

Arts Summit Review Transcript Season 3, Bonus Episode 2

Hello, and welcome to the Time Pieces History Podcast. Today, I'm doing something a bit different, and sharing my thoughts on a virtual summit I attended about funding for the arts sector at the end of last month. I've got five key takeaways to explore in this episode.

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Introduction

Last month, I participated in "Defining the New Normal", an Arts Summit looking at the challenges faced by those in the arts, culture and heritage industries, with an emphasis on finding funding, especially post-Covid. Speakers and panellists were international experts, and sessions ran throughout the day.

The event was jointly hosted by the [National Arts Fundraising School](https://www.nafs.org.uk) and [Fundraising Everywhere](https://www.fundraisingeverywhere.org). The NAFS offers a six-part fundraising programme for arts and culture organisations to develop a strategy and get advice on raising money; Fundraising Everywhere offers conferences, webinars and regular support to fundraisers to help them grow their careers, as well as a virtual fundraising platform.

So, why did I attend, given that I'm not a fundraiser and never will be? Well, I wanted to learn exactly what those challenges were from those who had first-hand experience of them, how they were solving them and where there were gaps in their knowledge.

As someone who wants to work more with the heritage sector, the Arts Summit seemed like the ideal place to network and see if any of my current offerings could be of use, or if I could create new products to help.

To secure funding, as well as completing an application form, organisations need to demonstrate they are actively focusing on certain key areas, such as inclusion and accessibility. Clients may need me to create content that does exactly that.

I wanted to make some good contacts and have a better understanding of the industry's problems, which I did. I also took copious notes (occupational hazard!) and identified five key areas where the arts and culture sector are struggling.

Five Key Takeaways

1. Digital Technology is a Double-Edged Sword

When we think of the arts, we think of galleries, museums and theatres – all things which mean leaving the house and attending an event at a specific venue. There is a perception, I think, amongst the general public, that these places are old-fashioned and often formal, even if that's no longer true.

Pre-Covid the majority of museums and galleries had a small online presence – a website often not fit for purpose, and an uneven approach to social media. Very few use any kind of multi-media in their venues. The bigger sites, such as the British Museum, do digital really well, but most don't.

The pandemic and subsequent lockdown caught a lot of organisations off-guard, because they had to quickly come up with ways to continue to engage with visitors and members while their premises were closed. Virtual museum tours have been popular, and some of the ballet companies and orchestras have streamed performances.

What really stood out for me, listening to the speakers and reading the chat comments from fellow delegates, is that arts and heritage organisations really need to embrace digital in order to remain relevant, but they are reluctant to do so because they perceive it as expensive and complicated – neither of these things are true.

One organisation surveyed its regular visitors who said they were trying digital for the first time – the general consensus was 'it's ok but I don't really like it' – unfortunately, I couldn't confirm the average age of these respondents, but I suspect they weren't millennials and Gen Z.

Of course, there's no substitute for an in-person visit – I can't wait to get out of quarantine and into the museums (safely!) – but you can use digital to encourage people to want to come by showing off your collections and the stories behind your site. Offering interactive learning tools when people ARE at the venue can help them visualise what life was like at a particular time, and to put an object into a wider context.

There was also an idea posited that digital is impersonal and makes people 'consumers' rather than 'appreciators', which I think rather misses the point. If that's the outcome of your digital efforts, then you've done something wrong. If you have one painting by an artist, you can use digital to share other examples of their work, or talk about other artists who painted in a similar style, such as the Dutch masters or the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

People are going to expect to find your venue online, whether that's on your own website, on social media or on an aggregate site like Trip Advisor, so you need to make sure you're properly represented. And be pro-active with using multi-media

and technology to aid learning and understanding for visitors. YOU might not be keen on digital, but your visitors are.

Finally, I should mention Google Ad Grants, which I had never heard of before. Essentially, Google offers up to \$10,000 per month of Google Ad funding (in-kind) for charities and non-profits, which helps you get your website further up their rankings. One of the main qualifying criteria is that your website must meet their requirements, so maybe that's reason enough to think about embracing digital!

