**Digital Culture Podcast – Episode 11**

**Digital Culture Award Winners Barber Institute of Fine Arts**

**Host**: **James Akers**

**Guest**: **Nik Wyness**

**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.

Hello. Thanks for joining us for this episode of the Digital Culture Podcast. We're interviewing winners of the Digital Culture Awards over the next few episodes. I'm James, one of the Tech Champions at the Digital Culture Network. I'm a white man with brown hair wearing a light pink t-shirt. Today I'm interviewing the winner of the digital marketing category, chosen by Ranjit Kaur Atwal, the Marketing Manager at Unlimited, and a freelance consultant.

To talk about the winning project my guest today is Nik Wyness, Head of Marketing and Engagement for the Tank Museum.

**Nik Wyness**: Good morning. Thank you very much for having me, James. Yeah, Nick Wyness from the Tank Museum. I'm a male in my mid forties. I've got brown hair, I'm wearing glasses and a blue shirt, and I'm in a white room here in Bournemouth.

**James Akers**: I'm loving the enthusiastic introduction.

As winner of the Digital Marketing category, it'd be great to learn more about what that process was, the different steps you took and the outcomes of what you did. Can you start by explaining the beginning and, why you chose to do the things you did.

**Nik Wyness:** Sure. So the story goes back quite a few years actually, and it's all about the evolution of our content marketing strategy, which has become this behmoth, if you like. and it's become also really important for the Tank Museum, not just in terms of how we reach and engage audiences online.

It's also become a really important source of financial resilience for us as well. And I think that's, what impressed the judges about our particular project, this year, because I think we've shown that, content creation, is an important tool to reach audiences and educate people online.

But it also means that you can grow these online communities and then use those online communities like a source for advocacy, and the generation of revenue, which of course in a sector as pushed as ours is very important and quite interesting because I think it's something that can be, imitated by other organisations.

But, to take you back to the start, James, it all really began with the rise of social media and the particular situation that we found ourselves in at the Tank Museum. Which was, and I dunno if you've made it all the way down to Dorset James, but the Tank Museum is in a very quiet corner of rural Dorset, a very beautiful part of, rural Dorset nonetheless.

We are based in the small Garrison Village of Bovington, which is about an hour away from Bournemouth. And as a tank museum, as you can imagine, we don't have huge sums of money. We're a rural regimental museum and registered charity. And so as a marketer in this organisation, our challenge has always been, how do we make people aware we exist?

We need to make people aware we exist so they can come and visit us. And we didn't have a massive advertising budget, and so we always relied quite heavily on PR in getting the word out about the Tank Museum. So with the emergence of social media as a brand tool, if you like, in sort of 20, 2009, 2010, we immediately realised, I think, the potential value of social media for us in terms of using it as a platform to make the Tank Museum more famous, particularly among those who would be, interested in the stories that we had to tell. And giving people more information about the Tank Museum, the vehicles and collection items that we had And then the objective was all about getting those people to come and visit us. And so we were doing that over time using tools like, Facebook and Twitter. And as our audiences grew and grew, we started to use other social media platforms because, we saw this growth and obviously the numbers were quite interesting to us. And we saw the value of investing time in it, but we weren't really sure what the return was going to be.

And I think it eventually got to the point where we realised that only a minority of our audience was actually based in the UK and even now it's only about 25% of our total social media following is based in the UK. So at that point we realised that the original strategy of getting people using social media platforms so that they'd come and visit us, was increasingly unlikely when, 45, 50% of our social media following was actually based in the US.

So what we did then was really change the approach of what we were using social fo r, which became, not purely about generating footfall, but building advocacy. And then eventually it moved on to generating revenues and using it as a source of fundraising.

**James Akers:** So why was it content creation that you thought, this is what we are gonna do. And, yes, we wanna reach new audiences in this different way, but why did you choose the platforms you did? Where did that decision come from?

**Nik Wyness:** I didn't have much of a team back then This has been a long kind of evolutionary process. So I think, you are always experimenting, trying to find the platforms and the tools that give you the best kind of engagement.

And actually, I didn't really mention Twitter sorry, X as it is now. We never really found X was particularly good for us, which is unusual because of course a lot of cultural venues and attractions have relied on Twitter or X quite heavily in the past. But for us, that never performed nearly as well as Facebook did. And then with the emergence of YouTube, we are quite lucky in the sense that we've got a collection, which is very visual. Things which have photograph and imagery based always create a lot of engagement for us. But because our collection actually moves and operates, I realised that video would be a strong medium for us as well.

And to be honest, I've been a bit of a YouTube addict since it launched back in 2006. And I just always thought that, this would be a good opportunity for us. I think when I started using YouTube for the Tank Museum. It was very different to how we're using it now. And actually what I saw with the opportunity for YouTube is almost to create like video press releases, about, new things happening at the Tank Museum.

