11 Managing Festivals in a Digital World

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After reading this chapter you should:

- Understand some of the key developments and theories surrounding digital media
- Understand how digital technology and communication are used in festival management
- Recognise the opportunities they can present, as well as how to manage potential pitfalls
- Know how to use digital marketing effectively, including how to execute a multi-channel campaign
- Gain a set of tools and frameworks with which to manage your festival in a digital world
- Understand the meaning of 'digital culture' in the context of festival management and audience engagement

Introduction

What exactly is digital? Debated by those who are less tech-savvy and those with advanced knowledge alike, the term 'digital' has been notoriously difficult to define. We see it used mostly as a prefix – digital device, digital television, digital divide – but, for the purposes of this book when we say 'digital' we are referring to the use of digital technology and communications.

This chapter focuses on giving you an understanding of how digital technology and communications are used in festival management, and how you can use them to maximise the success and impact of your festival.

So why is digital technology so important? Before looking at the practicalities, it is worth looking briefly at how it has developed and has had a fundamental and mostly liberating impact on both marketing and human communications.

Digital technology has had an impact on arts and culture in the following ways: mass communications, access, rights and ownership (copyright) and networking, power and control.

Mass communications

Prior to digital technology, the primary means of getting your message across to a mass public, or indeed a niche market, was via the printed press or broadcast media. The cost of producing a daily or weekly newspaper, or a weekly or monthly magazine, or setting up a radio or TV station was extremely expensive. This concentrated media control into a small number of hands, particularly newspaper owners, their editors, and public and commercial broadcasters. The cost of getting your message across via paid adverts was comparatively high and access to the public via editorials quite limited, and through a limited number of broadcast outlets. Broadcasting and editorial access via people with the power to choose whether to transmit your message, your brand and support your activity, was also determined by a relatively small number of people, most of them probably middle-aged men.

The growing impact of technology, particularly TV, from the 1960s onwards was accompanied by a development of media theory about the role and relationship of new technology to human communications and indeed human relations. There is a considerable body of literature on this subject, far too much to go into any depth and detail here. However, there are one or two theories that are worth mentioning as they mirror the development of festivals from the 1960s onwards.

The power of the televisual media to influence social thinking and human interaction was particularly noted by the Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan. In his 1964 book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, he coined the phrase "The medium is the message", arguing that the platform used (in this case television) influenced the way we perceived the message. This observation is a forerunner of the way that different social media platforms have been adopted by different user groups.

Access, rights and ownership

The Internet emerged in the late 1980s, and its most visible component, the World Wide Web, came into use in the mid-1990s. The web was conceived and developed as a free educational resource by the British computer scientist Sir Tim Berners-Lee and colleagues. It has since become commercialised and there is an ongoing debate about whether it can and will remain open-access or whether commercial interests will, in time, limit the freedom and access to information that it has generated.

Considerable parts of arts and culture are financed by income from copyright, especially literature and music, and technology has significantly increased revenues from these rights. Ironically, it was digital media file sharing that caused the breakdown of the music industry's business model which

had been built on revenues from album and CD sales, leading to a revival of live performance and the growth of music festivals.

The issue of ownership and rights in the digital sphere has been challenged by the American academic and lawyer Lawrence Lessig (2005), who has argued for reduced legal restrictions on copyrights and trademarks and open access to the radio spectrum. In 2001 he set up Creative Commons to encourage the publication of creative works for public sharing and benefit. Lessig's arguments revolve around whether it is better to commercialise information and extract financial value from it, or to make information freely available to the benefit of individuals and societies. This issue started to develop in the 1960s and 70s through publications like the pre-digital *Whole Earth Catalog*, which sought to make a wide range of knowledge, particularly about ecological and ethical products, freely available at low cost to the public, seeking to empower the 'grassroots'. Steve Jobs described it as a sort of pre-digital, paperback Google.

Today's digital equivalent of the *Whole Earth Catalog* is Wikipedia, founded and championed by Jimmy Wales, which for all its open access risks and failings has effectively sidelined the previously highly respected and authoritative Encyclopedia Britannica and other published encyclopedias, which were only available in public libraries or at a high purchase price.

A similar path surrounding access, information and rights has been trodden by music festivals from the 1970s' free festivals, which were comparatively unstructured, uncommercial and disorganised, to today's highly structured, commercialised and targeted music festivals.

Networking, power and control

Even more significant was the research by the Catalan sociologist Manuel Castells, who charted the growth of the digital sector in America's Silicon Valley and formulated the idea of the rise of 'the network society'. He found that in the early 1980s emerging technology companies grew as much through interdependent co-operation as through traditional models of commercial competition. Castells coined the memorable phrase 'the space of flows' to describe the way that technology brings about real-time, simultaneous, high speed, long distance interactions (1996: 467). This was different, he said, to 'the space of places'. Castells concluded his three-volume study *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture* (1996-8) by observing that networks constitute a new social morphology or structure. "...the power of flows", he observed, "takes precedence of the flow of power" (Castells, 1996: 469).

This observation was made some six years before Mark Zuckerberg set up Facebook and yet describes the power-shift that Facebook and other digital platforms, especially social media platforms, have brought about. Digital