

Social Media and Its Impact on Small Visual Arts Nonprofits

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## **Introduction**

In today's technology-driven world, social media accounts have proven to be extremely successful marketing tools for businesses and organizations. For larger nonprofits, meaning an annual operating budget of over three million dollars, such as the Museum of Modern Art, and for-profit commercial arts, social media marketing can be extremely useful in reaching audiences worldwide and increasing brand awareness. Larger organizations are often more likely to do paid promotion on social media and have other benefits that come with having a larger annual budget, many of which will be discussed later in this paper. However, smaller organizations can lack the funding, the staff, or the knowledge to take advantage of all of the benefits that social media has to offer. Due to different factors, both internal and external, it can be more difficult to have a strong and robust social media presence.

The intention of this paper is to educate smaller visual arts nonprofits on how to better utilize social media as a free marketing platform, to give smaller nonprofits insights as to how they can strategically use paid promotion on social media, and how social media can support the organizations' efforts. It is important to note that all organizations and art centers interviewed in this thesis are based in Westchester County, New York unless otherwise noted.

## **History of Social Media**

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter are often used for marketing and promotions for commercial arts and arts nonprofits alike, despite these platforms not being originally designed for promotion and marketing. Although there have been site modifications which have allowed for promoted or sponsored posts and advertisements, these sites were initially designed for people to interact with other people, not companies and

organizations. However, now that people can interact with companies and organizations, it is important that social media is utilized effectively. The three social media platforms that will be discussed in this paper are Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Facebook was founded in February 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg, Eduardo Saverin, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes at Harvard University. The intention of the site, originally called “thefacebook.com,” was to have a social networking site where the students could use their college email addresses to connect with other students (Sraders 2018). By December 2004, the platform had reached its first milestone of one million users, and after going international in the fall of 2005, Facebook had over six million users. By October of 2012, Facebook had acquired over one billion users (Sraders 2018). The company’s mission statement is “Give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together” (Facebook). Now that Facebook has morphed from a social networking platform to a major marketing tool, the company relies solely on the money of advertisers and marketers through the use of their paid media (discussed later) to fund their new innovations (King 2018).

In October 2010, Instagram was launched by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger (Bruner 2016). In 2012, Instagram had thirty million users and thirteen full-time employees (Luckerson 2016), and it was at this time that Facebook bought Instagram for one billion dollars. By November 2017, twenty-five million businesses were on Instagram, with the vast majority being small businesses (Instagram 2017). During this time, about eight hundred million people were using Instagram each month, and over eighty percent (which equals about six hundred and forty million users) of those accounts follow a business of accounts on Instagram. By late 2017, Instagram had the user-ship of over twice the population of the United States in April 2019 (U.S.

and World Population Clock). In June 2018, Instagram surpassed one billion users (Fischer 2018).

In 2006, Twitter was founded by Evan Williams and Biz Stone. By April 2007, it was officially a corporate entity (Britannica 2019). In the 2008 presidential election, Twitter proved that social media would be of high importance in all political elections following, with Barack Obama dominating his opponent in the social media sphere. In April 2009, the first user, an American celebrity, reached one million followers, showing how powerful of a social networking device Twitter was becoming. Shortly thereafter, businesses began using it for promotion. Although Twitter has the smallest number of users out of the social media platforms mentioned, it has the youngest audience. For organizations seeking to reach this demographic, Twitter may be the place. In April 2019, the Pew Research Center found that Twitter users are younger, more likely to identify as Democrats, more highly educated and have higher incomes than United States adults (aged eighteen years old and up) overall (Wojcik & Hughes 2019).

### **Social Media: Terminology**

Social media can be laced with a lot of technical jargon which can make it seem inaccessible and daunting to those attempting to better their skills and understanding of how social media works. When discussing marketing budgets and strategy with Boards of Directors, executives, stakeholders, or non-marketing employees, being able to articulate what is happening on the art center's social media is important, as it is something that can create inter-organizational barriers (Davis 2018). Content, impressions, reach, engagement, analytics, organic reach, and paid reach will be defined in this section.