I guess you'd call it vlogging, but that's what it was. It was just an opportunity to show, vehicles being moved and that kind of stuff. Cool stuff that most people don't get to see and if you're interested in tanks and armoured fighting vehicles, you would find that kind of thing interesting.

And sure enough, that worked to a degree. And then we just started experimenting with different concepts and different things. The first big successful type of content that we did on YouTube, which has become our most significant social media platform now, was what we called Tank Chats, and it was as simple as, we'd put one of our historians, one of our experts in front of a vehicle in our collection and they'd just talk about it for 10 minutes.

And this is going back over 10 years now. Those videos were picking up as much as 60,000 views, which for us back then was really good. And again, they weren't just being watched by Brits, they were being watched by a global audience. And that was really interesting to And because I was a YouTube addict myself, I was very aware that there were YouTubers out there who were making a perfectly good living. Simply from the content they were creating, the audiences they've built, and then how they leverage support, from those audiences. So what kind of evolved over that time was this idea of basically taking the tools of the creator economy, which is, if you like,the term to describe the economic activity that's been built up around content creation.

And basically just apply those to the not-for-profit sector. So as a result of that, we have used our organic content creation. to be the basis for fundraising through advertising revenue. The more views you get on YouTube, the more money you generate from adverts through the increased sale of memberships, particularly using Patreon, which is an online membership platform, which is used by a range of different content creators.

And that's been particularly useful for us in engaging and, fundraising, from the US based audience who prefer to donate in dollars rather than pound sterling.

We're also generating, revenue through brand partnerships like many other content creators are doing. But of course, as a museum, we have to be very careful about the partners that we choose.

And, I'm sure you, we've all seen videos of content creators advertising things like gaming chairs and gaming headphones. that's not really for us, that wouldn't really align with what we're about. So again, we are, we're quite careful with that. and. The next way is through e-commerce. We're all aware that, every self-respecting YouTuber will at least have a basic little online shop which sells print on demand merchandise, like baseball caps and t-shirts and mouse mats and that kind of thing. And that's really how our e-commerce operations started, as just a print on demand Shopify store, which we've built and developed to become I suppose the *I want one of those* for military history enthusiasts, really. And the whole concept behind our online store was to really target that niche online audience of tank enthusiasts and sell them the kind of products that they'd be interested in buying. Models and books and t-shirts and novelty items and, souvenir stuff.

But it's taken us down an interesting route as well, I think because we've got this, really engaged niche audience. We've actually taken to publishing our own books as well through a crowdsourcing model. And since the pandemic, we've published over 20 books ourselves now and sold well over 30,000 copies of those books.

So, if you like, our content creation has become, the central cog of this ecosystem that we've got for generating revenue in a way that we couldn't possibly have hoped to do if we were relying on our physical museum down in the quiet corner of Dorset on its own.

**James Akers:** And was there a point where you went, hey this is working really well?

**Nik Wyness:** I think it was during the pandemic, to be honest with you. I think what happened during the pandemic is it just really accelerated everything because we were forced to close the museum I had much more time to worry about what might happen and focus on other things.

We had a new commercial manager at the Tank Museum at the time who was really keen on developing the e-commerce 'cause of course that was gonna be, one of the only ways that we were gonna be able to generate revenue when we'd closed our doors. And so I think, yeah, the pandemic was when we really saw that kind of linkage.

And the potential of really directly linking our content creation with this, engaged audience of online enthusiasts who were keen to, if you like, repay us for the value we'd given them and the content we'd created by supporting us and buying stuff from us.

**James Akers:** And you mentioned that it's a community. What are you doing to build that two-way dialogue? Is it certain content you're creating?

**Nik Wyness:** Yeah, I think there's a lot more work we can do. As far as we've come, down this journey, I still think there's a lot more that we can do and a lot more we can do to deepen that connection and build those relationships greater with that community. So in some ways the full potential of the community is yet to be fully tapped. But by and large, I think any online community with a niche interest like this, the thing that holds them together, as you can imagine, quite obviously, is this interest, which they might not necessarily share with their wider social group.

So it's a community that exists online 'cause it's not often that you might get so many tank enthusiasts in one space, so to speak. And I think where it works in particular is the interactions they have with each other. So if you have a look at one of our videos on YouTube or TikTok for that matter, if you go down to the comments, you'll see some really interesting conversations and debates and sometimes outright arguments about the veracity of one source over another source, or one opinion over another opinion.

And that can be quite interesting. And obviously it does require a bit of moderation. And again, I think that's one of the secrets of our success, is really getting to understand the niche, understand what it is they want, what it is they're looking for in their content, and react to that.

