

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

UNPUBLISHED EXTRACT – CASE STUDY: DULWICH ONVIEW

CHAPTER: CONNECTING COMMUNITIES

Author's Note

The following is an unpublished case study which was written for the book International Communications Strategy which I co-authored with Silvie Cambie. We had too much material for the book and needed to give priority to international case studies so a number of UK case studies were reluctantly dropped from the final book, this one on Dulwich OnView, being one of them.*

Dulwich OnView was a blog project which I created and developed for the Friends of the Dulwich Picture Gallery and exemplifies the principles of non-hierarchical collaborative working and authentic engagement and trust which are found in successful social media projects. The project won the Best Small Museums Website 2010 at the Archimuse Conference, a major conference within the museums and heritage sector.

International Communications Strategy was nominated for the FT Goldman Sachs Business Book of the Year Award 2009.

Yang-May Ooi, April 2010

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[The chapter opens with the following introduction]

Many social media tools are available online free or at very low cost, which makes this form of mass communication easily accessible to anyone or any group, regardless of their budget. This means that social media can be a powerful communication tool for those who would otherwise be marginalised within their society or by mainstream-focused traditional media. Through blogs and other online tools, such groups can make their voices heard alongside established “brands” such as news websites and corporations as well as enterprises catering to majority interests. They can also bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media and this is especially empowering in societies where press freedom and the freedom of personal expression is restricted.

Social enterprises can also use social media tools to build online communities not just around their business but as their core business itself, developing new services conducted entirely online that would have been unthinkable before.

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[The unpublished extract follows]

ART AND CULTURE

One of co-author Ooi’s projects, Dulwich OnView¹, illustrates how a blog can help to reach a fresh demographic which an organisation’s traditional marketing methods may be finding difficult to engage with. The Friends of Dulwich Picture Gallery² are an independent not-for-profit group that raises funds to support the exhibitions programme and specific projects of the South London based Dulwich Picture Gallery³. “Friends” can sign up for membership to take advantage of the special discounts at the Gallery and do no more than that. But many also take part as active volunteers, giving their time and skills for free. Many of the Gallery’s most popular events - concerts, lectures, dinners, parties, visits etc - are entirely organised by the Friends on a volunteer basis.

¹ <http://www.dulwichonview.org>

² <http://dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/friends/default.aspx>

³ <http://www.dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk/>

The Gallery is in the heart of the leafy, high-end London suburb of Dulwich Village, with its million pound homes, well-to-do professionals and establishment air. On top of that, as a world-class art gallery specialising in Baroque art and Old Masters, the Gallery has often been perceived as relevant only to “posh” people⁴. The then Chair of the Friends, Ingrid Beazley, was keen to help shake that image and engage a younger, hipper, multi-cultural group of people not just to come to the Gallery but also to join the Friends. “Ingrid and I met by chance having drinks one evening at a local neighbour’s house,” Ooi recalls “and when she was telling me about how she wanted to reach the younger 20- and 30-something Londoner, naturally I said, ‘What you need is a blog’.”

As we have seen in earlier chapters, the “millenials” or 20-somethings prefer to find their information and entertainment online, enjoy engaging in social networks and social media such as blogs and video sharing sites. If the Friends wanted to appeal to this group of people, they needed to be in the same playground. The Friends activities such as dinner parties, day-time art talks and family fun events generally tended to reflect an older, family-oriented demographic of volunteers and participants. Beazley had already initiated a number of new real world activities to attract a younger and more diverse demographic, including a film society, GalleryFilm. Ooi continues, “I explained that a blog would be ideal for engaging a younger, “wired” crowd who were comfortable socialising and interacting online.”

Ooi set about developing the strategy for the blog project and setting up the site using the free blogging platform Wordpress.com. The key criteria for Ooi in putting together the strategy were: ease of use, no or low cost and streamlined collaboration tools. The blog project would not be officially funded or resourced by the Friends or the Gallery, the volunteer bloggers would most likely have no “tech” or blogging experience and with no offices or premises, the whole project would have to be run virtually. Most significantly, and in keeping with the social media ethos, the project needed to become self-managing with no-one “in charge” and everyone being able to work together seamlessly from their individual computers at home.

