

New Paradise Laboratories: Using the Web to Create Online Performance

[New Paradise Laboratories](#) is an experimental theater that puts on original performances by a core ensemble group.

Project

The project sought to create a highly-interactive online tool that would engage young audiences aged 18-28 in the act of creation and provide material for an upcoming theater piece “Extremely Public Displays of Privacy.”

Research into Action Findings Used by New Paradise Laboratories

- Marketing is multi-channel. Cultural marketers have to rely on a mix of marketing media to reach consumers and close the sale.
- Personal practice is a gateway to attendance. There is a strong correlation between personal creative practice and higher levels of attendance.

Activities

New Paradise Laboratories (NPL) staff and consultants created an online tool called the “Frame” on NPL’s website in which curators shared compelling content they found or created with a deliberately chosen audience of like-minded people. At the same time, NPL staff and artists used some of the material gathered by curators and others to inform the creation of their play “Extremely Public Displays of Privacy.”

Specifically, New Paradise Laboratories hired seven “specialists” who acted as curators and trolled the Internet or created their own content to post on a private wiki. These specialists also created fictional characters who interacted with one another. The work took place under the direction of Whit McLaughlin, founder of New Paradise Laboratories.

After several months of gathering content and creating the site, New Paradise Laboratories moved the site to its webpage and opened it up to the public. Rather than make a public announcement, however, New Paradise staff and the curators “leaked” it out slowly by inviting friends as well as people who had gone to a previous NPL production to check out the website. NPL also posted a blurb about it on their Facebook page.

Visitors could come to the site, look around, respond to posts and even create their own characters.

The idea was to create a “provocation” or start a conversation with like-minded people, said Inger Hatlen, managing director of New Paradise Laboratories.

“It’s a site where they can go to engage ideas with New Paradise,” Hatlen said. “If there is any sense that we are trying to pitch them something other than ideas, concepts and aesthetics, people are going to run away. They can smell a marketing technique from a mile away.”

While New Paradise Laboratories was creating the interactive Frame on its website, it was developing its most challenging piece yet. Extremely Public Displays of Privacy told the story of the relationship between Fess Elliot, a mother, teacher and undiscovered singer/song writer and Beatrix Luff, a mysterious young performance artist who promises to help Fess gain the fame she’s never achieved.

The play unfolds in three different venues. Act I is viewed [online](#) and tells the story of how Fess and Beatrix meet on a chat site. ACT II is a video podcast that takes the audience on a walking tour of Central Philadelphia to places where Fess carries out escalating public dares at Beatrix’s direction (audiences could download a free app or reserve an iPod) and ACT III was staged at a secret underground venue and featured a live concert by Fess.

NPL artists drew some of the material for the play from the content found on the Internet by the “specialists” and posted on the Frame including a video montage of Beatrix displaying her conquests with men. In addition, in the midst of content that curators and visitors posted on the NPL’s interactive site, the theater included mentions of the upcoming show. The play was performed in September 2011 during Philadelphia’s Live Arts Festival.

Results

- **The Frame was visited in its “soft” launch by more than 9,000 viewers with 3,000 returning individuals.** More than 2,000 posts have been made with more than 4,000 responses. The site has averaged about 100 users a day with an average time on site of about five minutes. In comparison, NPL’s site typically had about 800 visitors a year.
- **More than 5,000 people downloaded Act I of “Extremely Public Displays of Privacy” in the first ten days of its availability.** Approximately 485 people downloaded Act II. Some 256 people attended the live performance (ACT III). Typically, NPL has about 1,200 to 1,500 attendees at its productions.

Challenges

New Paradise Laboratories staff learned they were seeking to engage two audiences: its regular theater audience that attends its plays but does not necessarily spend a lot of time using their computer to delve into online content like the Frame and a non-theater audience who were engaged in the online content but did not necessarily think about attending the live performance of Extremely Public Displays of Privacy.

“Our usual audience is a theater audience. They like off the wall, radical stuff but it’s a theater audience,” Hatlen said. “We were doing things [with FRAME and Acts I and II of the play] that innately didn’t appeal to a theater audience. They didn’t get it.”

At the same time, the people who spent time on the Frame didn't relish the idea of sitting in a dark theater for an hour and a half looking at something they could not click away from, McLaughlin said.

"How do you make the leap to live performance?" McLaughlin asked. "We are talking to people who go to their computers for entertainment."

The theater group also saw a sharp decline in audience members attending "Extremely Public Acts" from ACT I to ACT III, a decline Hatlen attributed to the length of the combined acts (more than five hours) and the logistics involved in seeing all three acts.

In addition, NPL hired a marketing firm to help them promote "Extremely Public Acts," and felt that the marketing was not as successful as it could have been.

Lessons Learned

- **Try a new way of connecting with your audiences through truly interactive online experiences.** Most arts organizations use web presence purely as a marketing tool—as a place to deliver information *about* the art and drum up audience members—it is not usually seen as an art in itself. New Paradise Laboratories proposed an alternative with Frame. NPL staff believe that there is a place online for audiences to engage directly with artistic practice. Providing a space where people, particularly younger people, can go to see and create art without overt marketing may be way to cultivate a new audience that seeks to participate in art and is jaded by anything that obviously looks to simply sell tickets.
- **Make it easy to connect with an interactive experience.** The Frame has many cutting edge features but it is also difficult to easily find the characters of the specialists or find responses to content that curators or viewers have posted. NPL is re-vamping the site to make the navigation more clear cut while maintaining its edgy style. Among the changes: NPL is also going to a user introduction video and Facebook Connect to help people learn quickly how to participate and share content.
- **Help audience members see the relationship between online and live content.** People who troll the web for entertainment may not be looking for live theater experiences and those who go to the theater may not see their computer as anything other than a tool to be used for work. If arts organizations are going to bring together online and offline experiences for audiences they need to think about how to help people see the relationship between the two. NPL is continuing to experiment with ways to do that, including encouraging more creation of content for its live plays on its online platform.

Next Steps

In 2011, New Paradise Laboratories received two-year funding from the Philadelphia Cultural Management Initiative to hire a staff member dedicated to working on the Frame. As part of this work, NPL will train a corps of new ensemble members who will be both specialists and artist/creators. These members will not only provide and create content but work to devise NPL's live theater work and serve as NPL's online ambassadors.

Contact

Inger Hatlen

Managing Director

New Paradise Laboratories

ihatlen@newparadiselaboratories.org

(215) 923-0334

Go back to [Table of Contents](#)