

Maningrida Arts and Culture

www.maningrida.com

November 2003

Interview with Kellie Austin on using the Internet to conduct e-business

1. About us

Maningrida Arts & Culture is a community-based Aboriginal arts organisation located in north-central Arnhem Land, and is one of Australia's largest Aboriginal artists' co-operatives. It promotes the cultural assets, both artistic and knowledge-based, of the Aboriginal people of the Maningrida region, through the documentation and marketing of their art. Maningrida Arts & Culture concentrates on marketing traditional and contemporary arts, including bark paintings, wooden sculpture, fibre craft, prints and items of material culture.

2. The idea

Maningrida Arts & Culture has had a website since 1995. The original site achieved the aim of giving them a basic online presence, but it contained too much information and had no interactive elements. Over time they were able to consider the kind of e-business operation that would best suit their circumstances and requirements. Maningrida's remote location was a significant limiting factor in its operation. An effective website would enable them to make Aboriginal art works available to a wider audience, by illustrating them on the site, and providing some means by which prospective buyers could select art works and order them online.

The website has been upgraded three times. The current site was launched in May 2003. It provides a wide range of information, an online exhibition or gallery and interactive options for prospective buyers, including an online ordering facility.

Maningrida is very happy with the site. The domain name works well, and users report that it is clean and fresh, and easy to navigate.

Site maintenance, which takes one day per week, is carried out by Kellie Austin, the website designer and manager. At present, Kellie updates the site manually every few weeks, but a database is close to being completed that will update the site automatically every two days. The site is an interesting example of the universality of the internet. The database was created by a company in Melbourne, the site is hosted on Maningrida's own server and it is managed by a company in Sydney. In remote north-central Arnhem Land the phone service often fails. As a protection against interruption of service the site is 'mirrored' in the USA. When the phone lines go down a server in the USA cuts in, to maintain the website service.

3. The e-business

Maningrida markets art works in the low to medium-price categories, and aims to sell items not handled by other organisations. These items, with information on the artists who created them, are presented in the online gallery. The site contains cultural information on artistic practices and general news about current events, exhibitions and awards.

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E-commerce is conducted through the 'Dilly bag'—a simplified version of an online shop. Potential customers, who are mainly private buyers, are able to register interest in an art work and order it online. By clicking on the **Dilly bag** icon, buyers are able to browse the online gallery, by artist or category of art work, look at an illustration of the work and learn something about the artist and type of craft involved. By clicking on **Buy artwork**, they can select an item and send an email request to purchase. Maningrida then responds with information on the availability of the selected work, and freight details. Payment is made through traditional means, and the work is shipped on confirmation of the sale.

4. The challenges

Kellie Austin says that the most difficult part of the whole process for Maningrida was getting appropriate advice on the technology and software which would suit the kind of e-business operation they were planning. Their remote situation meant that all discussions had to be conducted over the phone, and everyone they consulted seemed to have a different view of what was required!

Once those decisions had been made, the biggest challenge was to review all internal business processes and adapt them to work with the new e-business system—particularly the freight procedures. The staff readily adjusted to the changes and feel that the exercise has improved all aspects of Maningrida's operation.

5. The results

As the website is so new, it is too early to evaluate the specific benefits it will bring, but advantages are already evident. Phone and email enquiries are now directed to the website. This has resulted in a significant increase in email enquiries, which now account for about 70% of all new enquiries. There has also been a significant increase in sales, particularly works which have not sold well in the past, so the online gallery is proving effective.

Kellie spoke enthusiastically about the 'liberating technology' of the website, which has transformed Maningrida's operations. There are few tourists in north-central Arnhem Land. Maningrida used to have to send photos of art works in response to customer enquiries. Now they have an interactive website, a customer database, an online gallery and the means to provide a wide range of information on Aboriginal art and craft skills, local artists and the work they produce.

Physical remoteness has ceased to be the predominant issue in marketing Aboriginal art works. Local artists have benefited from improved communications with clients, and from the ability of the community to promote itself in the international art market.

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6. The future

Maningrida plans to improve the current site with the addition of new features. A quarterly online newsletter will be launched shortly, and the promotional aspects of the site will be enhanced by the introduction of integrated sound—such as didgeridoos and clap boards—which will provide a more atmospheric experience for customers.

Another facility will enable customers to access the site and check on their orders and freight details, and there are plans to introduce an online payment option.

7. The advice

Kellie has no hesitation in identifying the most useful advice for those intending to move into e-business—keep it simple! When Maningrida began to think about building a website they had big plans, but they soon realised that the best way to ensure success is to start ‘small and simple’ and develop from there. The initial site, limited though it was, established an online presence for Maningrida. The new site is designed for e-business, and is an effective response to the changing world of arts marketing.