Content is anything the organization posts themselves on social media. Content could be in the form of a status update, an event posting, posting a picture or a video, or a plethora of other things. Later in this thesis, examples, instructions, and tools on how to create excellent social media content will be discussed.

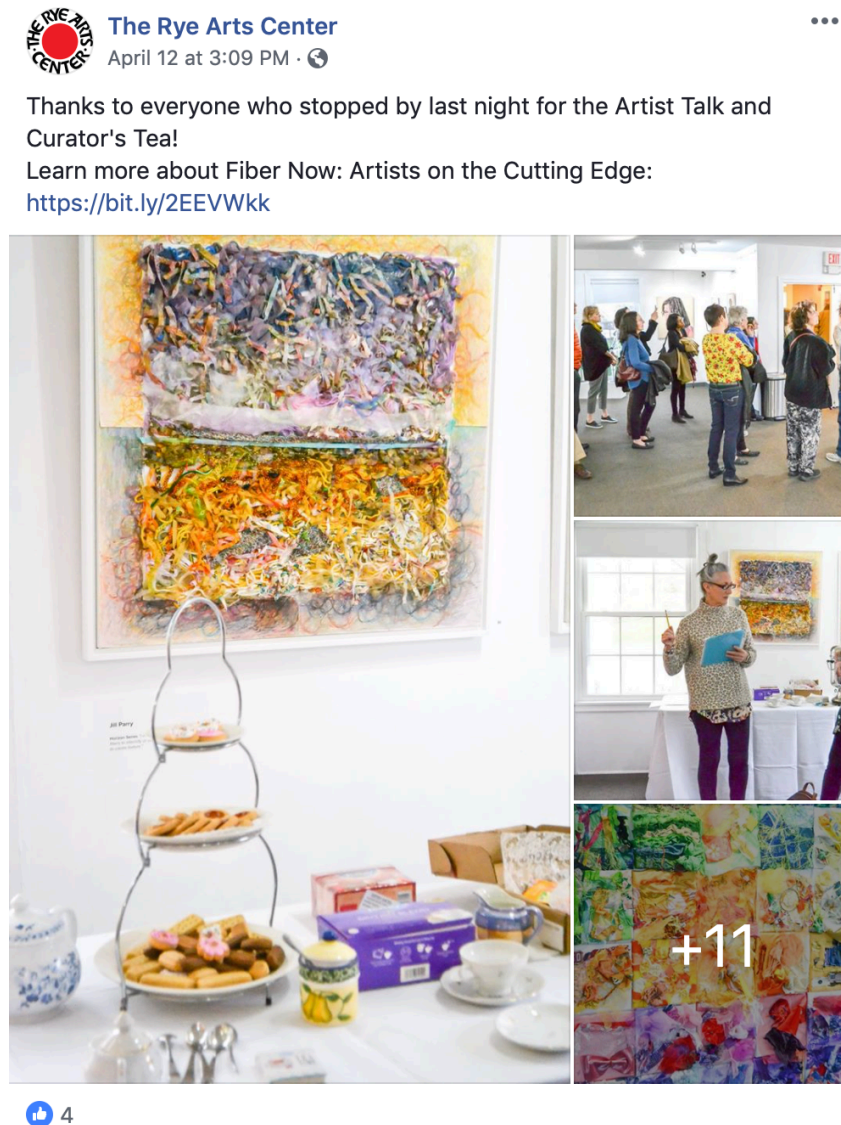


Fig. 1. Content Example from The Rye Arts Center. Facebook. 12 April 2019.