In the meantime, Beazley began to look for volunteers to help with the online blog project and professional writers, editors, marketers, photographers, DJs, musicians and film-makers located in the surrounding areas beyond Dulwich offered their time. These were exactly the mixed age group and wider range of people that Beazley had been hoping to bring in to the Friends. So, the blog project itself, regardless of its online

⁴ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/2008/07/15/what%E2%80%99s-all-the-fuss-about-that-picture-gallery/#comment-324>

presence, had the effect of attracting a new type of volunteer to the Friends – bringing with them their own wider network of friends and contacts. One of the volunteers explains her reason for getting involved: “Dulwich OnView is something different and a bit cutting edge.” The content of the blog, then, would be shaped by this fresh creative talent and so speak to the kind of audience who could connect in a real way with this new group of Friends.

The blogging team is encouraged to manage itself and Ooi created the systems and structures to enable this process. There is a core team of “editors” and a wider group of regular contributors. Ooi explains, “We use the terminology referencing print journalism because we felt it would break down the barrier to entry. In the context of Dulwich Picture Gallery, people could more easily embrace the concept of an online magazine than a blog.” Each member of the team contributes articles, photo-stories, films and podcasts as they wish. They are also encouraged to commission content from others, taking the responsibility then to edit and upload that content onto the blog. The editors do not set the editorial policy but rather steer it and also take turns in the role of Acting Editor, that is, the editor on duty who deals with comments, deals with queries and submissions from the general public. There is a bi-monthly Editorial Planner so all the volunteers can see what articles are lined up for the weeks ahead – this avoids duplication and encourages variety and diversity in the content. There are also numerous How To guides and a growing knowledge base created by Ooi and another volunteer, web designer and social media trainer, Angie Macdonald.

The more often a blog is updated with new content, the more likely it and its content is to be found high up in Google searches so in theory so there is an advantage if your blog is updated frequently. So the obvious thing to do is to publish a blog post every day, isn't it? But when considering the most appropriate structure for Dulwich OnView, it wasn't just about aiming for high Google rankings. Ooi needed to take into account what would work best with a loose and diverse team of volunteer bloggers. She explains, “The risk otherwise is that you end up with a lot of articles one week if everyone is feeling inspired and nothing for weeks on end when everyone is too busy to blog. It would also become impossible for our acting editors, who are all doing this in their spare time, to keep an eye on what was going to be published on the blog. By setting our publication dates for every Tuesday and Friday, it gave the team a structure to work within. Blog posts for a Friday need to be uploaded in advance by the previous Tuesday and those for the Tuesday, need to be ready on the blog by the previous Friday. Again, this is very easy for everyone to remember. And it gives the acting editor

a clear framework within which they can check the posts, raise queries and so on.” The key principle here is not to be led by the technology or a slave to Google – for team blogs, team management is as much part of the skillset that is needed as much as an understanding of the technology.

Ooi says, “In order for teams to work together smoothly and efficiently, you need to have boundaries and structures that facilitate that process. The trick is to use those systems to *enable* your team to give their creative and collaborative best rather than to *dis-able* them or restrict what they can do. My approach in creating the structure for a self-managing team was to trust that our volunteers are responsible, adult and professionals in their own line of work who want to celebrate the Gallery and the local area they live in. When you start from a premise of trust, the policies you create are different from those that assume that your team are unreliable and out to dish the dirt when you let them loose on a blog.”

The strength of the Dulwich OnView team comes from the diverse skills of the many volunteers. Many are professional writers, photographers and filmmakers⁵ and the quality of their blogging and multimedia contributions reflect those high standards. The involvement of a knowledge management professional, Sally Ann Johnson, helped to shape the blog’s risk management policy. Ingrid Beazley has a key liaison role in marketing and publicising the role of Dulwich OnView not just among the Gallery management, its Trustees and the Friends but also more widely within the museum and heritage sector and the general public. Angie Macdonald, gave the volunteers training in using Wordpress as well as the principles and structures of the collaborative process of working together as a virtual blogging team.

