

A social media tour for music companies

with Carl Morris of Native

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These notes accompany the presentation I gave on Friday 25th September 2009 at Galeri, Caernarfon.

My main emphasis was what relevance social media might have to musicians and music companies. I began with the context of online cultures before talking about examples of technologies and services and how they might be used.

Questions we're trying to answer:

Why should anyone care about my band?

Where I can go to find or grow communities?

What tools can help me to find fans, but also to learn how to adapt my business in a changing environment?

How should I manage the time and resources I put into my online activity - to get a good return on my investment?

A range of companies attended representing different genres. Everyone had music, in the form of songwriters, performing artists or catalogue or all three. Some took revenue from live shows, others from CDs, downloads and subscription services and others from sync licensing.

What are we talking about?

The World Wide Web began in 1990 and is always evolving. In recent years one big theme has been online participation and conversation.

"Social media is an umbrella term that defines the various activities that integrate technology, social interaction and the construction of text, pictures, videos and audio."

"Social media is people having conversations online."

Conversations is a metaphor. The conversations take place inside and outside companies or even across the company "firewall" - between companies and the outside world. Please note: not everything in social media is in pursuit of a "marketing" function. Social media involve fans, experts, amateurs, enthusiasts and yes, customers. But overall, people. They are about every topic possible, via video, text, pictures and audio.

Social media is about much more than social networking sites. There are thousands of places online which have embraced social media. Example: Amazon user reviews and tags, also Number10.gov.uk, even a company's own website if it has a blog or other social features, for example.

Growth

There has been huge growth in adoption of certain social media, e.g. Wikipedia, YouTube, blogs, social networks and subscription to RSS. I spent some time talking about the statistics, just to underscore the point that it's growing.

"It's not a fad. It's a fundamental shift in the way we communicate."

Observations about online culture

Before embarking on any "campaign" be aware of online cultures - across the web as a whole and also within individual communities. These are some of the common themes you often see. Not exhaustive, just themes you'll see in the wild.

Human

Natural, open, honest, direct, human voices work best. Not the mission statement, brochure or telephone busy signal. The unnatural "corporate voice" is fading. People just tune out.

Read The Cluetrain Manifesto at <http://www.cluetrain.com>

As a general guideline if your website looks like a static brochure it's probably not making the best use of what online can do.

Remix

By "remix" we mean that culture is adaptable. People in general have an impulse to participate and be creative.

It is a natural impulse and has existed for a long time, particularly in folk cultures and more recently in sampling. It can be easier to express through social media than it was through traditional media, there is a democratisation of media. This obviously covers music but not just music - everything.

In some ways it's an acknowledgement of how ideas have always developed.

e.g.

Kutiman remixing YouTube <http://www.thru-you.com>

Sleeveface <http://www.sleeveface.com>

LOLcats <http://icanhascheezburger.com>

and other online memes.

We can actively encourage this, e.g. Radiohead releasing parts of their track for remix. Be creative.

Read "Remix" book by Lawrence Lessig

Sharing

In the music industry, if I say "sharing" we jump to thinking about unlicensed music sharing. We could have a big discussion about that.

But here I wanted to emphasise the more general nature of sharing culture - people sharing news, posting links, discoveries of new bands (and old bands). Also of course, sharing through blogs whether that be experiences, advice, links, lessons.

It's human impulse. Increasingly this is happening in real-time too. People can share very quickly, sometimes by clicking "favourite".

As music companies, are we giving people things they can share? If not how do we expect to be found online?

For music recommendations, we often trust our friends more than critics.

Everyone in the room has something they can share.

Be creative.

Be interesting.

An idea: why not ask your community of fans if they are sitting on their own archive photos and video of your artists? They might be grateful for recognition and links back.

Don't be afraid of sharing niche things if that's what you do. The web is big enough.

If things are tagged and titled properly they can be found. It helps if each item has its own unique URL. Things exist across the web, on different services. But for your own website, if you requires major restructuring to allow deep links, it may be worth the effort.

Definitely share from your back catalogue, people are ready to discover it today. Some people in the room have decades of great stuff!

Openness

This is linked to sharing and also to the human voice. There is a tendency towards openness online. If you are open, like-minded people will find you. They will also converse back.

Examples from the world that music companies inhabit - most fans would like to hear more about the process of recording, "behind the scenes" at gigs, inter-band conversation. Think about the things you take for granted which are interesting to some people.

(Openness also means being accountable for mistakes and human failings - back to the human voice again.)

This is normal now. It is rare to have a Kate Bush-type artist who needs to be totally mysterious. Don't use this as an excuse not to open up. How will you be found?