A term that is very important to know is engagement. Engagements are how social media users interact with the piece of content the organization has posted. While the ultimate goal of

social media is likely to drive purchases, attendance, etc., engagements are a great first step down the purchase path. Engagements can be in the form of content shares, likes or reactions, comments, event responses, and so on. Engagements help with word-of-mouth for the organization because when social media users engage with a piece of content, the other users in which they are connected with, are able to see their engagements. Every engagement is accounted for by engagement type, not by one unique user. For example, if one Facebook user likes a post, comments on it, and shares it, it is still noted as having three engagements, even though they all came from the same user. In the same vein, if a post has three likes from three different users, the post still has three engagements. In Figure 2 (below), the post has received thirty engagements, having received twenty-six likes and reactions and four shares.



Fig. 2. Engagement Example from Clay Art Center. Facebook. 13 April 2019.

Two important vocabulary words that can be mistakenly interchanged in social media are impressions and reach. Impressions are the number of times your content is seen, even if it is seen multiple times by a repeat-viewer (York 2019). The more impressions, the more views of the content. Because not everyone who follows an organization on social media will see the content, impressions can make the organization aware of how many times a piece of content has been seen. For example, an organization may have two-hundred followers, but if a piece of content only has twenty-five impressions, it has been seen twenty-five times. Post reach informs how many people have seen a post (Shleyner 2018). Post reach is essentially counting unique



users, not the number of times a single user has seen the post, while impressions are the number of times your content is displayed. Broken down very simply, a post can have a reach of fifty people (which would mean a minimum of fifty impressions), but can have more impressions than that if one user has seen the post multiple times.

Analytics is the analysis of data or statistics that have occurred over time. Analytics help measure impressions, engagements, clicking-behavior, and content history. Other metrics can include where followers are located geographically, what time of day more followers are using social media, and the ages of followers, etc. Using analytics can help inform the language used in posts, what time of day or day of the week is best to post, and give an informed idea of who the post will be reaching. Using tools that measure analytics such as Twitter Analytics, Facebook Analytics, Instagram Insights (figure below), and Google Analytics (for organizations with a website domain), allows organizations to utilize these metrics and track social media trends that have occurred. To access Instagram Insights the account must be business account, which is a setting that can be configured after creating an account. An Instagram business account must be attached to a Facebook page for the same business. In terms of Google Analytics, these analytics do not do much in terms of tracking individual pieces of content across platforms, however, it does report on site referrals. Site referrals are a useful tool that shows organizations where their clicks are coming from. For example, if an organization's Twitter account is driving one-hundred clicks a month, but their Facebook account is driving three-hundred, they can decide whether they want to spend more time increasing their Twitter presence or if they should spend more time on Facebook, because that's where the larger audience exists. Ultimately the organization must decide what they think will have a better return on investment.

