotion and advertising [56].

Declaration on Generative AI

The author has not employed any Generative AI tools.

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