

UNION MODERNISATION FUND

BERR

Department for Business
Enterprise & Regulatory Reform

THE EQUITY WEB SITE

The Equity web site

Introduction

Equity used the Union Modernisation Fund to develop interactive directories of members on its website. The response from members has resulted in the biggest active two-way communication between the union and its members in the union's history.

Equity's profile

- Equity is a talent-based union.
- Membership is around 36,000.
- Fewer than two per cent of members are permanently employed.

Equity has the largest database of talent in the UK. The vast majority of Equity members operate in a series of discrete casual labour markets, where jobs are often short term. Many members act in film, television and theatre on a project-by-project basis. Others work in 'Variety', engaged predominantly on individual bookings night by night. 'Creative Team' personnel in theatre are also represented by Equity, including roles such as directors, designers, stage managers, choreographers and fight directors.

Why this project?

The characteristics of these disparate groups bring their own challenges for the union, as Lorne Boswell, Scottish Secretary of Equity, explains:

'Due to the nature of these labour markets, a very high proportion of transactions relating to potential employment involve intermediaries or agents. A significant number of employers don't know the extent of the available talent because of

the involvement of these intermediaries. Equity members without agents are often disadvantaged, as they have limited opportunities to market themselves to employers beyond 'cold calling' and speculative letter writing. Our UMF project gave us an invaluable opportunity to rectify this situation.'

Project aims

The aims of the project were to:

- manage the implementation and design of software that will dynamically connect and upgrade information on the union's membership database, with standalone directories targeted at employer needs;
- provide an important marketing tool for members;
- provide information on members that is targeted and specific to employers' needs and to train staff on how to use the information;
- reinvigorate union branches by giving them ownership of their directories, and
- transform union activity by using the union's assets to give all members a platform to market themselves to relevant employers.

The project also had a practical imperative for the union itself. Equity was using its vast membership database primarily to monitor subscription payments. They recognised a need to modernise members' relationships with the union and its branches and to make more of the opportunities to upgrade

their service. Accordingly, they proposed to enhance their internet and electronic communications so that all parties could reap the rewards. Specifically, they used UMF funding to design a pilot programme for Scotland and Northern Ireland, which was to help members market themselves to employers by posting relevant professional details on web-based directories, targeted at employers' needs. (NB The Northern Ireland element was not funded by the UMF, since Northern Ireland is outside its jurisdiction.) Scotland and Northern Ireland were selected particularly to address the geographic disadvantage that members there feel in relation to castings and decisions made in London. Once trialled and tested, the project could then be rolled out throughout the UK. Says Lorne:

'For the first time, union membership would equal being professionally visible. Those who fall out of membership will be removed from the directories. This new system should help the union considerably to retain members – and once the database was modified, union branches and specialist committees would be able to re-assert their identity through the use of these dedicated directories.'

Methodology and outcomes

Consultants were engaged to develop the website according to the technical specification.

The Equity website was re-launched on 14 August 2007 with a significantly increased amount of information and some important new facilities for members.

The website now has online directories for:

- Scotland Actors
- Scotland Variety Performers
- Choreographers
- Designers
- Directors
- Stage Management
- Theatre Fight Directors
- Northern Ireland Actors
- Northern Ireland Variety Performers
- Wales
- Children's Entertainers

Lorne explains:

Since its launch, there have been:

- over 330,000 visits to the site;
- an average of over 58,000 a month;
- over 20,000 unique (i.e. non repeat) visitors per month;
- over 5,000 repeat visitors per month.

'These directories were designed to interact with the union's main database, so eliminating duplication of input and, significantly, enabling the union to automatically remove members who are in arrears with their subscriptions. These new directories will help offer all employers equal access to all members who choose to have their details included on them. They will also help develop members' ability to accept bookings for work over the internet, a method of booking that will undoubtedly increase as the use of IT reduces the need for intermediaries.'