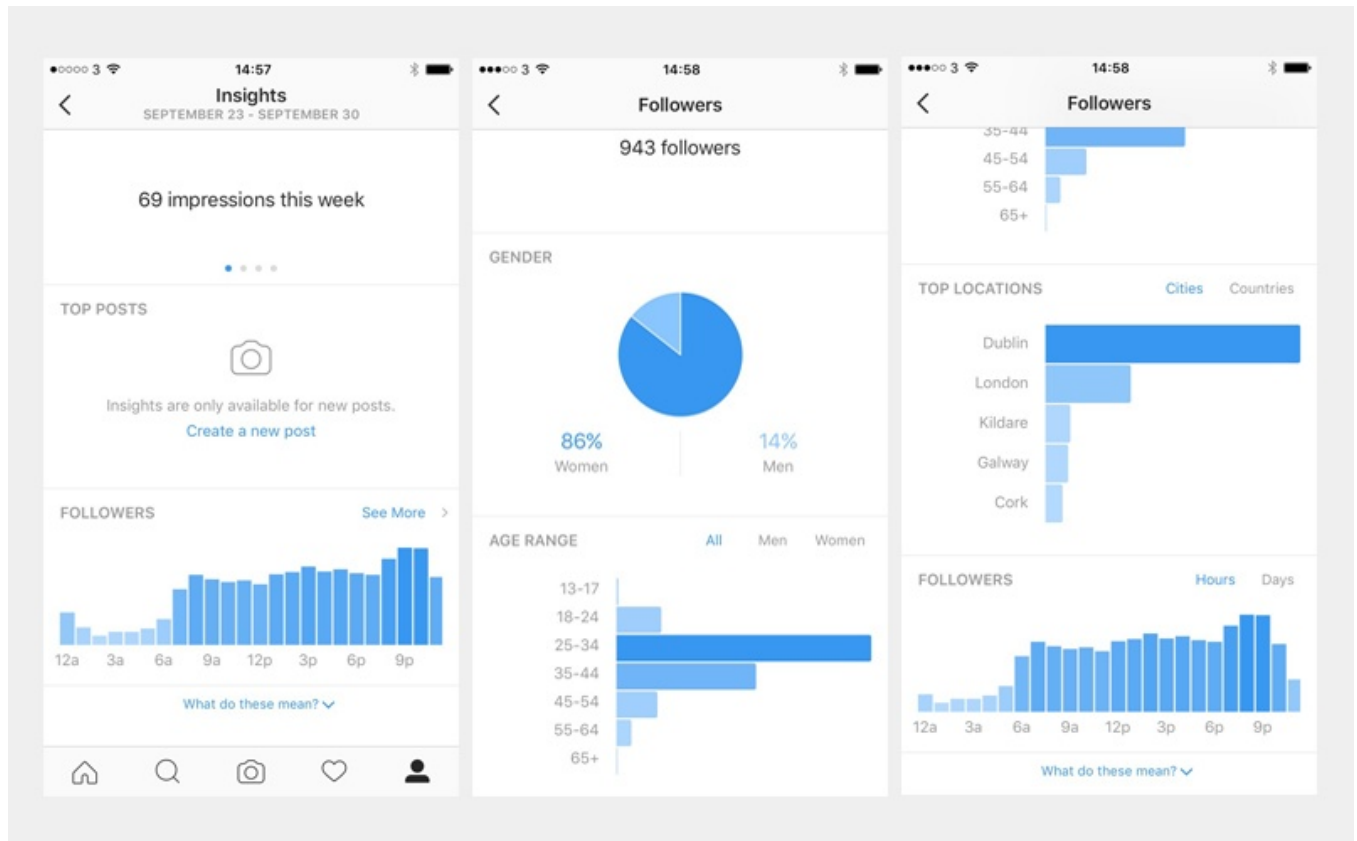


Fig. 3 Instagram Insights Example from Pryma Marketing. 10 January 2019.

Organic reach is the number of unique users that are served impressions through a piece of content using unpaid distribution (Dodson 2015). Having a large organic reach is highly desirable because it means that a post is receiving a lot of impressions without having to pay for it to show up on people's screens. Although it is more important to have the organization's main audience seeing the content, it is also important to be cultivating new audiences. So, when content is getting impressions from non-followers, it does help with getting new people to interact with the organization on social media. To have people outside the follow-base see a post, people must engage with it. For example, an unpaid post is shared with an organization's five-hundred followers, and if followers engage with the post, their social media connections will see that they have engaged with a post from the organization – follower or not.

Promoted or sponsored posts are used in developing a paid reach. Paid reach is content that is seen through paid distribution based on the demographics an organization wishes to reach. When developing a piece of paid content, organizations can specify the age, gender, interest-area, or even the geographic area they wish to reach with a post. Spending drives impressions, which increases the likelihood of engagements on a post. With the billions of users on social media, sometimes adding paid social media posts, help a piece of content be distributed more, and make it more likely to be seen by more people.

### **Social Media Platforms: Facebook**

Facebook is seen as a place to interact with the core audience. A majority of United States adults have a Facebook account. In 2018, sixty-eight percent of the adult population in the United States used Facebook, and in 2019 it has grown to sixty-nine percent of the adult population in the United States (Pew Research Center).

