

# **Background Research Report**

Gifts of Art, University of Michigan Health System

## **Client Challenge**

The University of Michigan Health Systems Gifts of Art organization seeks advice on re-conceptualizing and redesigning its online application process as well as recommendations on better use of digital platforms and social media. The organization's current website and submission process are out of date and cumbersome for both Gifts of Art staff members (back end users) and artists who are submitting their work (front end users). Its three types of "Call for Exhibit" submission forms create numerous communication problems and greatly delay both data input and data management flow. Gifts of Art hopes to update, streamline, and consolidate its website to include a roadmap to an improved submission process, which inviting to both new and recurring exhibiting artists. Additionally, Gifts of Art seeks recommendations on how to recruit a wider range of higher-quality artists (especially 3-D artists such as sculptors) without soliciting individual artists directly.

## **Organization's Mission**

Currently offering nine rotating galleries in several University of Michigan hospital settings, Gifts of Art is one of the first and most comprehensive arts-in-healthcare programs nationwide. It aims to reduce the stress and anxiety usually associated with a healthcare setting, support the healing process of the patients, and help everyone who works in or visits the hospital to engage with great art and music (Gifts of Art, marketing materials).

## **Questions:**

This report is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the main goal of Gifts of Art and what are the biggest obstacles they face?
2. What sub-problems contribute to the obstacles faced by Gifts of Art?
3. What are the main causes of these problems?
4. What are the general practices used by similar organizations to transfer from physical communications to fully online communications?
5. What are the target audiences of Gifts of Art and how can we apply these practices to Gifts of Art's target audiences?

## **1. Background of the Gifts of Art**

This research report will focus on the problems which our client, GoA (Gifts of Art) faced during the recent ‘Call for exhibits’ program. Specially, this report will explore the communicative obstacles our client has encountered and provide solutions to these obstacles. Unlike “similar organizations which identify an influential physician who is passionate about art as the coordinator and assign faculty and staff to participate in the exhibition”, GoA has seven full-time staff who run the annual three-month long ‘Call for Exhibits’ cycle and manage an online application system with a large database (Breslow 102).

Gifts of Art holds 9 exhibitions at the same time and rotates them every three months. With antiquated recruiting platforms and a cumbersome database, our client is facing inefficient communication between artists (front-end) and GoA (back-end), as well as insufficient applications. As social media becomes increasingly important in exhibition management and publicity, existing marketing tools such as phone calls, meetings, and emails are no longer as effective as they used to be (Russo and Watkins, 25). According to our client, GoA tries to form an effective social media platform to solicit artwork submissions to accommodate the current inefficient ‘Call for Exhibits’, which mainly relies on emails and cold calls to reach out to artists. Currently, the communication is mainly between GoA and artists or art organizations, which is a more top-down process – exhibition institutes looking for artists. However, more bottom-up participations, which are aroused by the communication between artists, audiences, and exhibitions’ reputations (Russo 3). Therefore, our client’s major goal is to establish an effective online system which assists and enhances the application submission, artist solicitation, and exhibition branding process.

## **2. Communication and Publicity Problems**

The communication process between our client and artists consists of three steps: recruiting artists, tracking submission, and conducting follow-ups. Currently, our client has two types of recruiting targets: artistic organizations and individual artist. For organizations, GoA posts paid advertisements on hosting sites to publicize the exhibitions. For individual artists, our client sends emails to everyone who is listed in the database, which was established 15 years ago and is updated every year. If these methods do not yield enough artists, GoA then cold-calls potential artists or reaches out to them in person at art fairs. During the submission period, GoA manually downloads data from online application or mailing forms and communicates with the artists by email or phone. After each submission application is made, our client keeps the artist’s

information in the database with mark ‘accepted’ or ‘rejected’, and sends periodical emails to maintain good relationships with them even if they are not accepted for previous cycles.

The ways in which GoA reaches out to artists or art organizations are neither efficient nor effective. The first problem is the small publicity coverage; both website advertisements and recruiting emails fail to reach out to a variety of artists across the country. The second problem is low submission rate; the emails sent to artists in the database are often ignored and the artists GoA reaches out to in person at art fairs often appear to be interested initially but do not participate in the exhibitions in the end, which is mainly caused by the long submission process to GoA according to our client. The third problem is cumbersome data management; the database of artists has become too large to be manually manipulated. In addition, the existing application webpage and the data processing software are not well-designed for archiving.

### **3. Causes of Inefficient Communication**

According to our client, the inability to utilize efficient communication platforms and the ineffective management tools are the main causes of the problems stated above. Several factors contribute to the small coverage. The hosting websites where our client posts advertisements for GoA are not accessible for a large audience due to limited budgets, and GoA fails to make the ads for ‘Call for Exhibits’ stand out among similar exhibitions. Although GoA has Facebook and Twitter accounts, the followers are limited; both accounts do not have enough attractive contents to help build and maintain the interest of online communities, where many interactions and exchanges between target audiences occur (Kidd, 69). Further, our client is unable to have access to a broader range of individual artists except the ones who have previously submitted to GoA.