2. Relationships with Donors and Influencers are Vital

Many of the positive stories about coming through the pandemic with the business or venue intact highlighted how good relationships with donors made a big difference to their sustainability. Of course, a lot of these sites already had things in place to ensure regular financial contributions, but some were able to make new appeals to bring money in.

It appears that many arts organisations rely on a core group of regular donors, and the uncertainty of lockdown did lead to some of these people cancelling their subscriptions. However, new donors often appeared to show their support. National Museums Scotland, for example, found that people had strong family ties and childhood memories of certain sites, and they wanted to help.

Many venues wrote personally to their supporters, asking them how they were doing and also to remind them that they were still there – the direct approach often worked well. Donors want to know what's in it for them, so venues had to be creative with what they could offer. There was also an acknowledgement that sites need to strengthen their ties with donors in case of another lockdown.

Alongside the more traditional fundraising route of offering subscriptions, member perks and exclusive events for regular donors, there was quite a lot of talk about 'influencers', particularly from speaker Usha Menon. I was surprised to hear about influencers in the context of arts and culture, as I'm more used to them in the world of online marketing.

In this context, though, an influencer is not likely to be a reality TV star or the most successful content marketer, but a donor or supporter who has the ear of many other potential supporters, and who can put in a good word for you if you cultivate the relationship in the right way.

These influencers are passionate about the arts, and your site in particular. To get them onside, you need to provide them with outstanding experiences, and their encounters with your online content need to be memorable.

Focus on the people and the personal connection, rather than the organisation, and you will encourage them to be advocates for you. Give them incentives to support your venue and to ask their friends to do the same, whether that's in-person or online

events – preferably exclusive. They need to feel appreciated and motivated to keep on donating.

3. Transparency, Value and Unique Story are Key Messages to Communicate

Another thing that came up a lot during the conference was ‘storytelling’, which seems to be a bit of a buzzword at the minute. I really enjoyed the session by Liz Ngonzi, where she explored the challenges that organisations have around the importance of sharing what makes them unique, the main one being again about personal rather than business-focused.

Museums, theatres, galleries and other cultural sites are actually in a really strong position when it comes to communicating what makes them different – apart from anything else, no other venue has the same collections. The site in my local area all have a story about how they were founded and grown, and yours will too.

Other challenges Liz highlighted were around budget, competition (which is international, and with lockdown and online, actually more of a problem than before) and the risk of fraud because of people pretending to be something they aren’t online. Organisations need to show potential donors that they’re trustworthy and a ‘good cause’ to give to.

It will take a bit of time to dig into your own history, but you will quickly find things that make you unique. Look particularly at how you engage with your local community and how your organisation has been part of the area over the years – this will help you connect with potential visitors and donors and show your value.

You need to demonstrate your relevance, Liz says, and to have a short, punchy mission statement that can be shared on social media, with a longer version to use elsewhere. She also highlighted that arts organisations are used to focusing on themselves as a whole and not as a brand, which is something that’s necessary to succeed with digital. Websites are a key part of this, and can also be difficult.

Liz also talked about transparency, which is new to me but key for charities, which many arts organisations are. This is about clearly showing where your funding comes from and what you spend it on, as well as who works in your business and who you partner with.

What was particularly interesting was that she couldn’t find a good example from the sector of an organisation that does this well – she had to use a water charity as her case study. I wonder if this is because it’s not something they see as a priority, or if it ties in with this uncertainty around online communication. If putting together a website and content for it is seen as difficult and expensive, then transparency about funds is going to be hard to share too.

4. Accessibility and Inclusion are no Longer Just Boxes to Tick off

In many organisations, accessibility is something that they will say they do but without giving much information on *how* they do it. Wheelchair ramps, disabled

toilets and large-print signs are often as far as they go, and they're generally unchallenged.

Lockdown, however, has shown that accessibility and inclusion need to be at the top of the list when it comes to making improvements to your organisation as well as the building it lives in.

Kate Larsen did a whole session on funding inclusion, and highlighted that conversations around the topic are happening more, which is a good thing. Decisions have been made far quicker than usual during lockdown, and organisations have had to reverse engineer a lot of things – for instance, staff being obliged to work from home meant that the policies around homeworking were developed after the fact, rather than before.