The re-launched website also has more than 550 separate pages of information, which includes:

- a website for every Equity branch;
- all Equity's industrial agreements for members to download;
- easy access to information on minimum rates of pay;
- contact information for every member of staff;
- a list of Council members;

- information about the work of every national, area, specialist and equal opportunities committee, together with lists of their members;
- the ability to pay subscriptions on-line;
- legal advice on accidents at work, agency agreements, agents' code of conduct and signing with agents, together with a downloadable guide: 'You And Your Agent';
- downloadable guides on Jobseeker's Allowance, Tax and National Insurance, Working in the European Union;
- the ability to change the details Equity holds on the membership data base, including which registers you are on;
- reports of each Council meeting (Council minutes on-line will follow when a protocol for confidentiality has been agreed);
- a downloadable health and safety guide and online guides to using firearms, working with smoke and vapour, working at height, working with animals and working with young people;
- a list of performers for whom Equity is holding money;
- links to theatrical charities;
- information on training;
- information on public funding for the arts;
- current campaigns and submissions to parliament, and
- information about how to join.

Recognising that not all employers want to use a union-branded website resource, Equity has also launched two un-branded sites <http://www.yorick.org.uk/>, for actors, directors, designers, choreographers and other theatre members, and <http://www.searchshow.biz/> targeted at Variety and light entertainers. All information added to the Equity site is replicated on

these two 'read only' sites and information can only be added through the Equity site.

In addition to the directories, one of the key benefits for Equity from the redesign of the website is flexibility.

'This site is much easier to expand and alter than the previous site. For example, there are continuously changing news items on the front page of the new website, which are updated almost on a daily basis. These include a new service for members of a daily digest of newspaper cuttings. And as well as the benefits of a more efficient, user-friendly and accessible site, there have been benefits in terms of developing the professional competence of union officers and keeping full-time officers up-to-date with modern business practices, so they can work constructively with employers.'

Looking ahead

The Equity Council now sees the re-launched website as a starting point rather than a finished product and are looking to develop it further:

Directories – The development work on the Scottish directories has already enabled Equity to expand online directories to include theatre designers, theatre directors and choreographers from across the UK. Later this year, Equity will consider expanding its online directories even further to include dancers and singers from across the UK and actors and variety artists in

England. This development will mean that almost every member of Equity will have access to an online directory that will allow them to promote themselves, via Equity's website, to prospective employers.

Search engine – A search engine is being installed, which will give site users much easier access to the huge and growing amount of information now held on the site.

Members' forum – By the end of 2008, an online discussion forum will enable members to discuss the issues that matter to them, wherever they are in the world.

Joining and re-joining – The company that maintains Equity's membership database is in the process of programming the ability for individual professionals who have been identified by Equity as eligible to join or to re-join to be able to do so on-line. The same company is also working on building in the ability for members to set up standing orders to pay their subscriptions via the website.

Lessons learned

As with any large website development, there have been a number of teething problems, notably in this case around registering, logging in and updating information – but amendments have now been made so that instructions are clearer and navigation more straightforward. The classification of some members, such as stage managers, is also being looked at. And the language range in the directories has been extended, at the request of a member, to include Gaelic, Scots, English and Polish.

Uploading photographs to the directories has also proved problematic because of the resolution of the images needed for different media. In order to cope with the mismatch in technologies, Equity's web designers have now installed a program that automatically re-sizes members' pictures so

that they display at the appropriate size and resolution.

As with all secure sites, the Equity members-only area of the site has a time out fail-safe, so that if a user leaves a computer unattended, they will automatically be logged out of the members-only area. Because some members found the time out period too short, it has now been extended from 15 minutes to half an hour.

If future work is done on the website:

- enforceable briefs will be drawn up for all commercial parts for the project;
- all contracts will include a payment schedule, limits and penalties for late or non delivery;
- a steering group or management team will be responsible for each project, with duties, key purpose and time requirements set out in advance;
- projects will be designed to avoid the possibility of a project ending without any user testing or marketing.

Lorne Boswell emphasises that, despite some hitches, the project has been a huge success:

'There's been a massive increase in interactivity between the union and our members. Previously, we had a static website, with relatively little information. The figures for visitors to the new site took us completely by surprise – we weren't expecting anywhere near the level of activity that we've had. And once the initial problems had been righted, the feedback has been very positive. We now have a system that works well, both as a directory and a well-used resource by the people in our industry. We are committed to continuing to work with members to invest and improve.'

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