Dulwich Picture Gallery and the Friends are doing everything right when it comes to PR and marketing. Kate Knowles, Head of Communications at the Gallery, and her team place the Gallery in all the top spots in the UK and international media you would expect, including broadcast TV and radio, major newspapers and arts magazines. The Friends place articles in local magazines and do leaflet drops in the local area, there is a Friends desk at the Gallery to encourage people to take up membership, they put up posters in local shop windows – ie all the activities that a local community group would normally do. The Friends also produce a quarterly glossy magazine, In View, with feature articles and events highlights as well as a monthly listings email that goes to its 6,000 plus members. How could the Friends’ blog, Dulwich OnView, compete with all that? The answer, of course, is that it couldn’t – and shouldn’t.

⁵ See Appendix for the editorial team and regular contributors

It can be tempting to focus your social media project entirely around your business or your products or services. After all, your business is what you know best and it's easy to be passionate about it. And that's what communicating your business to others is all about, isn't it?

In the case of the Gallery, there is already a print journal In View that features Gallery related articles and features. It did not make sense to repeat that focus online. If the objective was to bring in a new demographic to the Gallery, then the project needed to reach out to those people who might not see themselves as interested in the Gallery. "If you're interested in art in South London, then you're likely to be interested in Dulwich Picture Gallery – but you just may not know it yet. So the editorial team came up with the mission statement, or tagline, for the blog is 'Celebrating people and culture in the Dulwich area'," Ooi says, "And there is only about one "Gallery or Friends slot" for every two or more posts about culture, arts, community events and people with a South London connection." Dulwich OnView has posts about local music events (from Elizabethan lute music⁶ to The Blockheads⁷), ordinary South London people⁸, wine⁹, tattoos¹⁰ and features on other South London arts, community and cultural events. The Gallery slots include profiles of the Gallery attendants¹¹, bringing to life the people you tend to overlook when you're admiring the painted people on canvas. "The idea is to have content that you wouldn't find in any conventional magazine," Ooi explains, "The volunteer team write with their own voices in a personal, relaxed style. We are always on the lookout for local people who want to contribute posts and it doesn't matter if your writing style is not perfect."

Ooi continues, "Traditional communications is about "push" marketing – pushing your press releases out there, pushing your brand or events out there. Dulwich OnView is an example of "pull" or "guerrilla" marketing. The intention is to reach those people who would not think of themselves as remotely interested in the Gallery and who may not ever search for the term "Dulwich Picture Gallery." By making its "unique selling point" extend beyond Dulwich Picture Gallery and the Friends, the blog offers up its wares to anyone who is interested in arts and culture in the South London area, whether or not this person knows or cares about the Gallery or the Friends. So, while surfing on the net, they may search for "fitness Dulwich", "flamenco Dulwich", "tattoes Dulwich" and

⁶ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/2008/05/02/elizabethan-music-concert/>

⁷ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/2008/04/25/the-blockheads-oxjam-at-the-edt/>

⁸ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/category/south-london-people/>

⁹ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/?s=greville>

¹⁰ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/2008/01/29/locals-tattoos-in-dulwich/>

¹¹ <http://dulwichonview.org.uk/2008/08/08/dpg-attendants-other-lives-lynn-mcadam-opera-singer/>

they will most likely come across one of our post on Dulwich OnView - and while on the blog, they may notice that there is something on the site about the Gallery, and hey, actually, the Gallery doesn't seem to be such a stuffy old place and maybe, they'll check out that exhibition about American art or whatever.

“What's more, by featuring other local groups and local people, we encourage their network to come along to the site, too, since they'll be telling their contacts about being featured on our blog. So, in parallel with the real world community that thrives around real-world Friends' events, the blog is creating an online community around local events, local history and local people.

