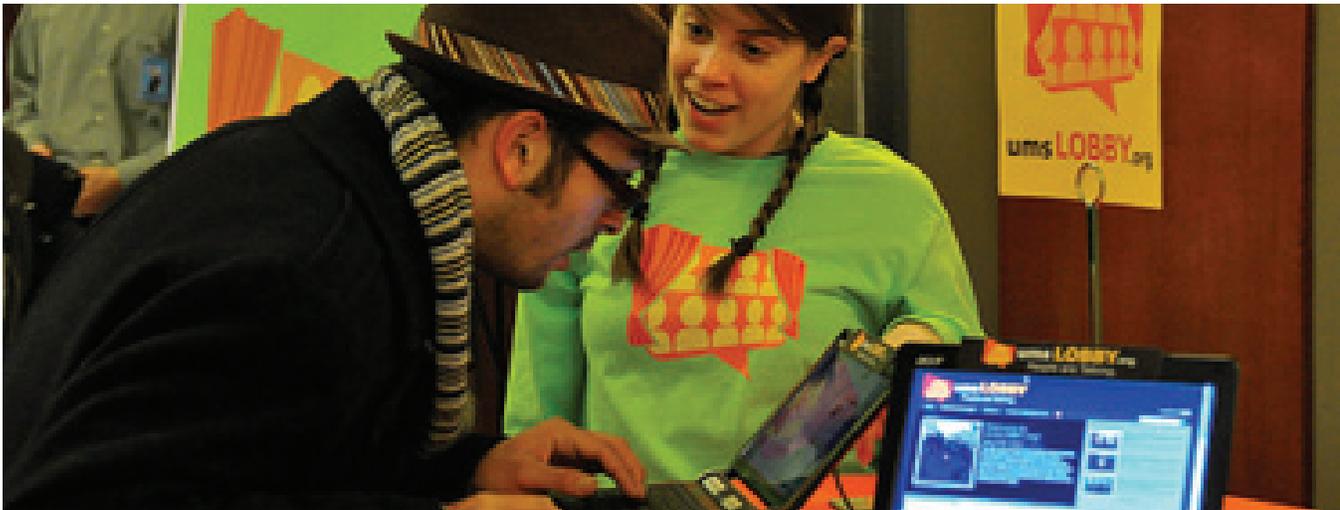


Doing Things Differently

Stories from innovation initiatives in the arts.



The Innovation Lab for the Performing Arts University Musical Society, Ann Arbor



The Innovators

University Musical Society (UMS) in Ann Arbor, Michigan is unique among university-based presenters. While it is affiliated with the University of Michigan and housed on its campus, UMS is a separate 501(c)(3) organization that is artistically and financially independent from its host. Established in 1880, UMS is a multi-arts presenting organization offering 60-75 performances and over 100 free educational activities annually. UMS commissions new work, sponsors artist residencies, and organizes collaborative projects with local, national and international partners. It has an annual budget of \$7.5 million and serves audiences throughout the Southeast Michigan metropolitan region, including the city of Detroit.

The Innovation

Through *The Lobby Project*, UMS expanded its concept of “lobby” beyond physical space, creating a virtual lobby that interfaces with activities in UMS’s three physical lobbies. Based on social media strategies, the online Lobby includes a multimedia blog and a “living archive” of past UMS events to which visitors are invited to add commentary, videos and photos. UMS reinforces its online interactions and gives participants opportunities to socialize in person through live events tied to specific UMS performances.

Image: A UMS staff member demonstrates the virtual lobby for a participant at the Bela Fleck concert

Starting Conditions

In 2009, UMS found itself “in a precarious position between two worlds.” The collapse of traditional print media hit hard when the local Ann Arbor daily newspaper closed its doors after 174 years. Without its primary tool for promotion and communication – and absent a focused internal strategy to incorporate social media – UMS sensed a “real danger to the bottom line.” It knew it needed to change its organizational mindset or risk losing its core revenue base. Yet UMS was deeply challenged in its attempts to find a solution. For starters, creating synergy among a staff that was housed in three separate buildings was difficult. How could the organization bring people together to tackle challenges? How could it bridge the gap between staff members who were comfortable with social media and those who were not? How could the staff work together to re-examine their roles and develop an effective organizational social media strategy? In the midst of these questions and faced with the critical necessity of change, UMS applied to and was accepted into the Innovation Lab in June 2009.