Facebook, which is the most popular form of social media in the United States has numerous benefits for organizations. Facebook account holders are able to create events, leave reviews, post updates, share photos and videos, direct message, and it is easy to achieve organic reach. Unlike other social media platforms, Facebook also caters well to the older demographic (ages fifty and up). Sixty-five percent of fifty to sixty-four-year-olds are using Facebook, and forty-one percent of those aged sixty-five and older use the platform (Pew Research Center). However, there are a few cons to Facebook. For starters, it is difficult on Facebook to make the initial contact. The only way a Facebook page can be suggested to someone is if they are friends with the admin of the page. Outside of the account administrator's Facebook contacts, the organization's Facebook cannot follow other people. Meaning that if the Facebook account's

administrator is not friends with Person X, they cannot suggest Person X, follow their Facebook page. This means Facebook users have to find the organization's account themselves.

### **Social Media Platforms: Instagram**

Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms, especially amongst those in the visual arts, but even more so with the youngest adults. Seventy-five percent of adults aged eighteen to twenty-four are active Instagram users (Pew Research Center). With its sole purpose to show videos and pictures, which are often what earns the most engagements, arts consumers typically look to Instagram. Unlike Facebook, it is possible for an organization to make initial contact with Instagram users. An organization's Instagram can follow pages and people that may follow them back in return. The major con with Instagram is receiving impressions and engagements from non-followers. It is not impossible to do so, it is just harder. To receive engagements and impressions from outside an organization's follow-base, the Instagram user must either seek out the page themselves, search for a hashtag used by the organization, or have it appear on their search page.

### **Social Media Platforms: Twitter**

An often-overlooked platform for the visual arts is Twitter. Twitter has the smallest user base out of the social media platforms discussed. Although it's most important to have a strong Facebook and Instagram presence first, Twitter can be a great third platform to use in addition to the other sites. It is an extremely useful tool in connecting and interacting with those in the community and the press. Despite most core audience being on Facebook, Twitter gives the opportunity to give a nod to the press when they highlight the organization in features, and

collaborate with other local organizations and businesses. For example, there is a Twitter page dedicated to events happening in Westchester County, and if they often post about an organization's event and the organization retweets (shares) the tweet, both accounts are gaining exposure to each other's follower base. Twitter, unlike Facebook and Instagram, offer a lot more give and take opportunities for people and organizations. Twitter also has the easiest share ability. On Facebook, it takes several clicks to for someone to share a post, but on Twitter it only takes two. A major con of Twitter is that is the least popular social media platform out of the three discussed in the paper, with on twenty-four percent of United States adults holding an account (Pew Research Center).

### **What is the Difference: Social Media Challenges Faced by Nonprofits**

All nonprofits and for-profits want to use social media to their advantage. Linda Solomon, a board member of Clay Art Center in Port Chester, New York and former professor of Digital Marketing at Purchase College, discussed how smaller visual arts nonprofits could learn from larger organizations' social media. "Nonprofits and for-profits want the same thing: brand visibility, engagement with fans, and the opportunity to share with them," states Solomon. While brand visibility, maximizing impressions and engagements, and a growing followers list are all important to businesses, the most important thing is that consumers actually go participate, show up, or spend money. The main challenge that nonprofits are more likely to face than for-profits is insufficient funding. Smaller organizations either cannot afford to spend money on social media marketing, cannot afford an employee dedicated solely to social media, and if they even have a marketing team, it is likely only one or a few people. When organizations cannot afford to pay for any or numerous sponsored posts on social media, they are missing out on an excellent

supplemental tool for in their marketing mix. This leaves them with a disadvantage when it comes to reaching people that will help grow their followers list, show up to events, or make the purchase. When an organization cannot afford an employee dedicated to social media, it becomes a team collaborative effort. For example, it may take three different people to manage social media accounts for an organization. This can take up time when employees have to communicate back and forth to make sure content, campaigns, and strategies are aligned properly, and when they have other duties such as writing press releases or planning events. While this does not have to detract from the quality of the social media content itself, it does take more time and planning than when one person can curate the social media alone as their sole role in the organization.