General points about cultures

Every company is a media company. The companies who are patient and adaptable and who share will get the benefit of this. We can have our own media which are fundamentally different to traditional media "channels". Social media don't necessarily replace traditional media - but social media are interactive, cover more niches, they are more diverse.

As music companies, we are free to release a large amount of interesting content. There are ways to do this without annoying people as a big album launch swamping traditional media sometimes does (U2 for example). For example you can post 100 videos to YouTube. People can filter down to what they like. Read "The Long Tail" by Chris Anderson.

Traditional media are preoccupied with release dates and current things. Music marketing responds to this. But online this constraint does not exist. Look at your back

catalogue.

A quick tour of some technologies

These are in broad sections with examples. There is overlap and a lot of hybrid services.

We couldn't cover everything in the limited time, so I talked about technologies and services most relevant to a music company.

Video platforms

YouTube - the definitive video sharing platform, fans are there - use it!

Vimeo - better quality but not as many active users searching

Qik - live streaming of video, e.g. for interviewing a band or streaming from a gig

In general it's a good idea to make your videos embeddable. Do this and people can post them on their own blogs and web pages, increasing the potential number of relevant viewers. Universal Music Group don't allow this for their videos, for some reason known only to them.

Social networking sites

Facebook - fan pages can be good as long as they are maintained. You can pull in your RSS feed of news but avoid too much automation. Again, people like to interact with a human being. In general, a Facebook page or any social media presence is a promise you will be available. (This is why you should answer email from fans.) Be aware of the walled garden - you cannot take your Facebook fans elsewhere very easily. Facebook are in control - of the experience, of your pages, of your fans. (I was banned from Facebook recently while testing something. It could happen to you. They let me back though.)

Ning - people create their own social networks. It offers more customisation than Facebook. Creating a social network is not something you do every day - but useful when you want a distinct community with its own URL. Americymru is an example of a community on Ning which you can join to discuss Welsh matters, including music. <http://americymru.ning.com>

Myspace - there is still value in having a Myspace account as a band or label. For gig promoters and agents it can be the definitive place to check out your music. Have up-to-date music, photos and gig dates on there. Other than that, be careful how much time you spend on it. This will depend what kind of music you work with. It's spammy.

Twitter - I sensed some scepticism about this one, possibly because of media hype and mis-representation. If you are dealing with excellent music, then you will be talked about on Twitter (and other places) whether or not you actually have an account. Try running a search. <http://twitter.com> It's a hybrid of blogging and social network, often called "microblogging" because each post is 140 characters or less. It includes mobile access. As with most social networks, any form of blatant marketing is a turn-off for people. Why not try it and see for yourself? The web is highly experimental. If you see some hype, be curious and go and decide for yourself.

Twitter is excellent for monitoring music news and social media news. It's also potentially good for being an influencer, if you are interesting enough.

Dedicated blogging platforms

A blog is not necessarily a diary! It's just a website organised by time. Actually a highly creative medium.

Blog is a contraction of "web log".

WordPress - my personal favourite. It's open source so you can ask your web person to download the code and host it yourself, on your own domain name. Endless customisation is possible in design and features. Now in use by many companies including Telegraph for their comment system and Number10. Go to <http://wordpress.com> for the easy hosted version or <http://wordpress.org> for the code (if you know someone technical who can set it up on your own hosting)

Blogger - long-running but possibly looking a little dated now, limited customisability

Tumblr - more like a blog scrapbook, e.g. singer from The Decemberists shares things he is interested in (not just his own music) <http://colinmeloy.tumblr.com>

Posterous - dead simple blog for small posts, worth a look

There are many others. It's technically easy to start a blog but it can take time to master it and grow to something of value. If you want to know how easy it is to start a blog, here's a fun experiment: send an email to post@posterous.com and you'll get an email back telling you about your new blog.

Miscellaneous

Soundcloud - audio platform (becoming popular with music companies and artists, as an alternative to CD demos and promos)

Flickr - photo sharing and discussion

Slideshare - slideshows

Last.FM - radio station with music recommendation, has a community of hardcore music fans

RSS

RSS is a way of pulling content from a website. One very useful application is setting up a feed reader and subscribing to blogs and news sites you want to follow. Instead of manually visiting site1, site2, site3, you are automating this process.

My analogy is a custom newspaper which you put together yourself. Mine has hundreds of subscriptions which I scan.

If given the choice, I will always subscribe to RSS instead of choosing an email newsletter. I use email for getting things done and my feed reader like my newspaper - for my coffee break.

