

Social Networking and Arts Organizations

By Byron Johnson

A consideration of how arts organizations can use web-based social networking services to reach out to and build audiences and supporters.

In the past couple of years I've become intrigued by the increasing use of social network web sites. I'm not what you'd call an early adopter by any means, however because I have been living around the technology through work and friends and colleagues I started dabbling in what for me was this new digital realm called Social Networking.

According to Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, "A social network service focuses on building online communities of people who share interests and/or activities, or who are interested in exploring the interests and activities of others. Most social network services are web based and provide a variety of ways for users to interact, such as e-mail and instant messaging services."

In the U.S. the two most widely-used social networking services are MySpace (www.myspace.com) and Facebook (www.facebook.com) but there are a whole host of others including LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com), Meetup (www.meetup.com), Friendster (www.friendster.com) to name a few. There's even one called DudeCheckThisOut.com.

My first steps into this world were either bold or misguided, depending on where you happened to be sitting at the time. At first, I tried blogging but couldn't sustain it as I really had no clear plan of what I wanted to communicate and for how long. Then I tried MySpace but it was a little too funky for me and for the first time in a long time I felt old and out of touch.

Then a curious thing happened. A friend invited me to join Friendster and I did. And then another friend invited me to join Facebook. And I did. Very little happened for a while after that until someone asked me to join LinkedIn and all of a sudden a light went off inside my head.

LinkedIn with its career-focused approach to networking and the ease in which you could identify people that you had some connection with really resonated with me. I began to see the possibilities in making connections on the web through social networking sites and the potential of doing things like recruiting board members and raising money for community-based nonprofit organizations...without spending any extra money!

This summer my wife and I went to Spain and Portugal for three weeks. We took a lot of pictures with our new digital camera and needed a place to share them online with friends and family. Sending them out as email attachments wasn't the most efficient way to do this so I ended up putting them on my Facebook page. Then an amazing thing happened. People commented on my photos through the site which prompted me to go back to the site each time and engage in a dialogue with them. I found myself communicating more with people that I had not spoken with in a while. This was so cool! So I searched for and added more friends, and began experimenting with the various interactive tools and applications on the site. I added to my profile, joined groups, became fans of people and groups, and joined causes that interested me. In the process I

had learned the most valuable lesson of social networking: To get the most out of social networking sites, you must become an “active contributor.”

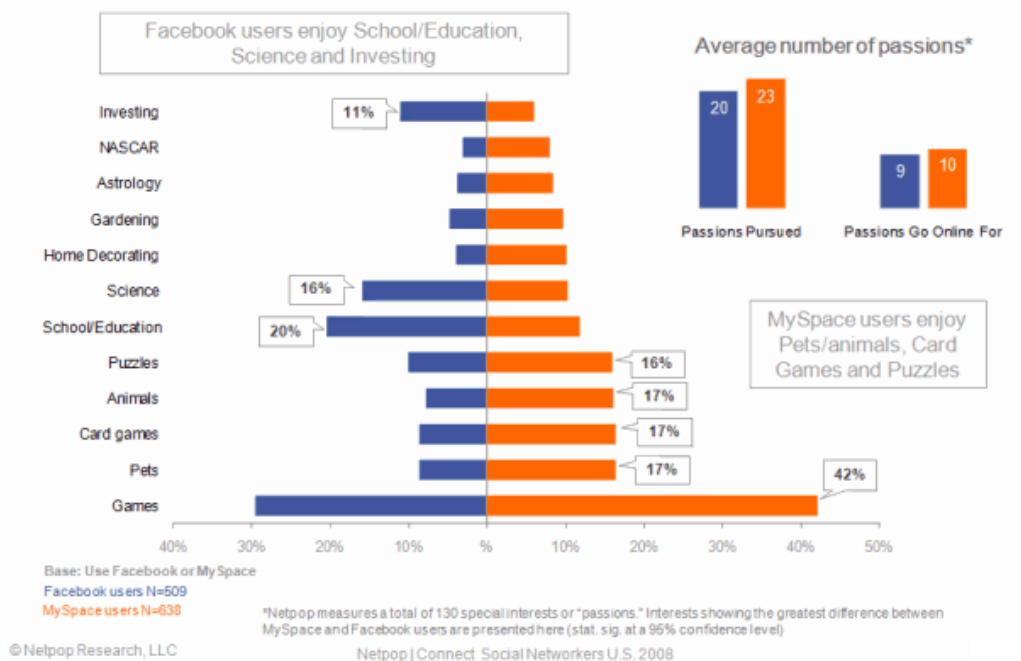
According to a new report by Netpop Research, LLC a cutting-edge San Francisco-based research firm, there are 138 million U.S. broadband users over the age of 13. 76% of them are active contributors to the Web via “social media” – uploading photos, audio, or video files, posting to a wiki, publishing a website or blog, etc... Another 29% or 40 million people contributing regularly to social networking sites. Of these 40 million “social networkers,” 63 percent are on MySpace, 60 percent are Facebook users, and 34 percent use both.

