

CREATIVE NETWORKS

Technology Innovation Centre (tic), Millennium Point
Wednesday 15th December 2004 - From 6.00pm 'til LATE

Breakout Session Summary

Following the breakout session at the Creative Networks event on 15th Dec 2004 where clients were split into informal sub-groups facilitated by Tic staff to enable participation from all clients, on thoughts and issues relating to the network. There were in excess of 100 clients who participated and below is a summary from all the groups:

Structure

Duration and venue

The general consensus is that monthly meetings are ideal, but other events staged by the TIC such as the Short Film Festival are of great interest to all. Two hours is perceived to be sufficient for the duration of the night, but three hours is acceptable if the content is of critical interest. People are very keen to continue holding events in the evening, but the suggestion of holding events during the day was met with strong opposition. Some individuals indicated that the Creative Networks events should span the West Midlands so as not to alienate the other areas such as Wolverhampton and Worcestershire.

Delegate list

A point which arose numerous times was the desire for a list of delegates. It was put forward that individuals could divulge their e-mail addresses on such a list should they give their permission. Descriptions should be in Layman's terms so that everyone has an understanding of who is in attendance, and it was suggested that this could be achieved by providing one line sentences on what every representative does. Attendees could register on the portal before each event so that the list of delegates is available for distribution on the night.

Colour coding

Coloured tags or something similar was aired as a great idea as this offered a means of being able to distinguish people more clearly. The principle of being able to identify people in this manner is agreed to be fundamental, as walking into a room full of strangers may discourage people from networking.

Food & standing/seating arrangements

Hot food is overwhelmingly popular. An hour for food and networking at the beginning is beneficial because it allows a chance to eat and chat for people who arrive early, and offers a window for others who have to travel to the TIC before the main proceedings commence at 7.00pm.

An important logistical issue which needs addressing is that of seating/standing arrangements within the first hour of the night. It has been suggested that the people who arrive earlier have a significant advantage

over latecomers as they unwittingly monopolise most of the tables. It is very intimidating to walk into a room where there are only either full or empty tables. People seem to have already formed into small groups, and this makes it very difficult for others to network. A suggestion around this is to remove the seats and leave tables for people to perch their drinks on. The other idea was to provide food which can be comfortably eaten whilst standing, ideally something which can be eaten out of a basket by hand or with a fork (as has been the case with first two events).

The Pub

The same principle applies for the pub following the event. A venue where everyone is standing up is preferred. People are less approachable when segregated into tables and groups. Several members feel that going to the pub is not necessary every time, preferring to go every other month. However others feel that there is not enough time to network at the event, and the pub offers a friendly and relaxing atmosphere where alcohol is available. The current schedule is generally perceived to be sufficient because anyone who does not wish to attend the pub is not obliged to. People were very keen to have the pub venue close to the event to avoid large drop out rates.

Steering

Participants acknowledged that the breakout sessions were useful while the network was laying the foundations, but essentially they want time to mingle on a regular basis. So a less formal direction and more time to interact seems to be the message for the future. Some felt that all of the participants split up into groups within one room would have been more productive, possibly dividing participants into specific sectors to identify what each requires. This would enable the network members to develop a united strategy within disparate segments.

It is felt that the network should grow organically, but there should be a very strong aim and focus at each event. Some suggested a small but significant number of clients, adding weight to the desire for specialised events. Breakout sessions were thought to be useful, but they detract from valuable networking time which only takes place once a month. Suggestions should be made predominantly via the online portal in future according to the contributors.

No formal participation

Network members were not keen on formal participation in terms of steering as they don't have the time. The group are happy to make spontaneous suggestions either at events or within the online forum as long as such points are noted. There should be a meeting to steer the network at 3-6 month intervals (this would ideally comprise of at least 70% established/existing companies and around 30% new start-ups). There should be a bi-annual conference for the network to discuss progress and future challenges within the region. This should identify clear goals & objectives of what trends should be exploited and key skills areas which needs addressing.