Google Reader is a popular example of a feed reader. <http://www.google.com/reader>

You can also subscribe to search feeds, e.g. for your name and names of your

bands! Many sites offer search feeds. YouTube, Twitter, Google Blogsearch are just three. Don't be slow to find out if you're being talked about.

Sometimes sites offer Atom feeds, it's a slightly different file format but exactly the same in practice.

We didn't talk about

Mobile, location-based services, social bookmarking (e.g. Delicious), activity streams, comment systems (e.g. Disqus), wikis, "user-generated content", collaborative documents (e.g. Google Docs), APIs

In other words, social media technologies are very diverse. There are lots of companies making a play to launch their own services.

Questions from music companies

I've tried to reproduce questions here as accurately as I could. In my answers I gave a lot more detail. Next time I'll consider recording it!

This time, in line with the Chatham House rule, I'll say what was said but not who said it. This document is online at <http://nativehq.com> so feel free to comment there.

Question: what's the difference between the different blogging platforms? What's the difference between, say, WordPress and Myspace? I already have a blog on Myspace. Why would I need a blog?

The different blogging platforms are service providers so it's about personal preference and features.

Myspace has taken inspiration from blogging platforms for its own blog feature. If Myspace is working for you and for your fans in your style of music then of course carry on and re-assess in the future.

I would say that not everyone is using Myspace, so you will miss people. With WordPress (which is my personal favourite, especially when hosted on your own domain), your own blog would be far more customisable in every way, not just in design but features - and importantly be more visible (probably). Also, your own blog would probably be less susceptible to social network fashions, as certain users have deserted Myspace. It might be an idea to do a blog and copy the relevant posts to Myspace, for people who spend time there.

Question: what about the metrics on Myspace friend count and number of plays for each track? They can be gamed/boosted with certain software.

The people who care about these figures should know that they can be gamed. Therefore there is no value in doing this. This then backfires on the cheats, or people just ignore the figures entirely.

(Questioner then said that journalists are deciding whether to feature artists on the basis of phoney counts. I don't know whether this is this case anymore.)

Maybe there is value in having an honest but low number of plays if your music has been freshly uploaded. Under-hyped can work!

Question: in the old days we would leaf through vinyl records. Bands could build a community in their local area. Now there is so much competition from other bands

worldwide. Is all this a double edged sword?

Yes it's a doubled-edged sword because people have finite attention spans. Online has been described as an "attention economy". People have more access to all kinds of things, not just music. So your music has to be good of course.

On the plus-side it is potentially easier to find international audiences such as Japan and America - both of which probably have big demand for Welsh music!

Someone gave the example of a successful licensing deal for an advertising campaign in another territory. (I think the implication was this was achieved thanks to online).

Question: what about quality? There is so much crap online.

This would make a good pub argument. I personally think there has always been crap, it's just more evenly distributed.

It is about having good filters - people and sources which you trust.

As for music companies looking for artists to work with, Geoff Travis of Rough Trade has an old quote which still holds: "always work with genius". You can't argue with that.

Question: what do you think of Spotify?

Spotify is a streaming music service. I love it.

It has advertising but their model seems to be based on paid subscription. The advertising is apparently there to annoy music fans into subscribing!

I'm not going to prescribe Spotify for every artist and label but many people like it. As with any deal, discuss it with your digital distributor and look at the figures.

In general subscription services could be an alternative to selling copies of albums, e.g. eMusic, Nokia Comes With Music. (Comment about whether somebody could set up infrastructure to get Welsh music on subscription services or have a Welsh subscription service. Other comments outside the scope of our discussion.)

(Comment about whether it hurts other revenue. Someone was looking at releasing one track instead of a full album.) I can't answer that for you. It could be cannibalisation or it could be "found money", depending on what you're doing. It's a business decision which, again, you make based on digital distributor's advice and wisdom from elsewhere.

There is lots of online discussion about revenue for content, e.g. <http://paidcontent.co.uk> - I'm here to say you should subscribe to the RSS and get smart!

Question: earlier you mentioned The Guardian review of a band which is interesting

Yes, I knew about it because somebody had posted a link on Twitter!

(We had a discussion here about the comparative value of newspaper reviews and blogs.) I think if you are good and have good PR then you can get, say, a Guardian review per album or for a high-profile gig. I'm definitely not minimising the value of newspaper coverage when I talk about social media. As far as your efforts go, the two are not even in competition.

The potential value of good social media engagement is growing.

References

Social media definition - this is an unattributed quote taken from Wikipedia but works well enough.

Some other quotes (italicised) taken from What The F**k is Social Media by Marta Kagen <http://www.slideshare.net/mzkagan/what-the-fk-social-media>

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