The report goes on to say most social networkers are females between the ages of 18 and 29. Over half are employed and connect with more than 18 people one-to-one in a given week, with some connecting to as many as 110 people. As a cohort, social networkers spend an average of about \$101 a week online, while those who don't contribute to social networks only spend \$80. On average, social networkers are also interested in a more diverse range of topics, with music, friends, movies, and games being the most prevalent interests.

Netpop also compared users of MySpace and Facebook and found some interesting differences:

- MySpace users span all age groups while Facebook users tend to be in the 18 to 29 year old range.
- Facebook has more users with college degrees (74% vs. 56%) who are less likely to be married than MySpace users.
- MySpace users spend more time online (5.5 hours during the week vs. 5.1 hours). They are also more active on weekends.
- MySpace users tend to more interested in things like NASCAR, astrology, and gardening while Facebook users cite interests such as school/education, science, and investing.

Facebook and MySpace users differ in what they like to do in their spare time ...



What jumps out for me after reading this report is that the arts was not listed as an interest. This is disappointing because not only so social networking sites serve as excellent, cost-effective vehicles for reaching out to and connecting with people, but also quite a few Bay Area arts organizations have an established presence on social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

One such organization is SOMArts Cultural Center (www.somarts.org) in San Francisco. SOMArts provides a good example of how to weave different aspects of social networking into their work in order to reach out to and appeal to different audiences.

According to executive director Lex Leifheit, SOMArts has a presence on both Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/pages/San-Francisco-CA/SomArts-Cultural-Center/14810979497>) and MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/somarts>) but sees most of its activity through its Flickr group (<http://www.flickr.com/groups/somartspics/>) that's used to share photos of events and share discussions about the different events and exhibits and YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/user/U2canbeaboob>).

Through support from the San Francisco Arts Commission, SOMArts was able to establish a space in Second Life and host artwork and activities that complement exhibitions at the cultural center. This fall they hosted a show called "Synthetic Masquerade," an exhibition of avatar-based art.

"Members of the artist community in Second Life flew from as far away as New York to participate and told us that this was the first time they had been invited to come together as a community of artists in real life," Lex says.

SOMArts also hosted a series of readings that took place simultaneously in Second Life and "real life" and found that people attended the entire series both online and in-person, because it was easier to accommodate their schedules when an online event was part of their experience. "Those who participated online heard the same reading in Second Life as the one in the gallery, they interacted with each other before and after the event, and they took in the exhibition—they just did so from their homes."

Two more local arts organizations that in my opinion successfully utilize social media are Kularts, (<http://kularts.org/>) and the Asian American Theater Company (<http://www.asianamericantheater.org/>).

Founded in 1985, Kularts mission is to inform and expand the understanding of American Pilipino culture and preserve the spirit and integrity of ancient Pilipino art forms and is considered one of the premier presenters of contemporary and tribal Pilipino arts in the United States. Like SOMArts, Kularts provides links to its communities on the home page of its web site. Kularts has online communities on YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com/kularts>), MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/kularts>), and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=30435191735>).

Go to the Kularts Channel on YouTube and you'll see videos of the group's most recent performances and educational programs. Their MySpace page has loads of content that's frequently updated with the latest media and information on recent and upcoming tours. You can also subscribe to their blog. The Kularts group on Facebook provides its almost 300 members

with the opportunity to share news and content and connect with one another through their interest in and affinity with Kularts.

As one of the nation's oldest theatrical organizations dedicated to the development and presentation of works by, for and about Americans of Asian and Pacific Islander descent, the Asian American Theater Company provides a good example of how a well-established community-based organization can use social networking effectively. With active pages on MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com/aatc>) and Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=41345307587>) AATC supporters have two avenues for connecting with one another through online communities. Unlike many MySpace pages, AATC's page is clean and uncluttered with various media content and links. Its Facebook Group page not only provides the usual social networking opportunity for members but also complements its web site with listings of officers and links to their personal Facebook pages.

This may all seem well and good but the reality is that, for many smaller organizations, audience development has always been a challenge and this promises to continue given the current economic crisis we are facing. All the more reason to look at social networking sites to reach out and communicate with new audiences because social networking is here to stay and, according to most experts, we are in the early stages of the evolution. SOMArts was able to accomplish all that it did without the benefit of a marketing department.

So what does the future hold for social networking? Lex believes the future will see organizations become savvier about ways to use social networking that go beyond "sites" like Facebook and MySpace. "One example is Twitter. Twitter is a social networking site that people often use it to find out where their friends will be moment-to-moment. If I see that my friend is going to a gallery opening and use my phone to find out when and where the event is—well, it's impossible on most gallery sites because they use Flash, or the info is three links from the homepage. Phone-based networking is changing how people use online information."

It is however a commitment of our most precious of resources: time. It takes time to go online and build your networks and to keep the content fresh and up to date. At first it will feel awkward as you upload photos or reach out and try to attract people and organizations to your organization and navigate this interesting new world. After a while however, I assure you, it will become as natural as talking on the telephone...or using email. Don't believe me? Check me out on Facebook at:

<http://www.facebook.com/people/Byron-Johnson/735816526>