Regional identity

The network feels that the region is fragmented and has no identity or specialism within the media sector. The West Midlands does not have a reputation as a centre for creative industries at present. The groups are keen to address this in the future were but are unsure how to accomplish such a sizeable task.

Content

Buyers

The network likes the idea that Tic will be holding regular buyers network, to enable a platform for people from the marketplace to attend who are looking for content. One participant said that he was attending the Creative Network events to scout for talent. When he asked one regional public agency for a list of businesses that could help him create a corporate video, he was given the names of only 6 well known companies whom he felt did not represent the amount of creative talent operating within the West Midlands. Other attendees agreed and said that if the events could attract buyers who wanted genuinely innovative content, it would be ideal and epitomise many of the reasons that the network was set up.

It was agreed that red and blue badges would be ideal for a buyers and sellers forum. Everyone is very keen on meeting potential customers and the idea of this system is popular, though overcrowding buyers must be guarded against.

Themed events

There was a suggestion that TIC should not hold generic Networking events every month, and evenings dedicated to particular sectors could be provided. This would give the nights more focus, so that everyone attending could approach anybody and know that they are in the same line of business. Respected sector specific speakers should be in attendance in order to make the night unmissable for pertinent SMEs.

However, a greater number was against creating narrowly themed events as there is a danger of isolating sections of the community. For example, a graphic designer may be put off if two consecutive months are aimed specifically at video producers and animators. A possible solution suggested would be to only dedicate a small portion of each night to a specialist subject, and this scenario could involve inviting an expert from a given field for example. If this was a regular occurrence at the evenings, it would probably still attract the high numbers that have been attending up until now. In addition, it may inspire SMEs from other parts of the industry to branch out and collaborate, especially if they could learn about each others' distinct skills and market segments.

Showcasing/Pitching

Opportunities to showcase creative screen based talent are desired. The individual in attendance who was talent spotting (on 15th December 2004) wanted to be able to see examples of work from attendees. It was pointed out that this is may not be practical at events because the amount of AV equipment is limited, however the DAM and portal could be a means of facilitating this outside of the evenings if SMEs were interested in pursuing this option.

Individuals liked the idea of pitching about what they can offer and recommended that this should be a regular occurrence. The suggestion was that there should be 30 minutes allocated for pitches of around 1-5 minutes in length. In addition, the opportunity to pitch to buyers was well commended by all.

Guest speakers

It was emphasised that guest speakers should be present regularly in order to demonstrate best practice. One participant said that he wanted to create 2D/3D cartoons, but he found it difficult to break into this particular part of the industry. The members want to know best practice & processes for their business and what they have to do to break into markets such as these. In this example it may be beneficial to invite individuals who can highlight areas where commissioned products excel, and how ineffective attempts by West Midland SMEs are flawed.

General business/technology issues such as business plans, commissioning tactics and new technologies are subjects that many would like to be addressed in the future. The network seems very keen on listening to a speaker who can give an overview on the issues relating to these topics.

Open Source Software

It was pointed out that there are post-production options other than Avid or Final Cut Pro, and several attendees asserted that the network should be made aware of these. Proprietary software available on Apple and Windows platforms were cited to be very expensive. It was concluded that the network should strive to address other options available such as the potential of Linux for creative applications, and then show members how to use them.

Unlocking the buyers and funders

Before introducing buyers' forums, the network should provide a session on unlocking the buyer. "Getting into their minds and pockets" was a phrase used. It was suggested that the TIC should bring in buyers to explain what they are looking for, as well as providing presentations from businesses that have experience in consistently winning projects. This know-how could be passed on to the network members. This is a crucial exercise and holding a buyers' forum before providing this support would be wholly unproductive.

Funding

It is generally perceived that a lot of red tape & bureaucracy exists with regard to funding, and people simply want to know how to get access to it. Many do

not know what the agencies do or how to get to hold of them, and one group in particular indicated that such entities do not listen to smaller businesses such as the SMEs within the Creative Network. It was concluded that the TIC and similar institutions should and take the consolidated views of the network to these organisations in order to act on their wishes.