Rye Arts Center is a non-for-profit art center in Rye, New York. Their annual operating budget is over one million dollars (Opitz). The center offers a variety of classes for all ages ranging from vocal and instrumental lessons to classes in ceramics, printmaking, and even textile classes. Additionally, they have a gallery that exhibits work and has ancillary programming, such as artist talks and social activities with the curators. In terms of their social media presence, they practice numerous techniques. They have two people on their marketing team that also run the social media for the art center. “As an art center our mission is to inspire, so we strive to have our social media mirror that,” states Noah Opitz, the Director of Development at Rye Arts Center. Their social media strategy is to post relevant arts related information, try to respond to social media users’ comments and questions, engage with their community partners by tagging and mentioning them in posts. They use Facebook as their predominate tool in reaching people. They try to post to their Facebook at least a couple times a day, and Instagram a couple times a week. As far as their Twitter presence goes – its linked to their Facebook, so whatever is posted

on their Facebook page appears there using Twitter as a mirror to Facebook, and not treating it as a separate platform.

Clay Art Center, an arts not-for-profit in Port Chester, New York, offers exclusively programming centered around ceramics. They offer classes for all ages, artist residencies, studio spaces, and gallery exhibitions. Their annual operating budget is over one million, also. This organization has an active Facebook, Twitter, and two separate Instagram accounts – one used to highlight community happenings that has a goal to reach local people, and one used to showcase the gallery. However, this organization has three employees (all part-time) working on the organization's marketing. Some of their strategies are sharing relevant articles, posting daily to as many social media platforms as possible, using their video assets on social media, using paid promotion for events to nearby zip codes, and trying to show more behind the scenes and day to day, rather than just exclusively asking for people to register for classes or attend something. Something Clay Art Center says they struggle with are sales conversions from social media (Yates).

Yonkers Pottery Studio is a for-profit ceramics center in Yonkers, New York. They have active Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter accounts, and they make an effort to update them regularly. Their budget is the smallest of the three art centers discussed thus far, and the owner, Cori Morenberg, takes on all of the marketing duties. As far as strategy goes, they use a lot of photos on their social media and believe that they are the most successful in terms of engagements on their page. In terms of Morenberg's key strategy she says, "Just do it! And do it regularly. Take good photos, connect with people who may be interested in the studio or know people who may be interested." Their challenges on social media are to get more followers, post engagement, and ultimately to get more customers from their online efforts.

Organization X is a not-for-profit in a metropolitan area in the south in the United States. They focus entirely on the visual arts, with a prestigious gallery, a multitude of art classes for all ages, and their annual operating budget is well over three million dollars. They dedicate over one-hundred thousand dollars to paid media promotion per fiscal year. They also have multiple employees dedicated to social media. The paid promotion they run is focused heavily around their current exhibitions, classes, membership, and some of their smaller programming (Iyer).

## **How to Overcome Challenges**

### **How to Create Successful Content**

An organization must provide their audience with content that engages them. Capacity Interactive is a digital marketing consulting firm for the arts based in New York City. This company was founded in 2008 by Erik Gensler. Gensler graduated from Northwestern University in 1997. He began his career at Marakon Associates, an international management consulting firm, and built his career at NBC Universal, New York City Opera, and The Marketing Group, where he worked with non-profit arts clients. He has guest lectured at arts marketing conferences all over the United States. Capacity Interactive partners with over one-hundred-eighty arts and culture organizations in North America to help them build audiences, engage community, and market smarter by offering services in digital advertising, web analytics, search engine optimization, search engine marketing, email strategy, and online fundraising. They have a strong focus on education and offer numerous tools, both free and paid, such as blog posts, benchmark studies, podcasts with arts industry leaders, Capacity Classroom (workshop), and a Digital Marketing Boot Camp for the Arts, so arts organizations have access to exclusive arts-related data. They believe organizations should follow a seventy-thirty guideline when it



comes to posting content. Essentially, seventy percent of the content created should be for the audience and it should be what they want to see, whether this be behind the scenes pictures of events or aesthetically pleasing pictures of artwork. In the same interview mentioned earlier with Linda Solomon, she discussed what smaller visual arts nonprofits could learn from larger organizations' social media. "Personally, I love the Museum of Modern Art's Instagram. Smaller organization's need to remember that social media is the perfect place to strut your stuff," states Solomon. The remaining thirty percent of an organization's content should be used for self-promotion, which can be asking for donations, event attendance and ticket buying, class registration, or membership renewals.

