

Case Study

Digital drivers of empowerment in art and culture at Waringarri Arts



Background

Waringarri Aboriginal Arts (WAA), established in the late 1970s, is the first wholly Indigenous-owned art centre in the Kimberley region and one of the oldest continuously operating art centres in Australia. Focused jointly on art and culture, it describes itself as a 'living, growing art centre celebrating the uniqueness of Miriwoong cultural identity'. Over 100 artists are supported by WAA, which also provides training and employment for local Miriwoong people in various roles supporting the arts, as 'arts workers'. This recognises that local Indigenous people can engage with the art and culture economy in a range of roles, not only as practising artists, which is a key channel for employment. As explained by Cathy Cummins, WAA's Arts and Business Manager: *'Some artists will succeed as artists in their own right, but the large majority want the opportunity to work in the broader arts industry as arts workers'*.

In early 2015, WAA began considering how digital technology could expand the opportunities and markets available for both artists and arts workers. It was agreed that an updated website offering audio-visual products representing Indigenous art, storytelling and cultural tours, would increase the reach of WAA into markets well beyond the East Kimberley. Many ideas were pooled for this exciting vision, but WAA's limited budget and digital capacity posed a challenge. Hoping to make some of the ideas a reality, Cathy Cummins, Arts and Business Manager, wrote a project brief for the development of a WAA digital strategy and shared this with Jawun. This coincided with the secondment of Leonie Woodfin, a skilled business consultant with Woodside Petroleum.

Approach

In May 2015, Leonie arrived in Kununurra tasked with developing a digital strategy that included a digital art range to maximise economic opportunities for arts workers. It was to be called the Dawang Digital Project – *dawang* meaning 'community' in Miriwoong language – and would span three years.

Leonie began by discussing with the WAA board, staff and artists how artworks could take digital forms. An important feature would be the creation of high quality audio and video recordings of artists explaining the meaning, inspiration and stories behind their work. This would generate lasting interpretative records that could accompany single artworks or become part of broader collections of audio and film products. Over time, all of WAA's art works would have a digital form, allowing them to reach widely into online marketplaces and be shared easily through social media. This would support the economic objective of WAA, but also the cultural one: traditional stories could be preserved and made available online for future generations, and relationships could be formed around them.

Leonie's work with the Dawang Digital Project prompted a revised WAA website, including an Artists Gallery where artists could connect a global audience with digital representations and interpretations of their work. This laid the foundation for a second project by Michael Casha, a digital strategist from NAB in Melbourne, who joined WAA for six weeks in February 2016. Michael's brief included expanding the WAA

website to integrate online purchasing, an online booking system for WAA cultural tourism, and a content management system that WAA staff could use. Michael also developed a secure portal within the website for artists themselves to manage their sales portfolios and profiles, from anywhere with online access. This is expected to go live in late June 2016.

Outcomes

The value of Leonie and Michael's contributions was estimated by WAA to be in excess of \$50,000 in direct savings in digital marketing expertise and development. Among this, Michael's training of three WAA staff members to do in-house web content management is expected to save WAA around \$5,000 a year, and it also gave them IT skills likely to support their future careers as arts workers. Leonie also transferred valuable skills during her secondment, giving one-to-one tutorials in PowerPoint, Photoshop, and strategic use of social media.

Key among its outcomes, the Dawang Digital Project has provided access to the global market for WAA and its artists, with audience size no longer limited by geographic distance. Social media and marketing, now more active than ever, is expected to multiply profile and sales. The members' portal on the website will give WAA artists a long-awaited opportunity to be in control of the sale of their work, and to add their own voices to its interpretation and marketing.

So far, the Digital Project has seen 120 artworks digitised and made available online, a first for WAA. It has meant additional positions have been created for arts workers in business operations, marketing, arts development and cultural enterprise, with more expected in years to come.

As hoped, the Dawang Digital Project generated digital stories around paintings that were combined with those of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous storytellers, and then made available to audiences including local communities and future generations. This fostered new partnerships with other cultural organisations in the East Kimberley, ones which helped preserve and bind together traditional stories in a way not previously possible. For example, it brought about a significant new partnership with Mirima Dawang Woorlab-gerring Language and Culture Centre (MDWg). MDWg was formed in the 1970s to preserve, analyse, and record the culture and the endangered languages of the Miriwoong and Gajirrabeng people. As part of the Dawang Digital Project, WAA and MDWg Language Centre plan to generate talking books and other storytelling products that combine Indigenous language, stories and art. This partnership will also support new career opportunities for arts workers.

Next Steps

The work of Leonie and Michael on the Dawang Digital Project significantly advanced the empowerment of WAA artists, expanded economic opportunities for local arts workers, and contributed to the cultural strength of the Miriwoong people. Next steps include continued roll out of the digital strategy to generate more economic opportunities for artists as well as employment opportunities for arts workers. WAA is also looking to develop a career support system for arts workers associated with the arts and culture industry of the East Kimberley.

Michael and Leonie returned to their lives in Mount Hawthorn and Melbourne, but did not forget their experience at WAA in Kununurra. Michael said it was, *'a million times more than I had ever expected'*, and Leonie went on to help create Woodside's new Reconciliation Action Plan. Both spoke of the privilege of hearing stories directly from Indigenous artists, and of the profound learning it gave them. Leonie's final reflection on her time was simply: *'I think this country would be an even more beautiful place to live, if more people had the chance to take part in a Jawun secondment.'*