Appointments with speakers

The ability to discuss and plan meetings with presenters who will be in attendance at the events is desired. Some kind of appointment planning mechanism which can be implemented through the online portal would be ideal for facilitating this. Such a system would reduce the stampede for guest speakers at the end of the night. This is especially applicable for commissioning editors who may be overwhelmed with questions by the audience.

Digital Archive of Creative Networks

All audio-visual content presented at events should be archived and made accessible online via the Creative Networks portal. For example, Lighthouse presented a video on 15th December 2004 and items like this should be made available for all members to see. If somebody within the network failed to attend the event for any reason, then they should be able to capture the essence of the evening through the portal. This is also applicable for clients who may have had the opportunity to pitch their product/service at such events. The network would like a means of displaying their content online, in particular for buyers & other members of the network to review their work outside of the event.

Contact with key industry figures

The TIC should provide the Creative Network with key industry speakers that people are interested in, with commissioning editors and funders being cited as examples. In addition to this, the network generally want a mix a business advice and professionals who have already succeeded in the industry. Many were particularly keen for the TIC to invite regional/national TV station representatives to discuss what kind of content they required in the future.

Network members would like contact with alternative cinema investors. The members want to be able to show their short films to investors in order to gain feedback and advice about how best to approach the marketplace in order to make money.

Structured workshops

Participants want trends to be identified so that they can act upon them. This ties into the concept of business development, which many specify as something which needs to be addressed. It was suggested that training could be provided for half an hour during every network event, and the term used for this idea was 'Structured Workshops'. One cited example of this was showing the members how to prepare and develop business plans which can be complemented by the i4 courses at the Tic beyond these workshops.

Creative Networks Portal

It is important that the members of the network are given a first hand demonstration of the portal and all that it offers. The contributors want to be shown how to set up a profile and search for services from other companies.

The portal should have a list of who's who in the creative network. For example, one participant mentioned that he would like to find a Romanian speaking editor to edit a documentary. A means to find out about other people in the network in instances such as this would be of significant benefit. It was suggested that everyone could fill in a profile with the option of uploading a picture so that attendees are easily identifiable at network events. The profiles should also be searchable. So with the aforementioned example, the user could search for the word 'Romania' to answer the query within a matter of seconds.

The profiles could display content of the users' choice, but also compulsory sections such as "Services Offered" and "Services Required", possible links to DAM for portfolios and showreels, and whether or not the company is willing to partake in a straightforward exchange of services.

On this subject, one breakout session threw up the idea of bartering or exchanging services. For example, a web designer may wish to implement virtual host (avatar) on their website, and an animator may require an overhaul of their web presence. SMEs may be able to negotiate a mutual exchange of services to benefit their respective businesses. This kind of agreement is ideal because it can act as a launching pad for start-ups who may not possess much capital for investment. If this is a preferred activity by all, the Tic will actively support this activity.

The network members would like a dissemination of key points from the event on the portal for occasions when they are not able to attend.

There should be an opportunities alert within the portal when new buyers specify that they require a service. This would instigate a series of bids, with the most suitable tender winning the project. This function should also provide a filtering system whereby companies can filter out alerts which are not applicable to them. For example, an editor would have no interest in a web design project.

All elements of the forum should be accessible by all members of the network. There should be equal access to tender documents for both start-ups and established companies.

General Points

- Participants suggested working with the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce to establish sustainable businesses that can compete nationally and internationally, rather than just locally. The region needs to build a reputation for being a focal point for the creative industry in the UK.

- Identification of niche markets and products was something that was mentioned fleetingly, but this could be an interesting line to pursue in the future.
- A definitive, searchable list of creative industries in the West Midlands is desired (similar to the PACT Directory).
- Other organisations/agencies should be represented regularly at networking events.
- The network should be a platform for business generation, providing a forum for new suppliers and clients to initially meet with a view to working collaboratively.
- Effective creative business processes should be a common theme throughout the evenings. It was pointed out that business courses were available for free within the Tic through the i4 project.
- Some people do not like approaching others and networking the conventional manner. The members would appreciate a means of communicating their message visually by means of an exhibition, stand or screen.