While it is important to maintain a certain level of professionalism, it should be remembered that arts classes are supposed to be fun, so when promoting art classes, an arts organization's content can be as well, especially when promoting entry level classes or youth classes. A common misconception about the arts is that they are elitist, isolating, or only for extremely talented people, which leads people to not attend or participate out of fear of embarrassment. To break down that barrier, making content that is accessible, accepting, and approachable is extremely important. It will make consumers feel like they can attend or participate without fear of judgement.

Although an organization's audience and consumers are ultimately there because they believe in their product or want to buy the product, they also are buying and consuming from the people that work and run the organization. Smaller organizations offer the experience of having a tight-knit community feel, which is something larger organizations can struggle to offer. Social media platforms are a great place to highlight the sense of community an organization has to offer and "add a face" to a brand. Posting content about the staff that work so hard at their

respective organization can provide consumers with a deeper connection to the organization by making their experience more personal, and less ambiguous. This would typically fall into the seventy percent of the seventy-thirty rule, because it would exist for the audience's enjoyment.

When creating the thirty percent content, where the organization makes the ask, try to make it sound less sales oriented, even if it is about sales. Using calls-to-actions like "sign up," or "buy today," sound sales-oriented and demanding. However, using calls-to-action that indicate spending money and have a sense of urgency, but do not mention it, can leave a better taste in consumers' mouths. Some examples of that can be "expand your talents in a class" or "snag a seat," can make it clear that consumers need to register without saying as much. These calls-to-action can be even more fun depending on the class or event being promoted. For example, Clay Art Center used a call-to-action for registration for their Candy Crush summer camp that said "doesn't that sound sweet?" and followed it with the registration link.

### **How to Incentivize Content Creation from Outside Parties**

An incredibly crucial aspect of an organization's social media presence, is not actually what an organization posts. It is what the organization's consumers are posting about them. Word-of-mouth marketing is one of the most persuasive type of marketing. So, if a consumer posts on their personal social media about how they loved an exhibition at a gallery, their friends will likely take their recommendation to go see it. "Eighty-three percent of Americans said they've made a word-of-mouth recommendation -- 55 percent said they make recommendations at least monthly and 30 percent said they make them weekly," state Rose Leadem from Entrepreneur. "Americans value word of mouth 41 percent more than [a business's] social media when it comes to recommendations." For example, if an organization posts about how

great a class is that they are hosting it will be taken with a grain of salt, as the organization is biased. But, if someone outside the organization posts about how great the class the organization is offering, their personal networks will take that as a word-of-mouth recommendation.

Essentially, posts about an organization should be treated as free advertising.

Organizations should take note of the effect of how important it is to be posted about rather than just posting themselves, and should seek to create incentives for their audiences. They could ask their consumers to tag them in the artwork they created at the organization for a chance to be reposted, create a hashtag specific to the people will want to use, or create more photo opportunities. Even if the organization takes photos of their consumers and audience while at the organization, people may share that photo on their personal social media. Also, it is important that if members or followers take time to engage with an organization on social media, the organization should take the time to engage back. A best practice would be within one business day, but a maximum of two business days. Sometimes, it just takes liking an engager's comment saying that an event was great. It shows the consumer that the organization is listening to their feedback. Whether it be liking the photo someone tagged the organization in, liking the comment left by a follower, or commenting a simple "thanks for sharing," it makes people want to continue reaching out online.

### **General Recommendations**

If it's a different platform, create a different message (Artwork Archive 2016). Changing up your copy and call to action are great ways to do a simple switch up.