And of course, we do talk to them. We react to their feedback, we take it on board. We ask them what it is they like about what we are doing. We ask them what they'd like to see more of. We ask them what they'd like to see less of, so to a greater extent. And the fact that the numbers themselves and the analytics and data that the community provides in the consumption of their content means that there's this continuous quick feedback loop, which we're always analysing and responding to, qualitatively and quantitatively.

**James Akers:** It seems like there's a lot of testing that you're doing, are you okay failing?

**Nik Wyness:** Yeah. Absolutely, of course we're okay failing and you can't get to where we are now without learning a number of lessons along the way. And again, for us it's been a really long journey. So we've learned plenty of things and we've learned plenty of things by, making assumptions.

And sometimes that's the only way you can, isn't it? You test, it doesn't work, you put it aside, you move on. I think that the problem only comes when you test, you fail, and you don't change your approach. So we're very acutely aware of,never being afraid even to stop everything that we are doing to sit back for a week or two, regroup, analyse, listen to what people are saying before we get started again.

**James Akers:** So looking at your numbers then, so these ones are from 2023, and these might have changed significantly. We've got 55 million YouTube, views. 5 million hours of viewing time, which is four fifths from outside the uk, 1.18 million subscribers, watching all this content.

And then across your other things, you've got half a million Facebook followers, 12 million likes on TikTok, 750 paid members on your Patreon as well. So that is all generating revenue from non visitors. And that was 2023. What did those numbers mean to you then, and how has that changed what you're doing now?

**Nik Wyness:** first and foremost, I think it's extremely humbling to be honest, because, again, we are reaching a size and scale of an audience that we couldn't possibly have dreamed of before the internet. And even then, I think, for any organisation success is going to be relative to a degree, isn't it?

It always depends on how many people are out there, are actually interested in your particular niche. And I suppose then there's that, how you are meeting their needs and that sort of thing. So it's humbling to see how much we've grown. But it also makes you wonder, how much more can we grow?

And so there's quite a lot of excitement on that and it makes you think about how you can augment what it is we're doing in the Tank Museum and turn that into content as well, which a slightly different audience might enjoy. We're obviously very proud of what we've achieved as a team.

Like I say, it's pretty humbling. The feedback is always something that we enjoy consuming as well. It makes you feel good about, what it is you're doing and the effort you're putting into it and that sort of thing. I think. the thing is, you always want to see, how much further can we go?

Do you know what I mean? But yeah, those numbers are incredible. we're very grateful to the audience and all the people who consume the content, for sure.

**James Akers:** And they are epic. Those videos that you create, they're amazing.

**Nik Wyness:** Oh, thank you. Yeah.

**James Akers:** So ,this long journey you've been on, were there any specific challenges or surprises that you had along the way and how did you adapt to those?

**Nik Wyness:** There's always new challenges with social media as I'm sure you know, things are changing all the time and that can be really frustrating, but it can provide opportunities as well. Some of the key challenges we face, I think with social media always comes the resource issues.

So like, how do you feed the monster that is social media and is ever hungry? And small organisations, small team, certainly initially, how do you argue for the resource and then when you are building that audience, how do you justify that resource? And I think I've always been quite lucky in that I had a director who was equally keen on experimentation themselves, and was quite happy to let me experiment with social media particularly because there wasn't an above the line cost to this. And obviously, you can imagine. when costs come into it, that's when everyone gets a little bit more sucking the teeth.

We've also benefited from things like, National Heritage Lottery Fund grants to support the resource that we were putting into our social media development in the past as well. So we've been able to pay for temporary positions to help us generate content and kind of organise ourselves a little bit more internally.

So that's been really helpful. I think with any social media comes that ever present sort of reputational risk as well. And that can be from the very large things to the very small things. One of the things that you can imagine we absolutely hate doing is getting it wrong when we're talking about our collections on social media, and there are so many different ways that you can get it wrong, that it's impossible not to make mistakes sometimes.

So taking those on the chin and apologising profusely.

But actually what's interesting is when you do get things wrong is the delight with which the audience loves to point these things out and dismantle you slightly like that. There's the other risks as well, when you're putting people on camera and we are getting the kind of views that we are getting, those people become recognised almost like personalities. And that's a completely new HR issue that we have to deal with. Because with that prominence comes potentially other risks, as well. Of course they get a lot of good personal feedback, but the internet is as we are aware sometimes, full of less desirable people and they can also attract some negative feedback. We've had issues with racism, for example, on the part of one of our presenters, and that's a very difficult thing for us to have to deal with and for the individual in particular to have to deal with as well. It's how do you look after the staff involved at that point?

There's good things that come out of it as well. the people who are presenting our content, when we have our events, they're being recognised at those events. there's not many curators around the country, I imagine that sign autographs and, have people taking selfies with them. There's obviously the rough and the smooth with that side of thing.

