

Regional Galleries Association of Queensland

www.rgaq.org.au

November 2003

Interview with Ashleigh Clark on using the Internet to conduct e-business

1. The business

The Regional Galleries Association of Queensland (RGAQ) is the peak industry body for Queensland's public gallery network. It represents an extensive network of visual arts venues in regional and metropolitan Queensland, with over 600,000 people visiting regional galleries every year. It also offers an exciting and varied program of visual arts, craft and design touring exhibitions suitable for display everywhere, from local community centres and schools to regional, university and metropolitan galleries.

RGAQ provides advice to local government and other bodies on planning and developing gallery facilities, management, policies, programs, benchmarking and research. The organisation is also involved in advocacy and marketing for the industry, to protect and promote the interests of public art museums and exhibition spaces throughout Queensland.

2. The idea

The role of RGAQ as a provider and coordinator of a substantial amount of information relating to the interests and operations of Queensland's art galleries is one which lends itself to the use of the Internet. The current website has been developed as a means of fulfilling that role by making its services readily accessible to its clientele through the online medium. The current website was developed during 2000 and launched in 2001. It contains information on all RGAQ membership galleries in the state and touring exhibitions, as well as training and development opportunities and a range of publications. There is also a searchable gallery and exhibition catalogue.

The website is promoted via all of the organisation's publications, newsletters and bulletins, and through RGAQ's associated arts organisations.

Maintenance of the site is carried out by Ashleigh Clark, the Website Administrator. She is responsible for the in-house administration of the site, but is only able to make limited changes. This takes her about one hour per month. Major changes have to be carried out by the website developer.

3. The e-business

As an association representing the interests of galleries in Queensland, RGAQ's business is to provide a quality touring exhibition program as well as services and information to its members. The e-business facilities on the site are Membership, the Regional Galleries Network, Training and Development, Touring Exhibitions and Publications, all of which are available from the home page.

Members of RGAQ are able to access the information and services on the site at three levels. Full membership gives access to the Exhibitions Program, Standard membership is designed for Associates and Local Government Councils with no exhibition venue and Individual membership is available for professionals, students and volunteers in the gallery sector.

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An online membership registration form is provided, that is downloaded and returned to the organisation, with the appropriate payment.

There is no online mailing list. RGAQ has a separate database of members, who are eligible to receive three newsletter/bulletin publications—Gallery, dealing with industry-related issues, Gallery Messenger, containing industry news and Update, providing information on exhibitions. Update is also available onsite, as a downloadable PDF file. The newsletters are included in the full list contained in the Publications section, which includes a PDF order form that is downloaded and returned with the appropriate payment.

The Regional Galleries Network takes users to an interesting and effective search feature, in the form of a map of Queensland that is divided into zones, which can be clicked on to reveal a full list of galleries and exhibitions in that area. This information is updated regularly. Training and Development takes users to information on training and professional development opportunities for museum and gallery professionals, volunteers, management committee members, local government staff, industry associations, cultural organisations and interested individuals, such as curators, consultants and artists.

An annual event calendar, which includes workshops, seminars and lunchtime lectures is provided. The full training and development program is conducted in partnership with Museums Australia (Qld) (MAQ), which has its own website. The RGAQ and MAQ websites are linked. A wide range of courses are available, including Certificate IV in Museum Practice.

4. The challenges

The biggest challenge faced by the organisation was that of selecting content to be placed on the site. Confronted with the problems of the vast range of information at its disposal, RGAQ focused on the professional needs of its client group, both in the creative sphere and in administrative support, as well as issues associated with remote location. These concerns shaped the selection of what to present, how to organise it and how to present it online. Another important consideration was the constraints imposed by the ability of the client group to use the site and access its facilities.

The challenge here was to create a sophisticated site, containing all relevant information and facilities, which was not too technical for the average user, and something which can be viewed by regional viewers, who do not all have access to the latest technology.

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5. The results

For RGAQ, having an effective website has meant a higher profile for the organisation, stronger promotion of its activities and a greater awareness among its clients of the support services available. The site provides 24 hours a day access to the organisation, which is particularly important for more remote members. In particular, the site has enabled regional galleries to publicise their exhibitions and to gain the advantage of online exposure. The site has also made the organisation's operations more efficient, since the majority of enquiries for information on activities, services, membership benefits and publications can now be directed to website.

6. The future

The current website is proving to be a very effective support for RGAQ's operations. There are no immediate plans to upgrade it, but in the long-term the site will be modified to enable a greater part of it to be self-administered.

Another long-term plan is to consider introducing an e-commerce facility, allowing members to order and pay for publications online.

7. The advice

Ashleigh Clark's experience with the RGAQ website leads her to advise any prospective e-business developer to ensure that the site allows for a high level of self-administration. The more work that can be done in-house, the more cost-effective the site will be. This will also be a significant cost issue for the future.

It is also vitally important to make sure that the website development plan is completed satisfactorily by the web developer before signing off. Failure to do this can involve extra costs later.