Web Presence for Musicians

Getting Started: The Big Picture

Cultivating an online presence is an inexpensive and dynamic way to build audiences and support for your work. With the wealth of free and low-cost promotional tools, the process of creating a professional identity online is easier than ever. With that, of course, comes a marked increase in competition for fan attention. That said, maintaining a robust and compelling online presence will greatly increase your chances of connecting with audiences near and far. Your task is to cultivate an online voice that feels authentic to you and will resonate with supporters, old and new. In order to achieve this, it's important to take time to evaluate your goals. Consider what you hope to accomplish, who you are trying to reach, and what you want to convey to your audience about your music. The answers to these questions will inform the aesthetic, technical and financial decisions you make about your online portfolio. As an active musician, it's inevitable that information about you and your music will wind up online: in the form of a YouTube video, a bio on an organizational website, or a few tagged photos on a colleague's Facebook page. That's (usually) a good thing, but you will often have little to no control over the way this content is framed and presented. Creating your own online portfolio will give you ownership over your artistic identity—it will enable you to shape the story you want potential supporters or collaborators to see.

The most basic building block of your web presence is a personal website. That may be a personal website for yourself as a freelance musician, or one for your band/ensemble. In some instances you may want to have both. Building a website can be overwhelming, expensive, and time consuming, but it doesn't need to be. You can choose to pay a professional and build a very elaborate website, or use a free platform and build a very simple one yourself. Remember, the goal is to be able to share your music and present a dynamic picture of your identity as an artist. See 'Building Your Website' for tips on how to tackle this project.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, YouTube, SoundCloud, etc. provide avenues to share media rich content that will reach people where they spend most of their online time. These tools will in turn draw people back to your website, where they can find the most comprehensive information about your work. Maintaining a multi-layered online presence can be time consuming, so it is also important to settle on a realistic and sustainable model for this area of your work. To begin, figure out what appeals to you most, and zoom in. If Twitter feels exciting to you, then really explore that platform and use it regularly to build an online community. If you're a great writer and love chronicling your work, get blogging. If video is your medium, make a YouTube channel and start shooting. These platforms obviously work best in tandem, but making a meaningful mark somewhere is an important first step.

Below, you will find basic guidelines and resources to help get you started. The realm of online promotion is incredibly dynamic and ever-changing, so we offer this list as a point of departure for your work.

Building Your Website

There are many free or low cost services that provide modern templates for designing and hosting your website (see 'Web Design and Hosting' below). These services are a great option for building a professional website, which with a little care and creativity, can serve most of your basic needs. If you are building your first artist website, this is a good place to start—not only because it is low cost, but because it pushes you to think critically about how you want to represent yourself as an artist and puts the creative reigns in your hands.

If you want a custom design, or more complex features, you can elect to hire a developer to build a website for you. If this is an option you're considering, but your budget is modest, seek out connections with students who are building their portfolios and might work for a slightly reduced fee. Custom websites can range in price from $5,000-$35,000 depending on the scope of your website and the experience level of the developer you hire. If you choose to work with a developer, make sure you have an easy way to navigate the back-end for updating text, audio, video

and images on your website. Whether you design your website, or hire someone else to do it, the task of populating the website with new content and information will most likely rest in your hands.

Research

The best way to generate ideas and develop a set of personal preferences for your website is to view other musicians' sites with an analytical eye. Once you get a sense of the range of possibilities for performing artist websites, browse websites of visual artists, writers, filmmakers and other creative people to get aesthetic and functional inspiration. Also, think outside of the virtual world - what grabs you visually on the streets or in print and consider how you can use and adapt those design elements on your website. As you browse and analyze any site, ask yourself:

- Do you get a clear idea of the artistic identity of the artist?
- Is it easy to navigate? What's on the menu? Are there interesting links?
- Is there anything fun or unusual on the site? Any surprises?
- Does the site offer opportunities to contact and interact with the musician(s)? Is there incentive to do so?
- If you were considering hiring this musician, would you find the information on the site relevant? Interesting?
- How does the site help the musician build an audience (or does it)?
- What do you and don't you like on the site? Why?

