**James Akers:** Welcome to the Digital Culture Podcast. A podcast for people working in the creative and cultural sector who want to know more about digital. I'm your host, James Akers.

Welcome to this special episode of the Digital Culture Podcast. The next 10 episodes will be in a shorter format and released weekly. We're gonna feature winners from the Digital Culture Awards and we'll find out what made their projects award worthy.

Firstly, I hear you ask, what are the Digital Culture Awards?

Well, it's an opportunity presented by Arts Council in England's Digital Culture Network, which celebrates and showcases digital and tech innovation. The awards allow us to recognize the very best in digital transformation, digital engagement, and use of technology in creativity and culture across England.

There were five categories open for entries; Digital Ambassador, Digital Content, Digital Inclusion, Digital Marketing and Using Data with winners selected by sector experts.

Additionally, four Digital Culture Network Awards were presented to candidates who had accessed support from our team, and were nominated by our Tech Champions.

I'm James, one of the Tech Champions at the Digital Culture Network. I'm a white man with brown hair and I'm wearing a pink t-shirt.

In this first episode of the award series, my guest is Nadia Somella, the marketing and communications officer from the Barber Institute of Fine Arts.

Nadia was nominated by Jack Roscoe, our Audience Data and Evaluation Tech Champion.

Hi. It's great to be here. Yeah, thanks for having me on. Like James said, I'm Nadia and I do the marketing and comms at the Barbara Institute of Fine Arts. We're a Art Gallery and concert hall. We're based in the University of Birmingham in a lovely grade one listed building, and we have a really diverse program of exhibitions, concerts, and events.

**Nadia Somella:** And my job entails connecting that offer with our lovely audiences. I am a woman in her mid to late twenties, white with curly brown hair, and I'm wearing a blue top with a white wall behind me, and some lovely sprawling leaves from a plant that I definitely am not responsible for.

**James Akers:** It is a big plant, isn't it?

**Nadia Somella:** Yeah, that's all my housemate. Thank you very much for being the green fingered one. I'm getting the benefits with absolutely none of the hard labor.

**James Akers:** Your award for the Digital Culture Awards, it's a bit different to some of the other awards which people submit an application for.

You were nominated by Jack, who is our Tech Champion for, Audience data and Evaluation. And he was blown away by the work you were doing and the conversations he had with you over time.

So it'd be great to learn from you about what that process was, why you first got in touch with us, and then why you won this award.

**Nadia Somella:** Yeah. it is a really interesting project and not necessarily the most, glamorous. So it was really nice to be recognized by Jack for the hard work we were doing. The core of the project was we were redesigning our visitor surveys, which are our kind of primary method of audience data collection.

And

 We first came to Jack because we decided to start this project. Like any museum or gallery, serving visitors is our primary, audience data collection method. it's really at the core of what we do because it's one of the best ways we can listen to our audiences, understand their wants, their needs, and hopefully, react and respond to those and continue to improve.

 We decided to look again and rethink our processes, because it was a time of change for the Barbara Institute. We'd had a new director, Professor Jennifer Powell, who joined us in 2022. And with new leadership always comes,fresh thinking, which is so nice. So we had new strategic documents, we had a new forward plan, a new audience development plan, and we'd also rethought our mission and values. So it was a time where there was a lot of thinking about who we are as an organization, who we're speaking to, and what the next five years might look like. When I joined, being a fresh pair of eyes, I thought let's instigate, a sort of review of those central systems and processes that have just been working along in the background kind of fine, but maybe haven't got the attention that they deserve for a while.

And at the core of our new mission was to be welcoming and responsive. So immediately as a team, we were thinking, okay, responsive. How are we listening and responding to our audiences? And could any of those methods be improved? So we, Looked at the survey. That's our main form, like I said, and we realized that it just didn't seem to work for everyone at the organization.

There were other forms of data collection popping up sporadically in perhaps more siloed locations. So the data wasn't being shared as efficiently as it could be, and it wasn't as useful for actual impact within the organization. So we wanted to create something new and we wanted it to be, proactive rather than reactive.

So using that data to lead to forward planning, rather than simply reflection and reporting. Also, the Barber Institute was going into a period of closure very soon. So we are currently closed for a building improvement program. The thing about being closed, it was gonna disrupt our data collection anyway. So it felt like the perfect time to look into that and make those changes and maybe have a pilot of a new system. Because, it was all gonna be a bit messed up anyway with the closures, so why not use it as an opportunity rather than a kind of challenge.

