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Workshop: Culture and Media

How I made 5 000 Twitter Friends in 10 days

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How I made 5 000 Twitter Friends in 10 days

(Despite even my own arguments about communication and New Media, I still depend heavily on the old. I would therefore like to begin by paying tribute to the translators who work hard to make my words mean more than just English. I respect and admire your talents - thank you.)

Imagine this:

You are at an international conference and a person you have never met before in your life comes up to you and says, "You know, you don't look anything like your picture on Facebook!".

What is the correct response?

- a) You apologise.
- b) You wonder what they know about you that you don't know.
- c) You get hugely offended and refuse to speak to them.
- d) You shake their hand and immediately ask them to join you for coffee.

In my opinion the correct response is anything but c.

Anything but a rebuff because – after all – nobody forced you onto Facebook.

And you did make a choice about that photograph. Maybe a bad one, but it was a choice nevertheless.

So.

Work with it. There is a relationship about to begin. . .

In 139 characters (including spaces) this is what I am going to say today:

Information is not neutral
All media is marketing
Relationships depend on communication
Partnerships are relationships (yes, even with donors)

Information is not neutral.

In my work as an independent culture and development consultant, I have been privileged to interview and research a variety of non-profit arts and culture organizations within Africa. My task is to provide reviews and analysis of project design, management and effectiveness, and - where possible - offer suggestions towards increasing sustainability.

An increasingly challenging part of my work is understanding how relationships are brokered between the cultural sector and their various stakeholders. It may be donor foundations, foreign development agencies, professional grant-makers, other sectors, public bodies or private businesses. Cultural organizations rely on the creation and maintenance of these relationships in order to fulfil their mandates and to establish social sustainability. In some cases, they rely on these relationships for financial sustainability as well.

It interests me that many culture and development initiatives are actively speaking about "looking for donors", as part of their sustainability strategies. It intrigues me how many cultural organizations still believe "a media campaign" is something to put in place once the project activities are happening – i.e. once you have something to "sell". And that it is believed that

resulting press cuttings from that campaign will be one of the main ways in which “donor relationships” can be maintained. (Along with the placement of logos on a website.) The main thing seems to be just to have the donor’s name mentioned. And now it seems that that the newer main thing is to have it mentioned on your Facebook. (Or Twitter.)

Changing forms of information dissemination for changing times makes sense. Digitalization and web-based media interfaces seem to offer many benefits – they are cheaper, immediate, multi-faceted, more accessible, simultaneously diverse and specific; and definitely very trendy. It is in line with the increase of IT throughout Africa and the push to use this development, for development.

I am by no means a New Media expert. I’ve read a few books, done some Googling – like anyone else really. I’m curious, stimulated and a bit intrigued. New Media presents new models of marketing; of thinking about who we are and what we might offer to others. I’m also a bit daunted and not a little cautious.

What if (after all) I am NOTHING like my Facebook picture?

Information is not neutral and all media is marketing.

Are we quite aware, as cultural organizations, of our brand significance and the media value it might generate through these so-called “new media” adventures?

How do we cultivate authenticity along with a responsive capacity that is creative and willing to engage?

Are there ways of assessing media value that are not about reducing media exposure to advertising value equivalents? What does this variety of media exposure and/or coverage say about us? And what do we have to offer a partner in this respect?

Increasingly, many foreign missions consider “public diplomacy” to be a priority of their work. Generally speaking, public diplomacy includes those interactions and relationships promoted and nurtured outside of the formal state-to-state, diplomatic channels. Public diplomacy seeks to influence opinion in favour of a particular declared identity – national or otherwise.

Public diplomacy is about asserting, denying, suggesting, convincing, ensuring, comparing, supporting, entrenching, identifying, highlighting, reminding, illustrating, associating.

Effective public diplomacy can only take place within the context of relationships. New Media marketers talk about “permission assent” – in other words, social networking creates relationships around specific interests and then uses those channels to transmit targeted messages. These kinds of messages usually have greater effect because of the “permission” or access granted by those relationships.

Is New Media Marketing actually the New Public Diplomacy?
Are there lessons here to be learned by cultural organizations?

Relationships depend on communication.

New Marketing also talks about “creating the environment we need to thrive.” In the world of e-commerce, this means literally changing business models of production, distribution and access. Obviously, web-based interfaces are ripe for this and so, for example, we have a revolution (and crisis) in the music business. Consumers of music no longer need to pay enormous mark-up prices on the end product of a long distribution chain that disadvantages the original creator, and can make their impact felt directly on the market by down-loading track by track exactly what they want. Yes, this is a simplistic point and doesn’t appreciate other

damaging effects such as piracy and the lack of copyright, but I wonder what “creating the environment we need to thrive” might mean for the cultural sector in terms of lobbying and advocacy?

If New Marketing (aka Public Diplomacy) might not also give us new channels, new courage or new energy to begin to exert our influence on how notions of distribution, production, development and even perhaps even relationships are conceived?

Partnerships are relationships (yes, even with donors)

Post-development theory asks us to question whether the modernist, post-World War II framework for development is the most appropriate and effective for Africa. In the long-term, how helpful are relationships based primarily on the extraction of value out of the continent, rather than on the production of value internally? Post-development theory seeks for discourses (or conversations) that are not about cultural universality – why should one set of cultural assumptions apply to everyone? Can we talk about different ways of doing things, and different ways to value our particular cultural “brands”? Different choices?

It is a critique which finds some synergy perhaps, in the findings of the Paris Declaration and the Accra Forum on Aid Effectiveness: -

“Partnerships based on mutual benefit” rather than “donor relations based on structural adjustment”.

Greater transparency and accountability from both sides.

Enhanced ownership and empowerment.

Which comes from increased channels of visibility and access to information about all of the above.

Which can come (in part) from embracing the possibilities of New Media.

Speaking from an African point of view, it occurs to me that this is also about the articulation of our own frameworks.

Telling our own stories.

Sharing examples of good practice, and warning of the bad.

Identifying and consolidating our own values that are the fundament from which we work, that shape our aspirations and objectives and project designs.

Being creative in setting up new kinds of partnerships that service new eras, and being willing to engage with the results.

It's not about having 5 000 Twitter friends.

Or having a professionally taken photograph on Facebook.

Of course not, but it is about taking responsibility for what we put out and cultivating a responsive capacity to negotiate from positions of increased confidence and credibility. And maybe using New Media and New Media Marketing strategies to help us do this.

In the words of a New Media Marketing expert who was talking about business but he might as well as have been talking about cultural co-operation:

“Avoid compromise.

In a world of choice, no one picks something that is not good enough.

In a world of networks, few pick the isolated.

In a transparent world, people avoid the deceitful.”

: Seth Godin

How New Marketing is Transforming the Business World and How to Thrive in It