The submission rate is relatively low considering the number of artists GoA reaches out to every year. The reasons are listed as follows. Firstly, the emails sent out to artists are not grouped or targeted, resulting in a high ignorance rate by the artists. Secondly, the face-to-face reaching out lacks good follow-ups such as mailing submission instructions, emailing official invitations, or phone calls to encourage the artists to turn in their art works. Thirdly, for artists who prefer mailing their submissions, being responsible for mailing artworks can cost a considerable amount of money, which causes great pains to the artists. Finally, the main purpose of GoA is not to sell artworks (the commission of selling an artwork in GoA is 35% compared to 60-70% in normal galleries). According to our client, some artists do not find it attractive to attend GoA’s exhibitions since high commission rates often indicate better selling and influence.

Outdated database and manual data manipulation methods often lead to the inefficiency of organizing information (Kempe, 119-120). As the database updates every artist who has ever submitted an application, it has become too large to be manually manipulated, e.g. every artist's email is copied and pasted by hand when mailing the initial emails. The existing application webpage also often results in unsuccessful submissions, and the data processing software are not designed for automatic archiving. The online submission process is too long and difficult to operate due to browser issues or file-size limit. It is recorded that 7 out of 120 submissions in 2016 were submitted by emailing application form and artworks after several attempts at the online system. Over the years, the system has been continuously changed although the main code stays the same. These changes, which do not improve the original problems, have created new issues such as incompatibility and unexpected errors like inconsistent formats.

#### **4. Best Practices for Constructing Online Communications**

In order to achieve a clean and streamlined communication process, our client needs an effective online submission and an interactive platform where artists and audiences can communicate spontaneously. There are three common online communication models for art exhibitions: "one-to-one (i.e. visitors to visitors), one-to-many (i.e. visitors to blogs), and many-to-many (i.e. knowledge to knowledge)" (Russo 1). I will start with the three models offering general solutions for online communications, and apply these models to Gifts of Art, and its target audiences.

##### ***4.1. General Solutions***

With the emergence of digital media, online communication platforms greatly enhance the interactive exhibition experiences (Soren, 136). At the same time, traditional tools such as phone calls, posters, and flyers fail to efficiently convey communications between exhibitions and audiences because these tools are one-way information and do not provide feedback from the information source (Dudareva, 8). Therefore, more and more galleries are beginning to use other "online marketing resources such as blogs, Twitter accounts, Facebook groups, YouTube videos, Instagram accounts, mobile apps, and even QR-codes" (Burnette 14). Russo provides four strategies for enhanced online communication tools: changing communication models, connecting youth audiences to museum content, creating agile business processes in the response to social media, and engaging communities in knowledge sharing (6). In general, these social media tools "enable exhibition institutions to connect with broader audiences and spread their influence" through the reach of the audiences in three ways: 1) sharing with others (one-to-one),

2) online pre-exhibitions (one-to-many), 3) online groups and online communities (many-to-many) (Burnette 7).

#### *4.1.1 Sharing with Others*

Social media enables visitors and artists to engage with art exhibitions (Russo and Watkins, 23). The sharing and tagging process of social media creates real-time information flow and transmission, which increases both the coverage of visitors and the participation interest of artists. By setting up and posting pictures with tags which are directed to the art institutes, both visitors and potential artists can access the organization concurrently and accomplish better communication.

#### *4.1.2 Online Communities*

According to Dudareva, there are five types of participants in online community: “enthusiast, connected, contributor, interested, and informational” (3). Each type contributes to the online community by posting discussion topics and responding to them, and the two-way communication between participants and exhibitions are achieved in this way. As one of the biggest social media platform, Facebook empowers art institutes to inspire their followers to pay more attention to their exhibits as well related activities like artist solicitation. There is a clear “connection between following an exhibition organization and engaging with it” (Dudareva 5). By creating a more participatory system, the online community pushed art institutes to a more responsive and interactive position, where both visitors and artists help market the institutes and spread their cultural values.

#### *4.1.3 Online Exhibitions*

Most of the leading museums like Guggenheim and MoMA holds regular virtual exhibitions. If visitors cannot visit the physical exhibitions, online exhibitions let them see the art works virtually, and can help them decide if the exhibits are worth visiting. At the same time, artists who are rejected by the physical exhibitions due to limited gallery spaces can show their artworks online, which expands exhibitions’ reach to artists. Also, higher acceptance rates brought by online exhibitions help art institutes to maintain good relationships with artists since artists who were accepted before are more likely to submit again (Geissler, 82).

