

So you think you need a website?

A functional and visually appealing website is becoming an essential instrument in the business side of art. Merryn Spencer taps into the core of this digital tool.

ESTABLISHING AN ONLINE IDENTITY IS A CRITICAL PART OF maintaining your well-oiled art marketing machine. What's more, it announces to the world that you're serious about getting ahead in your cultural industry of choice. But before diving in, how do you ensure you come up with the virtual goods?

If you're an artist, you might consider opting into a group portal rather than striking out on your own. Arts consultant and publicist, Lisa Cahill, comments that group websites offer a solution for artists who might otherwise sink without a trace. "You can spend a heap of money creating a site that no-one knows about," she says. "To get a profile for your work online, it is much better to set up a site within a portal ... so that you get the flow on benefits from the high profile, the marketing and advertising that goes into creating that profile and building subscribers." 10group's ArtWhatsOn have established an online 'stable' of contemporary emerging and established artists. Managing Director, Paul Becker, says he had encountered many unattractive, text-based artist websites. "It struck me as ironic that the very thing we buy for aesthetic pleasure should be presented in such a non-aesthetic way. We wanted a site where the work was the feature, not the mechanics of site itself."

When it comes to images, balancing usability with aesthetics is a hard line to walk. Images must be of professional quality and in an appropriate format for online use, as Arts Northern Rivers Visual Arts Network (VAN) Co-ordinator, Melitta Firth, points out: "With most websites, the images are not professionally shot, or they are shrunk incorrectly. It's a combination of those two things which creates a massive issue for artists everywhere. You just don't get the idea with poor quality images. It really shoots an artist in the foot." Melitta even admits to knocking some artists back from her website because of poor images.

You should also consider the impact of certain programs on your website, for example, with large PDF files, consider providing an alternative HTML document. Flash enables users to watch video on your website without extra downloads, but is problematic for slower connections. However, the use of Flash on the site can give added 'copyright' to the artists, so visitors to the site can't copy the images on to their computer.

Easy navigation within your site is critical. Current consumers of online information expect quick and easy access with questions being answered at the click of a button.

Orana Arts RADO, Kylie Moppett, maintains that a good structure is critical if you're going to develop the website further. "Have highlights on the front page pertaining to announcements or directing people to the areas of your site you want them to see first. Keep your contact details on each page so the user doesn't have to search for them." Your website can then be supplemented with other resource material.

In short:

Loading time

Consider the size of files you use on the site – not everyone has a razor sharp internet connection.

Display

Look at the site through different monitors and browsers to check the visibility with different operating systems, as well as disability access.

Budget and Technical

Shop around for domain hosting services. There are many programs available for to build your website, so you don't need to know how to use code to maintain a site. Web-hosting services offer an editor which similar to using a word document so you can make changes back-of-house with ease. If your budget is tight, a cheaper option is ask someone to set your website up as part of their studies (for example, school, university or TAFE student) who may give you a discounted rate.

Updates

It will keep people coming back, but be prepared to put in the time – it can take one full day per week maintenance to keep it looking good.

Visitation

There are programs available often included with your web-hosting package to help you keep track of who is using it, what your audience is, their locations and frequent downloads.

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Your website can also be a forum for discussion. President of Fresh Arts' Kim Goldsmith comments on their site in blog format which aims to increase members' communication – often hindered by isolation – and allows streamlined distribution of the newsletter. "It's a more direct link to the network's activities, as well as a more dynamic way of promoting the activities of Fresh Arts," she says. "It also increases the ability of the membership to communicate with others on issues."

Like or loathe the online world, your website can be your ticket to raising your profile as an artist, accessing the world as well as providing a 24 hour service point. So what are you waiting for? Get clicking! ■

Merryn Spencer is the Projects & Publicity Officer for Orana Arts.

Websites mentioned in this article:

ArtWhatsOn by 10group: www.artwhatson.com.au

ANR Visual Arts Network: www.visualartsnetwork.net.au

Orana Arts: www.oranaarts.com

Fresh Arts: <http://fresharts.bigblog.com.au>

PLUS Fuel4arts' e-marketing & website design tips at:

www.fuel4arts.com/gas/default.asp?id=100 and

www.fuel4arts.com/sauce/chapters/design/examples/web/