The Lab

Transformative Moments

UMS hit the ground running. The organization held several open meetings to discuss the Innovation Lab, explore numerous social media ideas, and encourage people to join the Innovation Team. UMS President Kenneth Fischer empowered a cross-departmental Team comprised of staff from programming, marketing, education, development, operations/IT, and box office. Students and Board members were added to bring outside perspectives. Half the Team members were under 30. Some were extremely tech savvy, while others were less comfortable with new technologies. Representing both sides of the digital divide, this group mirrored the audiences UMS wanted to reach. With the aid of facilitator Richard Evans, the Innovation Team met during Phase I of the Lab to research existing approaches to online and offline patron engagement. They reviewed a wide range of initiatives that extended far beyond the arts, evaluated possibilities, and compiled a long list

of ideas. In a unique effort to document its work and to engage others in the process, the Team passed around a Flip cam video camera at the end of every meeting, asking everyone what they had learned. The Team then set up a Wiki where they posted the videos and notes and solicited comments from others in the organization, mirroring some of the interactions they hoped to generate with UMS audiences.

Collecting information from a variety of sources prepared the Innovation Team for the Lab Intensive. In what Evans calls “tremendously conscientious work,” the Team worked during the Intensive to narrow a sprawling list of eight priorities to three they thought they could do: create a virtual lobby with a multimedia blog and connections to the organization’s Twitter and Facebook pages; build a living archive online; and organize live lobby events in conjunction with performances. Soon the metaphor of the lobby grew to encompass the full range of this work, and the Team developed a vision statement for what it now called *The Lobby Project*.

This vision proved useful when the Team returned from the Intensive and began to enroll others in the project. The Team had laid a firm foundation for this work during the Intensive, sending daily video bulletins to all the remaining staff in Ann Arbor. As Evans says, “They knew they would be returning home with halos on their heads, and they needed a conscious process of enrollment.” The Team created a presentation that shared the outcomes of the Intensive and plans for prototyping, and offered opportunities for staff members to play roles and have a genuine say in the further direction of the project. Many of their colleagues in the organization – stressed by the project’s increased demands on their time – believed that “it would just all go away in time.” Thanks to the Innovation Team’s careful attention to process and internal engagement, resistance gradually diminished as people realized that *The Lobby Project* was not a peripheral initiative, but “a powerful shift in the way the organization did business.”

Shifts in Assumptions

This fundamental shift in perspective enabled the organization to see *The Lobby Project* as an opportunity rather than a burden. Another subtle, but important, shift in conventional institutional thinking was UMS’s intuitive understanding that leadership and innovation do not reside exclusively at the top of the organization. By engaging junior staff in designing and implementing *The Lobby Project*, UMS gave further meaning to their jobs, inspired their creativity, and valued their contributions – ultimately producing shared ownership of the results. Just as important was UMS’s refusal to polarize its strategies.

New Pathways to Mission

As a major presenter on a major academic campus, UMS is called upon to present a range of leading artistic work. In a culture that often laments the disconnect between artists and audiences, it might have made sense for UMS to enter the Lab in hopes of developing strategies that would better illuminate the artistic process, using its stature and rich history as a national platform. In fact, UMS was not particularly interested in a project that focused on the artist's journey. Instead, the organization simply wanted to engage audiences in the events it presented around campus. In developing *The Lobby Project*, UMS succeeded with its audience; at the same time, the strategic focus on audiences also opened new pathways to serving artists. *The Lobby Project* created new ways for the organization to connect artists and audiences: through video interviews, opportunities to interact with artists on the website, intimate events in UMS's multiple lobby spaces, and access to the institution's archive.

