

EFFECTIVE SOCIAL MEDIA – HOW TO CAPTURE YOUR AUDIENCE

In today's climate, social media is the great leveller that brings artists into contact with the people who love their work, more than ever dreamt possible. This is not to say that social media is the be-all and end-all of what it takes to be a successful artist, but what we are trying to convey is that it is an incredible tool that is immensely useful to artists, gallerists, and supporters alike.

Instagram is different things for different people, but for artists working in visual media, it is an incredibly useful business tool that can fuel your success when used effectively.

Nothing is too big to fail, and as such, it would be remiss to write an entire book about one platform whilst neglecting all others. At the time of writing, by far the most useful platform for emerging artists is Instagram, but whilst this is the case now, it would only take one or two algorithm changes to send Instagram the way of Myspace. This short essay will focus on Instagram in particular, but the approaches are translatable to those platforms we continue to see evolving today. We also aim to give you some useful techniques to bring followers from Instagram, towards more stable modes of contact such as your website and mailing list.

TYPES OF FEED

As an artist, there are two main approaches to curating your feed. Firstly, there is *The Visual Diary Approach*, which treats your feed as if it is a journal, or an online

sketchbook. These feeds are often quite personal, which is useful when trying to appeal to collectors and patrons, who want to know a little more about the artist's personality before they decide to invest. This is also a good feed to utilise if you are hoping to attract galleries and curators, as these contacts want to look not only at your work, but they also like a little more information about you as a person – your interests, inspirations, methods of working, and works in progress. This kind of account is conducive to garnering a lot more genuine engagement, often promoting actual discussion within the comments. Whilst it may not generate as much overall engagement as the *Gallery Approach* outlined below, the engagement that it does generate is much more likely to create genuine connections with your fanbase, both between you and the fans, and between fans and other fans. People are much more likely to comment encouragement and critique on this type of account, and as such, it is often good to display more of your personality. You should not be afraid of sharing your insecurities and failures as well as your triumphs, as all of this humanises you and helps your supporters feel like they know the real you. This makes fans and collectors invest in the artist, rather than just the artwork. With this approach, your captions and responses to comments or messages can be a lot more informal and conversational than you might think, which is great because as well as being nicer to write, they are also nicer to read.

Secondly, there is the *Gallery Approach*, which is the kind of account that shows very little personality in favour of expertly taken images of works on pristine white gallery-like walls. The captions are often formal and written in the third person, with the artist's voice largely absent.

This account is successful when the artist is already established and doesn't need or want this direct

connection with their supporters. It is also good for practitioners like commercial illustrators and designers, as learning more about the personality of the artist is less important for commissioning editors or art directors than it is for collectors.

Both types of account can be useful for different reasons, so you should spend some time deciding which suits you and what you want, to achieve the best results.

DRIVING ENGAGEMENT

There are many ways to drive engagement on your social media, but most of all it is important that this engagement is genuine.

What you want is comments, reposts, direct messages, and likes – ideally in that order. When it comes to comments, you want ones that go beyond the ubiquitous ‘great work’, and give something more human. There are many accounts that, in order to drive engagement on their own account, will copy and paste the same banal-but-generally-complimentary text into the comments of every photo they scroll past, and it is not these kinds of comments that we are seeking.

Whilst it is true that indeed *any* comments will help drive overall engagement, what is more useful is the actual conversation that is so possible within comments.

Wherever possible, we would recommend liking the comments your photos receive, and even better, responding to them. It has taken the commenter valuable time to click into the dialogue box and type something out, and when the collective attention-span is as short as it now is (especially on Instagram), this is significant. It is nice for the commenter to see that their act has not gone unnoticed, and it also helps drive engagement to their account too. Social media is social in more than just name, and so the more you engage with people (on both their accounts and your own), the more they will engage with you in turn.

As well as encouraging engagement on your own account, you should be giving what you hope to receive across other people’s accounts too.

You should comment upon works you love and say why you love them; don’t stick to the ubiquitous single word affirmatives or banal thumbs-up emojis. Don’t offer critique unless it is requested though, as it is hard to judge tone without body-language, and you don’t want to appear to be derisory.

Some of the most successful accounts that we know of post their own work as often as sharing the work of others, and whilst this may seem counterintuitive, it pays dividends. Accounts that share other’s work are by their very nature more-varied, and so necessarily, they are more widely-appealing. It is important to share images that won’t look out of place amongst your works, as a well-curated feed is a must. When done well, these additions can benefit the whole, which becomes greater than the sum of its parts. This can be done in either posts or stories, and both are good for different reasons. Stories are temporary and immediate, and are somewhat-free of the negative effects of the selective algorithm that govern what is seen when. When sharing a work to a story, tag the artist always, as unless you do this, they won’t know you’ve posted. By promoting dialogue between you and the artists, it creates the potential for them to further share your profile through reposts.