**James Akers:** And what was the process then for designing the new survey?

**Nadia Somella:** So we started on our own. We realized that the survey does a lot of hard graft for something that is so simple. It's used by a huge variety of stakeholders for a huge variety of reasons. That data really, goes a long way. We use that data for marketing insights. We use it for funding applications.

We use it for actual curatorial decision making, organizational advocacy, both within the university, but in external organizations as well. It influences our programming choices and our actual operational, practical things as well. And, hopefully it continues to improve our actual audience's experience, because we can react and respond, to their feedback.

We started in a very collaborative way. We recognized that this is one thing that needs to work for a lot of people. So we tried our best to get everyone in the organization excited about data and surveys. And that really began by meeting with each team in our organization individually and having that chat with them.

One of the key things we did a bit differently was. Instead of meeting with, the learning engagement team or the collections team and showing them the survey and saying, what do you think could be different? We met teams and we didn't really talk about the survey at all. We just talked about what do you need to know from your audiences and why?

So the intention behind that was find out all the data that our teams need, what's most essential, and then work backwards and think about where we could get that from. Does it need to be from the survey? Could it be found in other ways? And if it does need to be in the survey, could there be ways of us amalgamating different needs from different teams into one question to try and get it a bit more simplified. So it really got to the heart of the issue and then we worked backwards to think of what questions would actually get us that data that we needed at the end result. And it's that second stage where the Digital Culture Network really came in and supported us.

So we went to Jack for his expert support to say, this is the data that we want to collect, how do we do that? And, he really helped us think about what questions were the most important for us to include. the wording, the phraseology, how they might be presented, and also how to make the survey intuitive for the user. And we were able to go back to him again and again throughout the process. it really empowered our team, having that expert on board the whole way through.

**James Akers:** And what is the difference between the original survey and then the one that you created?

**Nadia Somella:** They're not radically different. I think. the primary difference was before, this point we had been using a sort of ready-made system that had its limitations in terms of what we could include and couldn't include, and how far we could adapt questions based on our organization.

And the Barbara Institute is in the unique position of, we're funded by a trust, so we perhaps have less restrictions around, what we need to report to certain organizations. So it allowed us to think about what was the most important for us. And some of those things having done, the research ended up being similar to the first.

But the changes might have been the wording around certain demographic questions, to try and be more inclusive and accessible. But we also were able to include questions that were really specific to us. So it could be things like, there's a question that's targeting university students and thinking about how the Barber Institute has supported them in their studies or their wellbeing.

And that's something that's so unique to us and the context that we're working in. So we were able to really, adapt it to our specific organizational needs, which is really great.

**James Akers:** So you went through that whole process you interviewed your team members, you built the new survey. What was the next stage then for going live with it?

**Nadia Somella:** We were open for a seven month period when we launched the survey. So we decided that this would be a sort of test bed period. And, we designed the survey with a designer and kind of ran that through Jack again to get his feedback and we briefed the teams who would actually be delivering the survey on what was changed.

And Jack came in and did some training with our front of house team and our learning and engagement team. Plus a lot of other staff that were just interested, but it meant that we could really talk about how to best deliver the survey. Any changes that had been made that they need to be aware of, how best to perhaps avoid any potential bias or handle any questions or concerns visitors might have, especially about sensitive questions.

So that was really useful and again, helped build that buy-in amongst the teams. And another change we were thinking about in terms of accessibility and in terms of efficiency was we were working with primarily a paper survey system, and had done for a long time. So we also thought about designing a survey in, other digital ways.

We released a QR code or digital version of the same survey so that, front of house teams had the option of more than one, and it could be accessed in different ways. And then, we also designed something that could be used on iPads in the gallery space. For various, bureaucratic reasons we weren't able to launch that in those seven months, but it'll be coming when we reopen. So just thinking about,the methods of delivery, the accessibility of the presentation, and the confidence within our teams to actually make that initial approach and feel like they're equipped, to make the most of the thing we've created.

If you have a survey and no one fills out, it's pointless, isn't it?

**James Akers:** Yeah, So you went through all of that. What was the impact on the results?

**Nadia Somella:** So we're definitely still in the middle of this project. I would say, like it's far from finished, but there have been some really impressive, achievements so far. Which is a hundred percent down to our teams, especially the people on the ground, the front of house and learning engagement teams have been incredible in their buy-in of this project.

