

Experimenta Media Arts

www.experimenta.org

November 2003

Interview with Alex Taylor on using the Internet to conduct e-business

1. The business

Experimenta evolved from the Modern Image Makers Association (MIMA), which was formed in Melbourne in 1986 to represent and exhibit the work of Australian film and video artists. With the establishment of biennial Experimenta festivals (from 1988-96) the organisation expanded to encompass international works and a range of related disciplines including installation and performance.

In 1996 MIMA changed its name to Experimenta Media Arts and has continued to present critically-acclaimed exhibitions and events in a range of contexts and media. Its screenings, installations and performances are held in cinemas, in galleries, online and in a variety of less conventional exhibition contexts.

Experimenta features the work of emerging and established artists, and fosters artistic experimentation through convergence across a range of disciplines, including interactive technologies, multimedia, digital music, virtual reality, animation and visual effects.

Experimenta's innovative events include **Robotica**, a visionary survey of robotics presented as part of the 1996 Melbourne International Film Festival, and **Viruses and Mutations**, which probed current issues in biotechnology through an exhibition, symposium and online gallery as part of the Visual Arts program of the 1998 Melbourne International Festival of Arts. **Waste**, presented in 2001, was an interactive media lounge investigating environmental, corporate and human waste, technical obsolescence, the recycling of culture and cultural residue. **Prototype**, presented in 2002, was a major interactive exhibition exploring the possibilities of invention.

2. The idea

Experimenta realised that its role as a leading Australian media arts organisation required it to be a leader in the use of the Internet. In planning its website the company concentrated on promoting its activities through the online medium. The central feature of the site is its subscriber/membership database, which is the basis of the organisation's promotional and marketing strategy.

The site has been in existence since 1996. It is not only a central corporate marketing tool, it is a virtual space for the exhibition of innovative net.art. By making the website a destination for more than simply information about its exhibitions and events, Experimenta encourages regular repeat visitation.

The site is promoted through all Experimenta's marketing materials, and cross-promoted through the email bulletin.

Alex Taylor, the Marketing and Project Coordinator, has organised regular cycles of maintenance, in which update material is delivered to the website designers, ptOingmedia, for addition to the site. Alex spends about two hours per week on update activities.

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3. The e-business

The central e-business elements of the site are its marketing and promotional features and its membership/subscription database. Corporate marketing information is provided on membership, supporters and funders of the organisation. Past, present and upcoming exhibitions and events are publicised, and an online gallery is provided for net.art projects. Subscription to an email bulletin list is available free, using an online form that automatically registers the application and adds the information to the subscriber/membership database.

The Membership section of the site contains a downloadable PDF application form that is posted or faxed back to Experimenta. Members receive invitations to all Experimenta events, including special member previews, discounts on ticketed Experimenta events and screenings, special offers and discounts from partner organisations.

An email bulletin is sent out fortnightly. This is an information portal that compiles information on exhibitions, events and opportunities in Australia and abroad. The email bulletin itself is not on the website. It is sent to subscribers free, but a section is directed to paid members, who receive various privileges. The email bulletin positions Experimenta as a major source of information in its field.

The site includes an archive of MESH magazine. Experimenta publishes MESH annually, an online journal of film, video and digital arts that explores critical issues and theoretical frameworks for new media arts. The journal was established in 1993, and 12 issues were published in print form. Since Issue 13 the journal has become exclusively web-based.

4. The challenges

Shifting technologies remain a challenge for a small organisation that needs to keep up-to-date with technological change, without always having the resources to do so.

Another challenge is to ensure that Experimenta's use of the online medium is innovative and visually stimulating, and at the same time accessible to the widest range of users. There are increasing difficulties with email marketing, due to changes in spam-filtering software. This is creating new challenges for the organisation, because email has been its central low-cost marketing tool for the last few years.

5. The results

The site has provided the organisation with the opportunity to communicate more efficiently with its subscribers and members. Through its email bulletin Experimenta reaches a wide and expanding audience. The bulletin is now a major focus of the organisation, and is currently received by almost 1500 subscribers—an increase of more than 300% in twelve months. As a result, Experimenta has been able to establish itself as a leading provider of information in the specialised world of artistic experimentation through the full range of electronic media.

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6. The future

The website features information about the Experimenta House of Tomorrow, which is its major exhibition for 2003. The House of Tomorrow imagines living with interactive furniture and appliances, digital video and animation artworks on the wall, a digital baby, high-tech toys, electronic plants and even robotic pets and pests, all installed in a realistic home environment. The exhibition features Australian and international interactive installations, futuristic furniture and screen-based works that imagine fantasies of the future home.

Planning is underway to create the **House of Tomorrow** section on the Experimenta website. It will be interactive, visually compelling, and will showcase this major Experimenta project. Mini-sites within the larger website will contain marketing information and images from works and events.

7. The advice

Alex strongly advises those planning an e-business component for their website to make sure that the general information and marketing sections of the site are constructed using basic web technology, so that they are immediately accessible to people using basic hardware. There is always a risk that using highly complex site development will exclude some users. The site should be designed so that even if users are unable to access its more complex areas, they will at least be able to obtain basic information about the organisation and its operation.