#### ***4.2. Demographic Information of Target Audiences***

A large variety of artists submit to GoA every year. In terms of artworks, the diversity of these artists makes it harder for GoA to manage information, track the submission progress, and communicate with them. According to artworks' type, 2D artists and 3D artists differ greatly in how their artworks are evaluated. Most of the art works submitted to GoA are in 2D format, mainly consisting of photography and paintings. It is easy to send digital copies of 2D artworks on the Internet, and exhibition judges can better understand and evaluate these 2D works. However, some of the works received by GoA are 3D works like sculptures or models, of which the whole picture is hard to present. Our client seeks to better appreciate and weigh 3D artworks, thus expanding the exhibitions' diversity.

Additionally, according to how often artists participate and submit, artists consist of those who never submitted, submitted once, and submitted multiple times. The artists who have never submitted to GoA are potential targets; the calls sent to them should highlight the strengths of GoA and advantages of participating in GoA's exhibitions. Artists who submitted once can be divided into two categories: those who found the process enjoyable and those who had complaints. GoA should keep good relationship with the artists with positive feedbacks, and the artists with negative feedbacks are the sources of suggestions for system improvement. 'Call for Exhibits' for both these artists should stress the features of the coming exhibition. Artists who submitted multiple times usually have good long-term good relationship with GoA. According to our client, these artists are mostly their social connections or those who find GoA's culture very attractive. Therefore, they can play an important role in publicizing GoA to other artists.

#### ***4.3. Specific Solutions for GoA***

It is crucial for art exhibitions to "keep the authenticity of essential content in social media marketing" (Russo 5). GoA stands out by its culture of hosting hospital exhibitions to help patients, relatives of patients, faculty, and staff. Therefore, the first solution is to enhance the first image of GoA, and to use the culture as the branding. "Many audiences decide whether to visit an exhibition based on the impression of the exhibition's website and logo" (Geissler 74). However, GoA's logo dated back to the 1980s, and the website was designed in the 2000s. Artists will find the chance to hold exhibitions in GoA's galleries more attractive if our client utilizes a meaningful logo and modern website, which enhances the transmission of GoA's culture.

The second solution is to employ social media accounts. The GoA Instagram account, Facebook group, and online exhibition site are proposed to increase 'Call for Exhibits' publicity. Firstly, an official Instagram account serves as a good public sharing platform for GoA. Visitors to GoA's exhibitions can share their experiences with others through Instagram by "presenting different artworks in their own interpretation" (Weilenmann 1843). Instagram Application Programming Interface (API) can also provide exhibition organizations like GoA with "desktop, web-based, and mobile applications, with which users can communicate and engage" with exhibits, artists, and GoA itself by "tagging and commenting" (Weilenmann 1847). Secondly, it is also beneficial to create an online communication system where GoA, audiences, and artists can see the thoughts in each other's scope. The better reach GoA has, the more likely artists will want to participate in the exhibitions to both publicize their works and help reach more audiences. Thirdly, in addition to current YouTube videos of previous exhibitions and musical performances, our client can set up an online exhibition page. According to Soren, several factors should be taken into account to set up high-quality online exhibitions for GoA: coordinators need to set a clearer expectation for artists to know how they can participate and engage in the exhibitions; GoA should assess how the participants (both artists and visitors) feel about the online exhibition; GoA will want to plan for periodical feedback which help to build better experience (132).

The third solution is to clearly organize and categorize the database of artists. According to Kemme, cleaning replicated databases for group communication involves two steps: "first, proposing cleaning algorithms and transferring the database by using more comprehensive division rules; second, modifying the previous algorithms to incorporate different scenarios with simpler solutions" (118). The cleaning algorithm refers to deleting those inactive artists from the database, e.g. those who never responded to the emails that GoA sent or those whose email addresses are no longer valid. And modifying the algorithm includes dividing and prioritizing artists by context. Therefore, artists in the database should be categorized by their demographic information stated above. GoA will also want to constantly reshape the structure of the database to make it more efficient and target-specific.

## **5. Conclusions**

These specific solutions stated above aim to solve the current issue of inefficient communication, as well as to solicit artist submissions. However, GoA faces some limitations and constraints to employ these solutions. Firstly, GoA has limited funding for advertising and publicity, because

more funding is put into maintaining the artworks and keep the organization going. Secondly, the exhibition spaces are mainly located in the UM hospitals, where large number of visitors cannot visit at the same time. Thirdly, GoA is based in Michigan and the theme of the exhibition is to help those who works in or visit the hospital, which brings obstacles to form active online discussion and responsive online communities due to the small reach of hospitals.

In conclusion, this report aims at providing a more comprehensive understanding of our client's obstacles in communicating with artists and their audiences, as well as exploring the causes of the problems. I also explored the general solutions to these problems, and showed how to apply these solutions to the specific context of GoA. The limitations of the solutions are stressed and more specific details need to be discussed with our client.



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