Their hard work has led to a 200% increase in our actual survey collection. So we'd initially worked out with Jack a target for the team of a thousand surveys, annually. And that was based on our audience, numbers as an organization and our previous annual totals of surveys and trying to choose something that was realistic, but ambitious. And they smashed through that within the seven months, I think we got something like 12, 1300 within that seven month period, which we were really happy with. And that will have a big impact on improving the robustness of our data going forward and I think the fact that we'd created this one survey that worked for lots of different people, meant that it means we have all of this data in one place that can be compared and analyzed and will have a bigger impact in the future. Another knock on effect was almost a 50% growth in our mailing list

**James Akers:** That's amazing.

**Nadia Somella:** We had a call to action on the surveys and with some trial and error, we decided to have just a really clear call to action. That's write your name and email here if you would like to be on the mailing list and the increase in surveys. And I think the clarity of the message really led to more people signing up.

And so that's been an amazing impact that we perhaps didn't consider in that our mailing list has grown. It will help future attendance numbers and events, figures, which is great. And then, there's really specific examples of, impact as well in terms of the data. Simple things like, one of our questions used to be, a sort of, any more comments section. Whereas now we ask really specifically, how could we improve, how could your experience have improved? And whilst a lot of people lovingly say it couldn't have been, it was amazing. I think it has given people more confidence to suggest things where they wouldn't have necessarily gone out of their way to write that thing down.

But because we're asking them and we're empowering them to. Give that opinion, they are suggesting improvements and that will really help us, keep providing a better audience experience because it's much more actionable insights for us.

**James Akers:** They're amazing. I love that secondary thing you're getting with the newsletter,Were there any other surprises or challenges that you faced through it?

**Nadia Somella:** Not too many, but I'd say if I was thinking of a challenge, we did release a survey, test it, tweak it a few times because you can imagine how people will fill something out and it is definitely not always accurate. things will make sense to you with the context that you have already that won't necessarily make sense to a busy parent who's half filling this out whilst trying to look after small children. So we needed it to be really intuitive and obvious what a visitor needed to do or what was expected of them.there were a few tweaks with wording or things like that where we changed it. Having seen how audiences would perhaps make an error or fill it out in a way that we weren't quite expecting.

**James Akers:** So you've got some physical changes going on at your building at the moment. Will the audience data that you're collecting shape that in any way or shape your next steps that you're doing in other things?

**Nadia Somella:** I think it definitely will shape our forward planning. it's a really significant time of change for us as an organization. There are a lot of things happening behind the scenes and we are really looking forward to reopening with a more accessible building.

And we are currently in the process of really digging into that data behind the top line stats. We are actually working with a postgraduate team of data analytics students, to help us get into that data and try and gather as many insights as possible, which will directly influence a lot of our actions before reopening.

Whether that's gallery interpretation in galleries that will be rehung or the design of future programs, we are excited that we'll be able to better respond to our needs than ever before.

**James Akers:** So So, based on your experience with the Digital Culture Network, what would you tell anyone thinking about getting support from us?

I am a huge fan of the Digital Culture Network. I absolutely could not recommend you guys enough. I think at a time in the cultural sector where teams are usually small but ambitious and the digital landscape is constantly changing and a lot of people do have, digital aspects of their role that they perhaps hadn't, signed up for or weren't in their job description, but they're learning on the job and they're keen to learn.

**Nadia Somella:** And funding is tight. Resources like these are really vital and you're shocked that it exists. So yeah, the Digital Culture Network have been incredible and I think just the the level of expertise in the team is incredible, and the fact that you can keep going back to people and refer, to different members of the team so you can get a really well-rounded support for your project from all different areas.

 Yeah, it's been really invaluable.

**James Akers:** I think it's been fantastic for Jack to see your journey through this. He's, such an advocate for what you're doing, and he's been so impressed with the results. And the way you approached it from interviewing everybody across your organization, getting everybody on board, redesigning and testing, and then, training your in-house staff to then, deliver it.

And it's just been wonderful to see.

**Nadia Somella:** Yeah, it's exciting and, I'm excited to see what happens when we actually reopen and this testing period will have allowed us to reopen with a, much more rigorous, data collection process, that will hopefully have yeah, impacts for many years to come.

**James Akers:** Thank you so much for sharing your journey and telling us about how you use the Digital Culture Network.

**Nadia Somella:** Yeah. Great to chat James. Thank you so much for having me.

**James Akers:**

 Please join us for our next episode of the podcast where we'll be interviewing more of our award winners and learning about their projects.

If you'd like to find out more about Nadia's project or get support from the Tech Champions at the Digital Culture Network, please go to our website, which is digitalculturenetwork.org.uk.