Kate added that programmes have gone online quickly, such as the aforementioned live-streamed concerts and performances, and these have given arts venues a wider, even global, reach. However, things like sign language and captions have been an afterthought, which is unacceptable.

She urged organisations to put access and inclusion first, rather than an obligation that comes at the end of the list. Go beyond the bare minimum of what's required of you, and come up with creative solutions, and budget for these things from the beginning.

She advocates outreach and finding people in the community who can advise on solving inclusion problems for you, rather than guessing if you don't have personal experience of a particular challenge. Asking them what you need to provide means you can be sure you're getting it right.

Much as we would like them to, things won't go back to how they were before, and this should be seen as a positive. The future will involve digital elements of all programmes, and some things will only be presented online. There will also be a hybrid online/in-person way of working for staff, and that's something to be mindful of too.

Kate talked about digital inequality, too. Not everyone in your community has access to electronic devices or the knowledge of how to use them, even though they're cheaper and more accessible than ever before. One of the other sessions talked about how they crowdfunded iPads for their art school service users, so people could still learn and be creative even while the venue was closed.

Equally, not all employees have the skills to use these devices for their own work, the data bandwidth to access shared resources, or the knowledge of how to deliver programmes digitally, and all of these things need to be taken into consideration.

Museums, galleries and other arts and cultural sites are essential for communities, engagement, wellbeing and mental health, and those in the sector have an obligation

to explore ways of making their venues, their collections and resources accessible to more people. It can seem daunting, but it's important to get it right.

5. Being Flexible and Responding Quickly to Change Ensures Survival

The Covid pandemic and the global lockdown took everybody by surprise. One speaker talked about having three days' notice of venue closure, which happened to be the same day as their flagship gala event, featuring live music, drinks reception and hobnobbing with the great and good.

She was able to move the entire thing online, and by opening it up to those outside of the regular invite list actually secured additional donations and created a sense of goodwill on both sides.

Smaller organisations tend to be more resilient and able to pivot quickly because there is less red tape and fewer decision-makers to slow things down. However, they have the challenge of not having the money to keep the lights on (literally) or pay their staff, and there was a bit of doom and gloom from some of the speakers and panellists.

But we **MUST** be able to think on our feet, and be prepared for another pandemic. If not another lockdown, then perhaps venues are at risk of the fallout from the coming recession – arts and culture are always among the first businesses to suffer.

So, what is the answer? What came out of the sessions was about building good relationships with donors, influencers and others who can help you. Many of the speakers said that their frequent visitors were keen to get back as soon as possible, and, where they could, were returning tickets but not asking for refunds, making additional donations or rallying their friends to do the same.

If nothing else, the lockdown has shown just how important arts and culture are for communities, for learning and play, and for wellbeing. Nobody wants to see their favourite local museum close, and when venues were honest about needing support from members and visitors, most people did what they could.

Organisations also need to be flexible with how they offer things to people – many visitors still aren't comfortable with coming back to sites, so a digital, hybrid solution is going to be an important part of engaging and communicating with people.

For the next generation, the teenagers and children, many of them have been taught online, and they have adapted to that. They will expect to have the same experiences outside of the classroom environment, and they will engage with multi-media learning tools.

Collaboration is also going to help – don't regard other venues as competition, but as a potential partner and someone you can learn from. It may seem that the bigger sites have done well with digital because they can afford it, but the truth is that

having a bigger budget has simply enabled them to explore the options sooner. Digital is unavoidable, but it *is* affordable, so be open-minded to its potential.

Thank you so much for listening! If you attended the arts summit or you work in heritage or fundraising, I'd love to hear your thoughts. This show marks the end of season three, and I hope you've enjoyed learning more about Roman Britain – I certainly have. As we didn't get very far down the country, I'll probably be coming back to the topic in a later season.

Season four is about remarkable women and starts on 22nd September. I've got some interesting ladies lined up for you to find out more about. There will be a guest interview, and I'll also be marking my 50th episode with a review of the podcast so far and my plans for what's next. Speak to you soon!