I think the key challenge though, and this will resonate with absolutely everybody who works in arts and culture and heritage, is internal organisational alignment to the benefits of this long-term brand building activity as a whole, but particularly if it comes at the cost of more short-term performance marketing.

So the short term stuff, we all know it's a slog, and so it can be difficult to measure. It can be difficult to show the benefit back to the organisation. Whereas, of course, if you do a paid Facebook ad, the data's all there. We spent X, we got Y, and I think particularly in our sector, I've sometimes got the impression speaking to colleagues in similar roles, that the kind of thing that we've been doing is a little bit of a luxury. Compared to *Oh yeah, but we've got this budget and we've got to get this result tomorrow.*

It can be difficult to sell to trustees, particularly if you are begging for extra staff to help with this kind of thing. So hopefully, our example shows that there is benefit to this long-term brand building activity in our sector.

And actually the payoff can be much greater in the end because, we're a creative field and I think what it shows is that creativity in marketing can solve problems that financial efficiency alone never will. And I think hopefully at least an important message from what we've managed to achieve.

What other challenges we have? My key challenge at the moment, we are obviously quite reliant now on the advertising revenue that we are generating. We see it as a form of fundraising, as I've already explained. And because of the nature of our subject, we're always at risk of demonetisation because the monetization rules are basically governed by AI, by bots who are processing the words we use in the imagery that we upload through algorithms and of course for very good reasons. Those platforms are very sensitive about people discussing warfare, weapons, shocking events and certain words connected with World War Two, for example, and certain symbols connected with World War Two, immediately get flagged by these things.

And as a result of that, because of our subject nature it's very difficult not to talk about those things. And of course, we're a tank museum, so it's very difficult not to show tanks. And tanks just so happen to have guns on the end of them. So we're at constant risk of demonetisation. So getting the attention of those platforms to understand that we're an accredited UK museum, we operate by a strict set of standards and there is nothing that we put online that we wouldn't put on our gallery can be very difficult. And we've actually been demonetised by Meta, and I've been unsuccessfully trying to get their attention for it's coming up to a year. Unbelievably. And what's sad is that's genuinely costing us money, but no one seems to want to listen, which is, very disappointing.

**James Akers:** It's such a shame and I know you've spoken with our Social Media Tech Champions who usually can help resolve issues like this, but it seems like your case is quite unique and frustrating.

**Nik Wyness:** Yeah, I have reached out to the Tech Champions. They tried and met with the same, computer says no, sadly, but I appreciated the support nonetheless.

**James Akers:** So for other museums or cultural organisations thinking about growing a digital audience, what's the one thing you would tell them to focus on?

**Nik Wyness:** God, there's probably more than one, but I think I would definitely start with it's all begins with the audience doesn't. It all begins with the niche. In so many ways our niche is, defined by our mission, which is a charity to tell the story of the tank and the people that served in.

Nice and clear. There's no ambiguity there and therefore you can see we can go straight to a very clear segment of people and create content around that specific interest, around that specific mission. But I think the other important thing to remember is if your mission is a little bit broader, is I think it's important to remember the things like YouTube channels, for example, you can't treat them like a TV station. So like our YouTube channel, we don't treat it like a TV station in the way, like BBC one is a TV station. So for example, on BBC one, you have a combination of sport, you have music, you have comedy, you have drama, you have variety. And that's not how YouTube channels work.

YouTube channels are all about consistency of topic, consistency of tone, consistency of, approach. And so If you try and be too broad with what you put on your social media channel, you're never really gonna gel and connect with a specific niche. So the advice would at that point be, if that means you need more than one social media channel in order to reach different segments, then that's almost certainly the right approach because algorithms, as we know have been evolved to feed people with more of the stuff that they're already interested in. So if someone's running a YouTube channel and they're trying to cover, I don't know, tanks as well as, racing cars, do you know what I mean? They're two different audiences, there.

And so it probably wouldn't work unless you're extremely creative and find a way to stitch those two things together.

**James Akers:** Fantastic. People can find out more about your project on the Digital Culture Network website, where the award winners page is. There's a great video of you explaining, that whole process, which is really good. I recommend people watch.

If people want to know more about the Tank Museum, where should they go Nik?

**Nik Wyness:** Well, it'll be churlish not to direct them to our YouTube channel first and foremost, just search the Tank Museum on YouTube. There's a range of, video content on there. Unsurprisingly all about tanks. But if you'd like to come and visit us down in Dorset, we'd sure like to see you, go to tank museum.org.

**James Akers:** Thanks for speaking to me today, Nik. It's been a really good chat.

**Nik Wyness:** Great. Thanks for having me.