The Prototype

Using funds from the Lab, UMS initiated a multi-faceted prototype of *The Lobby Project*. The first step was creating an IT platform separate from the organization's existing website (which offers concert information and sells tickets) to host the new interactive components. The two websites will eventually be integrated. As part of the prototype, UMS convened two small groups of beta testers to review the new site. The new site (www.umsLobby.org) is colorful, clear and easily navigable. It gives visitors five key entry points: 1. "People are Talking," 2. umsLobby events, 3. umsblog, 4. video, and

5. living archive. In "People are Talking" visitors can chat with patrons, artists and staff. The weekly blog invites visitors to "keep up with the arts scene." Visitors are encouraged to attend events where they can speak face-to-face with others they meet online, and they can view videos that give them behind-the-scenes access to artists. They can also explore the living archive, featuring material collected over UMS's more than 100 years of existence.

Working with 99designs, a graphic design marketplace, UMS launched an online contest for the creation of a UMS Lobby logo, offering a cash prize for the winning design, which was selected by the Innovation Team. Staff members say this work "reinforced the notion of the project, as real-time commenting on various submissions led to a better design." Once the logo was established, UMS designed bookmarks, club cards, t-shirts, program book inserts, flyers, and give-away items such as coffee cups and notepads to reinforce the site's brand.

UMS also hosted live events in its physical lobby during the prototyping period. These events were designed to complement online efforts and give participants an opportunity to meet and socialize while UMS tested different formats to see what resonated with the audience. The initial event launched the new website and featured banjo player Béla Fleck who performed with several noted African musicians. UMS deployed staff members with laptops to demonstrate the website, gave away promotional items, and used Flip cams to interview participants. Following the event, they edited the video, posted it to the website, and solicited comments about the performance from the public. UMS held a

second event in conjunction with a performance of *Uncle Vanya* by the Maly Drama Theater of St. Petersburg. Staff passed out invitations to a free post-performance reception at a nearby restaurant where they spoke with attendees about the performance. They also encouraged the public to post their comments on the website. The third event included an in-lobby reception with a "Post-It" wall, inviting comments from audience members and questions to the dance company that was performing.

To help launch the living archive, UMS hired professional videographers to shoot footage of visiting artists and local patrons about their experiences at UMS. As part of the prototype, professional videographers trained staff in video filming and editing. UMS hopes to bring much of this work in-house in the future. The Team also began digitizing UMS's extensive archive. Visitors to the site will be able to access archival information about past events, add their own commentary and memories, and post video and photos.

During this process, UMS learned that the archival material was interesting to the public as a way to access artifacts, but even moreso as a springboard for capturing individual stories. As a result, the project has become a kind of oral history that captures the memories of people who performed or were there when the events occurred. By thinking of the living archive this way, UMS has developed a site that appeals to audiences across generations.

Obstacles and Enablers

Certainly there were obstacles to UMS achieving success – time, economic constraints, the complexity of the project, the initial resistance of staff who saw the project as extra work. The organization also discovered that the process of developing guidelines for contributors to the website was more complicated than expected. According to Evans, UMS brought significant existing resources to overcoming these obstacles: an archive that spans 130 years, an extensive multi-disciplinary season, and events in several buildings, each of which has a big lobby. The organization was also aided by its own ability to create a disciplined process that started with big ideas, narrowed them to a manageable list, selected three key strategies, looked for connections among them, prototyped ideas, evaluated them, and made changes based on feedback.

The rigor of this process kept the organization focused and strategic. From the outset, the Team was supported by senior leaders, including Fischer, who delegated authority and responsibility and invited creativity from others in the organization. The Lab was instrumental in bringing together Team members who worked in different buildings and who had had no previous experience in working together on an institution-wide initiative.

The Impact

The Lobby Project offers rich learning for the presenting field. It is an unusually well-structured and comprehensive approach to linking live and virtual spaces, engaging patrons in both the history of the organization and its current practices, and providing multiple entry points for the public.

UMS says the Lab had tremendous impact on its ability to realize *The Lobby Project*. In order to implement its plans, Team members invited the entire staff to join any of several Task Forces devoted to the project. They were invited to write blog entries, plan live events, serve as comment moderators, or help develop the IT platform. UMS says that these Task Forces “have generated fruitful cross-departmental collaborations; helped staff members improve their writing, video filming and editing, and other skills; and engendered a renewed interest in the organization, its history, and its current programs.” Perhaps most importantly, some staff members say “they see their job and organizational role differently now that the Innovation Lab project is being implemented.”



Image: www.umsLobby.org

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