“However, there are numerous links on the blog to the main Gallery website, especially in posts that have a natural tie-in to Gallery events, so it's an obvious step for readers to then go and explore the main website. One quarter to one third of visitors who land on Dulwich OnView go on to the Gallery website but only one in fifteen or eighteen come to the blog from the main site. But is exactly the strategy and raison d'etre of the blog – to act like a Venus fly-trap for increasing traffic to the main site so that more people go in than come out the same way!”

[end of unpublished extract]

APPENDIX

Dulwich OnView's success is owed to the many volunteers who have given their time and skills to the blog. Each of them played a significant role in the success of DOV..

Yang-May Ooi, April 2010

Founder Members and Editorial Team

INGRID BEAZLEY - In her capacity as chair of the Friends of Dulwich Picture Gallery she facilitated Yang-May's concept, 'selling' it to the Gallery staff and Friends committee. Now as one of Dulwich OnView's acting editors, she commissions articles from the Gallery staff and from the local community and promotes the website ceaselessly, locally as well as internationally.

[ANGIE MACDONALD](#) - took over from Catherine Fraher as acting editor in the early months of Dulwich OnView and shaped the role of the Acting Editor. She wrote the Editor's Handbook, trained other team members to be editors and to use Wordpress blogging software. She also writes occasionally for DOV. More recently she has been involved in project managing the redesign of DOV, co-ordinating the team ideas and working closely with Ingrid and the web designer to create a new-look DOV.

[YANG-MAY OOI](#) - created the concept of Dulwich OnView as a community blog and developed the key "guerrilla marketing" strategy for the blog to raise Dulwich Picture Gallery's profile among the online demographic. She also planned the DOV team structure and set up the web-based collaborative systems which make this project self-managing and non-hierarchical. This includes creating the collaborative editorial documents which ensure that the blog runs smoothly and writing the several handbooks which set out all the processes for current and new members of the team. She continues to provide strategic advice as well as contributing multimedia content to the blog.

[ANNA SAYBURN](#) - wrote many of the earliest DOV articles, helping to develop the informal, community style of Dulwich OnView through a mixture of interviews with local people, reviews of local events and pieces about local history and art associated with Dulwich. She served as an acting editor for part of the first two years, helping bring in

new contributors and fostering the sense of community. She still writes regularly for DOV.

[STEVE SLACK](#) - writes off the wall articles for DOV with the aim of debunking the myth that Dulwich is populated solely by rich, posh people. He's written about pub quizzes, street names, local history and general peculiar cultural goings-on. Working with DOV has helped him develop as an online writer and given him skills he uses in other freelance work.

[TAHRA MORTON](#) - is an intern at DOV, writing articles as well as carrying out her role as one of the acting editors while on a work secondment in Brussels, Belgium, underlining that DOV is truly an online community that while local is also without borders.

SALLY ANN JOHNSON - advised the team on risk management and helped develop DOV's article submissions policy. She also writes for the blog.

CATHERINE FRAHER - was DOV's first acting editor. She co-ordinated the team of volunteers, editorial meetings and uploaded much of the early content onto the blog.

SHAPA BEGUM - an intern at DOV, she currently writes articles and is responsible for the Paul Nash online art competition. She is provided with regular support by the editorial team to learn and develop skills in networking, editorial management and technical skills.

ANNA MARIA DI BRINA - is one of DOV's acting editors and also writes articles on art and events.

[ANGELA CORRIAS](#) - contributed to the editorial style of DOV as one of the acting editors and collaborated in its content with interviews to local artists and coverage of local events.

Other Contributors

[Amanda Greatorex](#), Greville Havenhand, [Laverne Hunt](#), Ed Saunders, [Rebecca Portsmouth](#), Erica Green, [Steve Overbury](#), Nigel Thorpe, Lorenzo Ali, Daniel Pateman, Patrick Knight, Bella Tullo, "Jane Morris"