Organizations can use scheduling tools across all platforms to make sure the same thing is not being posted across all platforms on the same day, at the same time. Consumers do not

want to see repetitive information, otherwise they would only want to follow one of an organization's platforms. Utilizing or creating a digital marketing content calendar, can be a simple way to visual what message is going to which platform. A digital marketing calendar can be as easy as using a standard planner or calendar and filling in each day with what needs to be promoted each day. Using content calendars to plan out post themes of messaging in advanced allow social media marketers to see the big picture for an entire month, rather than having to reference the platform directly or rely on memory.

For content creators that wish to do more than merely sketch out a plan for a month, there are several scheduling tools that can be used to save time at a later date. Facebook posts can be scheduled directly in the platform for exact time and dates. Tweet Deck is affiliated with Twitter, and works similarly to Facebook's scheduling tools. Hootsuite, another scheduling tool, can hold up to three business accounts with a free plan. This would allow an organization to have a Twitter, Instagram, and a Facebook scheduling toll that is all in the same place.

Make sure to utilize analytics. A large part of success on social media starts from trial and error and a bit of luck. However, most trends can be tracked. Through analytics, it is possible to see an account's most popular content. Over time, trends will start to present themselves, whether it be posts from a certain time of day, specific content, or a particular hashtag. These engagement trends differ from organization to organization. So, if every post from Wednesdays at 2:00p.m. has a high engagement rate, continue to post then, and learn from the less popular posts and see what can change.

Last but not least, keep content cohesive, simple, and aesthetically pleasing. Try to use images and videos as much as possible. Images, videos, and other visuals typically earn the most engagements. Keep captions short. Most people do not want to spend five minutes reading a

post, so try to keep it at one or two sentences maximum. If people want more information, they will find a way to contact the organization or check the website. Curating social media posts can take a long time, especially when just starting out in it. If an organization cannot handle the time commitment of running all three separate social media accounts – that is okay. Having one excellent account beats having three below average accounts. Decide to work on improving one platform at a time, based on the results that are being analyzed from analytics. For example, if Facebook is outperforming Instagram exponentially, and Instagram is outperforming Twitter, spend time making Facebook better. Then when Facebook is under control, make Instagram great, then worry about Twitter.

### **Paid Promotion on Social Media**

While the bulk of this paper discusses effective organic and unpaid media, it should be noted that excellent organic media translates into excellent paid media, so the same strategies can be applied. When audiences are underperforming on social media, the answer is not to scrap social media altogether, but to put money behind a carefully crafted piece of content.

As previously discussed in this paper, an entire marketing budget should not be solely dedicated to social media, just as an entire marketing budget should not be solely dedicated to print or traditional media. The excuse of “my audience doesn’t live online” can no longer be used as per the numbers referenced earlier from the Pew Research Center. The majority of every age demographic lives online.

Capacity Interactive released a benchmark study in November of 2018 that discusses, analyzes, and interprets data found by 180 arts organizations and their online and social media behavior. Capacity Interactive found that their survey respondents reported that 30% of paid

media was dedicated to digital and 70% was dedicated to non-digital media (Capacity Interactive 2018). In these terms, digital media refers to social media and other online media such as Google Ads and paid search. An eMarketer report indicates that across all industries 38.4% of advertising dollars were being allocated to digital methods in 2017, and eMarketer forecasts that it will grow to 44.9% by 2020 (eMarketer 2016). Furthermore, it predicts that television, print, radio, directories, and out-of-home spend will continue to decrease steadily (eMarketer 2016).

## **Conclusion**

As seen in this thesis, social media is projected to keep growing in its audience size and is a marketing tool that will not be going away any time soon. Ultimately, social media will move to be the backbone of the organizations marketing plans. Creating strong content and investing digitally has been and will continue to be the largest trend in arts marketing, and using these platforms effectively organically first and then in paid ways secondarily, will make the organization stand out as more and more people turn to social media.

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