

THE POWER OF DIGITAL STORYTELLING (HUFFINGTON POST)

Monday, December 30, 2013

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By Lane Harwell

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New York City's nonprofit community has an opportunity to harness the power of digital storytelling to engage a growing online public and drive contributions, attendance, and other forms of participation. This power was the topic of this recent Engage NYC panel, co-convened as a model of interagency collaboration by NYC Digital, NYC Service, Greater New York and New York City's Department of Cultural Affairs:

As executive director of the grassroots advocacy and service group [Dance/NYC](#), I joined the panel to offer reflections on our efforts to strengthen dance through digital media, especially a new video campaign, [NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE](#). Featured in *The New York Times*' piece "[Bringing New York City Dance Into the Limelight](#)," the campaign offers personal statements from New Yorkers on the importance of the art form to creativity, education, neighborhoods, and the economy. ([Subscribe to the Dance/NYC YouTube channel](#) to follow the campaign.)

Here are some of the lessons learned through NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE that may be applied more broadly by advocates and colleagues in arts and culture:

Borrow Successful Non-Arts Strategies for Storytelling

First and foremost, there is untapped opportunity for arts advocates to adapt digital strategies effectively deployed to advance other causes. While it differs significantly in its intention, NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE borrows the [New Yorkers for Marriage Equality](#) campaign model, which successfully moved public opinion on gay marriage.

Use Stories to Personalize and Grow Research Agendas

As a messaging vehicle, the campaign extends Dance/NYC's commitment to [research](#) as a foundation for effective advocacy by personalizing the cases we can make about the role of dance in neighborhood and economic vibrancy. The campaign is also a tool for research, in that it generates new community input on the contributions of our art form.

Engage Your Storytellers as Organizational Partners

It is only one campaign goal to mobilize support from a broad viewership. The campaign is also creating value behind-the-scenes, empowering storytellers and meaningfully vesting them in Dance/NYC activities, as demonstrated by new programmatic, marketing, and financial partnerships. The campaign began with leaders in dance and culture, but will be made even more interesting by including additional unlikely suspects.

Think Real-time to Create Targeted Value

Dance/NYC embraces a content-driven approach to the release of videos, individually and in curated groups, timed with significant field and organizational happenings. For instance, the campaign was launched to coincide with New York City budget hearings for FY 2014, and I should point out that the adopted arts dollars are up from FY 2013, despite proposed reductions (Read Phil Chan's "[Keep New York City Dancing](#)" for more). Dance/NYC released statements by [tap artists](#) to coincide with the annual festival, Tap City, and produced a [holiday special](#), encouraging New Yorkers to see holiday productions and give to their favorite dance makers. Future opportunities are infinite.

Include Digital Stories in Live Events

The power of digital storytelling can be amplified in live spaces. The launch of select NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE videos at live events extends the reach of organizational programs and helps cultivate new relationships. To offer just two examples, Dance/NYC released a [statement on arts education](#) at a [Dance Education Laboratory Open House](#) and a program [stakeholder](#) series at the press event for the 2014 [New York Dance and Performance Awards](#), produced in partnership with Dance/NYC.

These are just some of the lessons being learned through NEW YORKERS FOR DANCE; there are and will be more. I offer the campaign construct up to dance leaders elsewhere (remember, New Yorkers for Marriage Equality became Marylanders for Marriage Equality, then Americans for Marriage Equality). I offer it up to sister arts development agencies in the metropolitan area (imagine: New Yorkers for Theater, New Yorkers for Arts & Culture). Finally, I invite you all to join me in collecting and sharing digital stories, and I am here to tell you: your stories matter.

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Please note: This article first appeared on Lane Harwell's Huffington Post Blog on December 30, 2013.

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