

## Tips for cultural organisations considering collaborating together to launch a joint digital service, platform, or channel.

### Case Study: Dundee Rep Theatre (collaborating with DCA, Scottish Dance Theatre, Dundee Heritage, and V&A Dundee)

#### **Background**

In austere times, it is hard to justify the investment in new developments. As part of the [Federation Scottish Theatre's](#) Digital Action Research Group, [Dundee Rep](#) were committed to creating a digital development that would help them increase the reach, profile and accessibility of their work to audiences from outside Dundee. Initial ideas for developments included the positioning of Dundee Rep content on national channels of digital performing arts content, such as [digitaltheatre.com](#). This would have been an expensive undertaking for an organisation of the scale of Dundee Rep.

However, as the Action Research Group (facilitated by Hannah Rudman) discussed the opportunities and Dundee Rep held discussions internally, Dundee Rep were able to clarify their aims to being about actually creating new audiences in Dundee, and profiling Dundee/Dundee Rep as a destination place to visit with a rich cultural offer. (Significant existing parts of the offer include DCA, Dundee Heritage's assets such as Discovery Point and The McManus, and Scottish Dance Theatre; emerging parts of the offer include V&A Dundee and the wider creative industries led activities, organised into a coherent offer by Creative Dundee).

Having held discussions with commercial businesses in Dundee, Dundee Rep knew that there was support to be had for positioning Dundee's cultural offer to business tourists. They recognised the value of marketing the collective over marketing just themselves: audiences are actually more likely to visit Dundee if they can "make a trip of it".

In the culture sector, consortia and partnerships have always had their place: artists and arts organisations have always collaborated, co-produced, and partnered-up, but the prevalence of this collaborative behaviour is increasing as the idea cost-effective creativity and the promise of self-sufficiency becomes more desirable. Leading a collaborative project was something Dundee Rep felt confident to do, perhaps inspired by their latest in-house production: a celebration of the international heritage and ambition of Dundee.

#### **How was the collaboration established, and how did the idea develop?**

Dundee Rep invited other Dundee-based cultural organisations of similar scale but different art forms to the table to discuss the notion of sharing digital services and channels to enhance local audience/tourist awareness of the breadth of Dundee's cultural product.

At the first meeting:

- the organisations discussed their needs, and areas of consensus and agreement were clarified;
- the current provision was mapped and the shortcomings of that provision were noted; and
- relationships and politics between the individual organisations and the stakeholders of the current provision were disclosed in trust within the group (under the Chatham House Rule<sup>1</sup>).

The idea that emerged solved the real needs of the organisations. The collaboration stayed strong and focussed:

- by meeting regularly, with each collaborator undertaking the action points assigned to them (or in relation to their organisation) between meetings
- because each meeting reiterated and checked the explicit aims of the project
- as all partners came to every meeting, and the representatives from each organisation all had a solid understanding of digital content and marketing.

The idea for the collaborative project developed as the organisations pooled their collective knowledge and contacts. Key conversations that needed to take place with key stakeholders were assigned to individuals, undertaken on behalf of the group, and reported back.

Stakeholders such as Dundee Council and VisitScotland were briefed on the project, as were the boards of each collaborating organisation.

Potential development and delivery partners were "sounded out".

## **What is the collaborative project?**

Building a rich media channel for cultural tourism and an archive legacy of art and culture in Dundee. To enhance tourism by showing the quality and calibre of Dundee's creative and cultural outputs; build a creative and cultural showcase for Dundee; build a broad arts/culture/heritage/creative network, and enable things like car share to events; build a digital content ecology in Dundee; build local profile and awareness of what goes on culturally and creatively in Dundee.

The business model for the project is based on selling advertising space at a premium to large corporate clients with an interest in attracting audiences to Dundee - the collective profile of the collaborating organisations enhanced the value of the advertising opportunity.

The project may well integrate with an existing online channel that already has significant traffic and following from audiences attractive to the cultural collaborators, but that has little funding, and not enough clout to attract

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<sup>1</sup> A fuller definition can be found here: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatham\\_House\\_Rules](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chatham_House_Rules)

premium advertisers. Discussions about the ongoing project management and funding, legal structure, and IP/ownership will be completed before any work on the project begins.

### **Benefits of working collaboratively:**

**Safety in numbers.** The project is less likely to fail, as there momentum and buy-in from many different places around a solid plan.

**Cost efficiencies.** No one organisation will shoulder the costs of the digital channel, all will benefit.

**Co-opetition.** This group has a shared audience, but not a competition for the same audience. The group see the digital channel as a chance for the participating organisations to share **more** information about when/what events are on so that there is no clash, and so there is greater complementarity and integrity with overall cultural planning.

