

Australian Music Centre

www.amcoz.com.au

November 2003

Interview with Simon Chambers on using the Internet to conduct e-business

1. The business

The Australian Music Centre (AMC) was established in 1974 to facilitate and encourage the performance and understanding of music by Australian composers.

The Centre has grown to become the leading provider of information, publications and scores relating to Australian music. AMC is a member of the International Association of Music Information Centres (IAMIC), a worldwide network of forty organisations in thirty-six countries promoting new music, and cooperates with the Association on issues of common concern.

Each year the Centre services some 25,000 requests for information, loans, hires and sales of publications, recordings and scores. Performers, orchestras and ensembles are regular users of the Centre, along with private, secondary and tertiary teachers and students. An extensive range of teachers' resources is also available.

2. The idea

The Centre is primarily a repository of substantial amounts of information on musical scores, composers, recordings and an extensive range of books, videos and articles. Its primary role is to make this information available to a wide range of client groups, including students from high school to PhD level, performers seeking repertoire, music researchers and teachers. A sophisticated website which could store this information and make it readily accessible to users, would enable the organisation to fulfil its role more effectively.

AMC's first website, which provided basic information about the organisation, was launched in 1997. The site has been upgraded several times since 1997, most recently in February 2003. Its current features include searchable catalogues containing a substantial amount of its vast information resources.

AMC uses no formal promotion processes. It receives its greatest volume of traffic from people using search engines to find information about music. The site advertises itself through its databases.

Maintenance is carried out by Simon Chambers, Library Technician and Webmaster. He spends about four hours per week, mostly building information on the databases. DreamWeaver templates have recently been introduced, which simplify his task considerably.

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3. The e-business

Information is the biggest business—providing a vast amount of information in the form of an online catalogue of over 20,000 scores, recordings, books, videos and articles and a composer database, with over 400 entries.

The e-commerce function of the site operates through the Shop. This is not a direct order/sale system. Customers order items using an onsite email, then enter a secure payment facility in which they record credit card details. Orders and payment details are then matched and the transaction completed.

The membership and publications section contains an online form enabling clients to apply and pay online by providing credit card details. The form is also available as a downloadable PDF, which can be completed and returned by post or fax. Non-members can join a free email list, again using an online or PDF form. A members publication list enables members to view selected articles online and purchase past issues through an email sales department.

4. The challenges

Cost and staff time are the most demanding challenges. All website work is done by staff using existing skills. Some initial training was carried out by the web development company, but there is no specific staff training program. AMC has no content management system and all information is added to the site using templates. With limited time and resources it is difficult to maintain the life cycle of the website.

AMC also faces a challenge in terms of its ability to meet the needs and expectations of all of its website users. The organisation believes that it is important not to privilege any particular style of music, and there is constant tension between the conflicting demands of providing services for all and serving the interests of members.

5. The results

The website has enabled AMC to provide an effective service to its many clients, through its extensive databases, which can be accessed 24 hours a day from anywhere in the world. It has also helped AMC to serve its purpose as a national organisation, with increasing international traffic.

The site, and its membership databases, has enabled AMC to move increasingly into e-publications, which are now received by 45% of members. This has meant better communication with members and more efficient administration, with many phone enquiries being directed to the website.

Marketing is much more effective, online sales have been very successful and the promotion of events in which the organisation is involved, such as awards, has been greatly improved.

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6. The future

AMC is embarking on the task of digitising its store of scores and recordings. This is a major project, undertaken in conjunction with other institutions, and a pilot project—Music Australia—is underway, in conjunction with the National Library. This will offer major benefits to AMC's clients, for example, the ability to access PDFs of scores online.

An upgrade of the e-commerce operation is also planned, with the introduction of an integrated sales system, which will enable clients to order items online and pay directly, instead of having to complete two separate operations which the organisation then has to connect.

Overall, the main issue confronting AMC will be challenge of maintaining a website that is suitable for the cultural industry, and avoids a 'business' emphasis that is often inappropriate for the people who use the site.

7. The advice

Simon Chambers' advice for anyone planning to build a website for e-business is, 'analyse what you want to achieve very carefully'. It is essential to identify which aspects of the organisation lend themselves to online support, and how that support should be structured.

He believes that it is important for cultural organisations to steer away from prescribed website models that offer 'checklists for successful websites'.

A successful e-business website is one based on close analysis of an organisation's characteristics and mode of operation, and the best website plan is one that emphasises those qualities and enhances the business processes.