

Adelaide Fringe

www.adelaidefringe.com.au

November 2003

Interview with Jodi Glass on using the Internet to conduct e-business

1. The business

The Adelaide Fringe Festival is one of the world's biggest and most vibrant arts festivals, held biennially in Adelaide. It evolved in the early 1970s as a reaction against the mainstream Adelaide Festival of Arts. Rivalled in size only by the Edinburgh Fringe, it is widely regarded as one of the best events of its kind in the world, generating massive enthusiasm with audience attendances exceeding 850,000.

The Fringe Festival celebrates innovation in the arts through its hugely popular, open access program. It attracts many of the world's finest independent artists, who come from all over Australia as well as from Europe, USA, Canada, the Pacific and across Asia.

The body responsible for the Adelaide Fringe is primarily a service organisation for participating artists. Those wishing to be part of the Fringe pay a registration fee that gives them access to a wide range of information and support facilities from expert staff with strong local knowledge. The success of the festival depends on the effectiveness of this support. Today the Adelaide Festival of Arts and the Adelaide Fringe Festival are inextricably linked and together create an atmosphere of electric excitement across the city.

2. The idea

It was clear to the Fringe organisation that the complex process of identifying prospective artists and providing them with the support necessary to enable them to mount their performances would be greatly assisted by the use of an appropriate website. Such a site would enable interested artists to access the organisation and its wide range of services from anywhere in the world. It would also greatly improve the efficiency of the organisation's operations.

The first website, which was very basic, was created for the 1996 Adelaide Fringe Festival. It has been improved significantly since then. An online ticketing function was introduced in 2000, and an online artist registration system in 2002. At that time these two major functions operated separately, but an integrated registration and ticketing system has been developed—the Fringe Event Registration System or FERS—ready for the 2004 Fringe Festival. The website promotion strategy has also improved significantly since 1996. Now it is vigorously promoted through all communications and all publicity, including the Fringe Poster and the official Fringe Guide.

Maintenance of the website is carried out by the Marketing Manager, who spends about half a day per week updating the general information on the site. A content management system allows the organisation to control content and upload it to the site. Most of the content is self-administered, but big changes, such as navigation or design features, are carried out by a contractor.

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3. The e-business

The site provides a number of important business functions for the Fringe, serving the interests of both artists, their support workers and the public. Performers are served through the **FERS** function and **Taking Part**, a link which leads to a wide range of information for artists, including development programs. Support workers are served through a **Jobs/Volunteer** link, which includes a registration form which can be submitted online.

The public is served through the advertising of Fringe performances and events, an online ticketing facility and an e-newsletter that keeps them up-to-date with the latest Fringe news. The ticketing function, which becomes available closer to the actual event, allows patrons to first select an event, then move to an online payment facility. Tickets are posted out if time permits, or collected at the venue.

The Fringe Event Registration System permits artists to register their performances and administer their own information online, for example, by uploading graphics and information about their own performances. The system also offers them access to a wide range of practical services through the Artist Bureau, which provides support, contacts and information from expert staff on issues such as marketing, performance venues, accommodation and general services.

Membership of the Fringe can be obtained through an online registration function accessed from the home page, using an online form that is downloaded and returned with the appropriate registration fee. Members of the public can join a free online mailing list by completing and submitting an online form.

4. The challenges

Jodi Glass, the General Manager/CEO of the Fringe, spoke of the difficulties of communicating to the website developers the nature of the organisation and its operations, as well as its requirements. At one point they were using two developers, one for the registration function and one for the ticketing function, which caused some difficulties. These have now been overcome with the development of an integrated system, created by a single developer. The online development exercise also meant changes staff. They had to be made aware of the site and its functions, and some had to be trained to use the content management system. A particular challenge was the need to standardise the terminology used across the whole range of Fringe functions and activities. This was achieved by the creation of a 'dictionary', so that all staff shared a common understanding, and there is consistency across the organisation and its website.

Inevitably, maintaining a sophisticated website involves meeting the challenge of new technology.

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5. The results

FERS and FringeTIX are now interlinked, providing seamless transactions from the artist to the organisation to the public. FERS serves the organisation's two audiences. First, the artists contributing to the Fringe, then the public who will attend performances.

The combined database means that the organisation can now collect data and schedule it for use at specific times in the future. It also means that they do not have to handle huge amounts of paper-based information from artists. FERS has been a huge investment for the organisation, but has provided a huge return in efficiency.

The website is now the organisation's primary communication medium. Over 90% of artists use FERS, some after initial manual registration, others totally, from the start. This represents a huge time saving, as artists now do much of the data handling themselves. Online ticketing has jumped from 6% in 2000 to 19% in 2002. Another significant jump anticipated in 2004.

6. The future

In addition to FERS the organisation still maintains multiple data sources. Plans are in train to reduce these sources, ideally to one database. They would like to have all relevant information available onsite, right down to suppliers of services and equipment and government agencies associated with the Fringe.

7. The advice

Jodi Glass stresses the importance of thorough planning in any online project. It is essential to understand your organisation, its online needs and the work required to translate them into an effective website. Plan to build as complete a site as possible, to avoid the time and expense involved in changing it later.

A final word from Jodi: never let the web developer take control of the website development project—you are in control. If you experience resistance from the developer, don't do it!