CAPTURING YOUR AUDIENCE

So as particular social media platforms are always at risk of fading into obscurity, what can you do with this audience once you have them?

What you need is to bring them from your social media to something a little closer to home – there are a few ways to do this. Ideally, you want them to visit

your shows and buy your work, but both of these things happen in the real, physical world, and there often needs to be one or two more steps in between this and them discovering you online.

One such step is your website, or more specifically, a blog. As outlined above, your website is now not your most efficient tool when it comes to making your work discoverable by potentially interested-parties, but it is still an incredibly useful tool in bringing them in a little closer, and giving them more information about yourself and your practice.

A website serves many functions that are absent from your social media, making a well-ordered website essential. The most efficient website would contain a blog, which when used effectively can help drive traffic *towards* social media and vice-versa. Keywords and an effective SEO (Search Engine Optimisation) approach are useful to optimise how the blog performs online (SEO is actually a lot easier than it sounds).

The ideal blog would be updated as often as is possible, and contain more text than images. This can be used to provide further insight into your practice or your inspirations.

The optimum use of a website/blog can work wonders not only for your online presence (in terms of SEO and being 'searchable'), but it can also supplement your social media. The content that you present should be specific to each medium (main website, blog, and social media), as each of them has different strengths and weaknesses. For the main website, this should contain all details such as personal statement and CV, as well as a list of other engagements such as shows you've been in and other relevant information. The images here should be the high-resolution photos of finished works, shown either cropped to only include the work, or in an interesting setting. Think of this as a retrospective show, and

only include your absolute best work. The blog can be a bit more informal, contain a lot more text, and talk about things as they are in progress. This can link to your social media, and where appropriate build upon or give more detail to things you have posted there. Social media should be used as outlined above, but all three should be used so as to direct traffic to the other two, either by using direct links, or by explaining where this extra content can be found.

Another place that you want to be bringing your social media following is into your mailing list. Whilst we can say with certainty that social media as a concept will be around forever, we cannot say the same with any degree of certainty for individual platforms. As suggested earlier, each platform, however stable it may seem now, is in a tenuous place. It would only take a few minor changes to the way any platform works to destroy it irrevocably, or for another slightly more workable one to emerge, and all of your hard-won followers are lost.

One thing that will be around forever however, is email. When done correctly, a solid mailing list can be the lifeblood of your business. Something you should start doing immediately if you aren't already, is encouraging your followers to transition to also being on your mailing list. Whenever anyone buys or expresses interest in your work, put all of their details in a spreadsheet to keep a record. This gives you a bank of people who you can be certain have a tangible interest in your work. Whenever you release a new print or start planning a new show, these are the most likely people to be interested. Once you start doing this, you will wish you did it sooner.

Some ways that are possible to get people to sign up to your mailing list include using swipe-up functionality within stories (if available), adding your signup address

in your bio, or mentioning your mailing list in your captions. The mailing list signup box can appear as a pop-up on your website, or remain permanently in a side-bar, but whatever way you encourage sign-ups, make sure you are GDPR compliant. Whilst it *is* still permissible to copy-and-paste email addresses into your mailing list yourself, be wary that it must be of genuine interest to these people, and that they have in some way consented to be contacted by you. If you ignore these rules, you run the risk of being blacklisted. When people unsubscribe from a mailing list they have the option to explain their reasons for doing so, with one of the tick-boxes being 'I never signed up for this list'. The more of these you get, the more likely your provider is to ban you.

Unsubscribes happen to everyone, and should not be seen as fans that have changed their minds about you or your work; people unsubscribe for a multitude of reasons. Think of it as part of a honing of a tight, dedicated list that has a genuine interest in what you are doing. Don't despair.

You can optimise the open rates of your mailing lists using techniques such as personalising the 'To' field of your message, verifying your email and authenticating your domain. These adjustments are a little fiddly, but they will really help ensure your messages do not get redirected to junk by spam filters.

To conclude, your social media should be treated as a business tool, and when used appropriately can be of great benefit to you. It is something that is often seen as adolescent and throwaway, and many artists neglect to treat it with the respect it deserves. It is true that the platforms that are popular currently may not be around forever, but what is inarguable is that social media in some form or other, will be. What is important is to not fear change, and utilise whatever new media is available in the most efficient way possible. If that means getting

the best out of Instagram now whilst it is around and then adopting something else that may come along to replace it, then do so.

To use this media in the most efficient way is to bring any followers you attain closer into the fold, to create a like-minded community. Once you have this community, you should strive to extend that community *beyond* the confines of whatever platform you found them on, and towards other more stable platforms like email.