**Collective creativity.** The ideas needed for the design and curation of the channel come from more than one person, and so discussions around quality and aesthetics that all participant collaborators can sign-up to have begun. This may well lead to other collective creations, as trust has been built.

**Confidence.** There is a strong desire to share resources, and plan city wide, which will broadcast a confident message to other sectors and wider stakeholders. The cultural organisations know that they can do the best job of presenting themselves, and this gives them a way of controlling that.

**A bigger little black book!** The collective of organisations have a wide pool of stakeholder, sponsor and developer partner contacts. Collectively, they also have greater clout than they do individually, and so can make a bigger ask of a sponsor, for example.

**Joint buying power.** Genuine savings can be created through sharing the costs of digital content creation - a day of a film crew could produce 5 short interviews from 5 different cultural organisations, each paying a fifth of the cost.

### **Impacts and issues of working collaboratively:**

**The digital project has to be in everyone's day-to-day work, structure and future plans.** This is so that the pace and focus is kept. It has not been "a project on the side".

**Buy-in at every level must be achieved.** Boards and Senior Management Teams (SMTs) have had to be briefed, the potential of new work to achieve the channel has been planned into departmental diaries.

**Conflicts of interest and issues around IP can arise.** These can be overcome - the group has discussed setting out clear processes for this through creating a Memorandum of Understanding (or MoU)<sup>2</sup> contract to clarify relationships, practicalities, disagreement, and exit processes, etc., at the beginning of the practical development of the digital channel.

**Difference of creative autonomy and opinion may also arise!** Every participant organisation has recognised that they have slightly different audiences, marketing messages, and aesthetic quality standards, but compromise has been achieved through being explicit about this, and debating. This will need to be ongoing.

### **Further developments: an ongoing commitment to building a digital content creation ecology and network for Dundee**

The collaborative group are now busy engaging significant sponsors who are interested in the potential for cultural tourism in Dundee. They are also sensitively engaging with other creative networks and umbrella groups already established in Dundee. Web developers, graphic designers, film makers, musicians, game creators, Higher Education Institutions and Colleges are all being communicated with - the collaboration recognise that these groups are a key part of the practical journey of developing the product as well as a core audience and potential ecology for future developments. This work meets the wider economic and sector development objectives of government agencies such as Scottish Enterprise, VisitScotland, and Dundee City Council, and is being profiled and reported back to them highlighting these achievements.

### **Top tips for collaborating with other cultural organisations and wider partners on a shared digital service**

- **Be open, and do not worry about who takes the credit for the idea.** The good is for everybody, if an individual has a key conversation, treat it as a win for the team! Be open also to the collaboration expanding and taking up different partners as the project progresses.
- **Have a shared mission and vision.** Write up a description of what the collaborative project is, who it is for, why, when and how it will be achieved.
- **Always have an up-to-date joint set of objectives and goals.** Make sure the description above is updated after every meeting, together with a list of action points that work towards the objectives being achieved.

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<sup>2</sup> A fuller definition can be found here [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorandum\\_of\\_understanding](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Memorandum_of_understanding)



- **Develop an ethos of respect of others' quality of work, and recognition of others' artistic aesthetic.** Discuss this explicitly - it is not criticism, it is working out where you all are in a marketplace, how your value proposition differs, and therefore how your key customers fit into different segments. Each organisation can still exercise their own creative autonomy: homogenisation is not the aim of a collaboration!
- **Have difficult discussions early on.** Who owns what? What will do if we disagree? Who takes the risk on? Having an idea about how issues like IP, rights, data, disasters, and disagreements will be dealt with up front gives everyone peace of mind (as well developing more personal trust within the group of collaborators, and giving everyone a solid, risk-analysed, business case to take to boards and SMTs).
- **Be comfortable looking outside your own environment for collaborators.** Sometimes its easier to collaborate with those who have similar goals, but who sit outside your organisation or sector (so for this project, with other people in other organisations who "get" digital).
- **Work hard to ensure the collaborators meet regularly, even if it is a squeezed hour last thing on a Friday at the pub!** Co-ordination, shared ambition, and commitment will make a collaboration work: when mixed with a good bit of old-fashioned human relationships working as they should!
- **Share what you learn as you learn it.** Dundee Rep have been committed to sharing their learnings , failures and successes through the process with the Federation Scottish Theatre's membership throughout the Digital Action Research Project. Now they are sharing this with the wider sector through this case study.

## Further Reading

Mission Models Money, 2010. [Enabling Effective Collaboration.](#)

Hannah Rudman, Rudman Consulting,  
with Graham King, Dundee Rep and the CultureDundee.com collaborators.  
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