Domain Name

The first thing you need to do to build a website is obtain a domain name. For about $15 per year, you can own the exclusive rights to www.yourname.com, unless, of course, someone else already registered the URL. Two of the most popular sites for registering domain names are www.godaddy.com and www.register.com. Some web hosting services (see below) have tools for purchasing and registering a domain name built directly into their interface, and in some cases you will get a discount for purchasing the name and the hosting service together.

Architecture and Content

Before you begin building your website, you should first create a sketch of the site's architecture and prepare the content that will populate your pages. Great content can make even the simplest of websites memorable. If you are building a website for yourself as a freelancer, it will vary slightly from building a band or a project website, but much of the content/sub-pages will be similar. Below is a list of pages that you should consider including:

- Home
- About or Biography
- Media (photos, audio and video recordings)
- Electronic Press Kit (EPK)
- Projects (if a freelancer)
- Reviews
- Upcoming Performances or Calendar, including an archive for past performances by date and venue
- Store: Music and Merchandise
- Teaching (if a freelancer)
- Composition (if a freelancer)
- Links to all other online presence (Facebook, twitter, bandcamp etc.)
- Links to other artists, organizations, activities etc. that you are excited about
- Forum (if a band)
- Contact

Images and Design Concept

As a performing artist, making a strong visual impact with your website can be a challenge, because your art may not be visual in nature. This means that you have to be a bit more creative about the visual impact of your images, fonts, color scheme, or design concepts. If you have a small budget to dedicate to this project, consider investing in high quality promotional photos, or hiring a graphic designer to create an attractive custom header for your website. These elements can go a long way in making your website look inviting and professional. If you are building a website for a band or project, it's a great idea to come up with a long term logo - an easily recognizable image that will appear on your merchandise, your albums, and your website.

Web Design and Hosting
Below are just a few options for designing and hosting your personal website:

Squarespace
Squarespace is an easy-to-navigate website building/hosting service that has many attractive templates for online artist portfolios. For $90 a year, you can build and host a personal website that is professional and versatile. They also provide quick and in-depth tech support to address any development questions that may arise. Squarespace offers significant discounts to students – even if your university is not a registered partner with Squarespace, you can often still get a discount just by writing to customer service.

Wordpress
While Wordpress.com is commonly used as a blogging platform, it is also a great tool for creating a simple, professional website. Many of the free themes will allow you to create multiple unique pages, so that you can create the look and feel of a basic website. If you are looking for more creative and aesthetic control, consider purchasing a premium theme, which generally costs $50-$100 for the life of the website. Many of the premium themes will enable you to adjust color, font, page format, and add custom headers through an easy 'back-office' editing system that requires no knowledge of HTML. If you are feeling more adventurous, consider exploring Wordpress.org (distinct from wordpress.com), which is a free web software you can use to create a more robust website. Many of the custom themes developed for Wordpress are designed to work with the wordpress.org software and will give you much more creative control. Using the software will require more research and trial and error but it is within reach for anyone who is willing to dedicate some time and effort to figuring it out. There are ample tutorials on YouTube and forums that can introduce you to this software and help troubleshoot problems that may arise.

Tumblr
Tumblr, like Wordpress, is often used to host blogs but can easily be used to build a website. Tumblr also has a wide range of free and premium themes with bold and modern designs.

Wix
Wix is another popular website building service, with similar rates and functionality to Squarespace.

HTML & CSS
With many free or low cost web design services, a little html and css knowledge can take you a long way. All website building tools give you the ability to customize the code. If you are very excited about learning to code, you of course have the option of building your site from scratch. A great resource for building this skill is Code Academy (www.codecademy.com).

Traffic and Analytics
Effective websites are those that receive a lot of traffic and return visits, and not just on their first pages. When creating or revising your site, think about what will motivate the visitor to click through and what will generate more traffic. Keeping your web content dynamic and up-to-date is an effective way to increase web hits—post relevant news, photos, videos, audio clips. One great way to generate traffic and a high level of activity is a having a forum - a place where your fans can post their comments, photos, videos etc. In a sense you are providing a space for people to connect and create community based on their shared interest in you and your art.

Also consider adding links to external websites that you find useful, interesting or relevant to your music and/or your interests outside of music. This can be in a separate tab on your website, or imbedded in your bio, blog, or news text. The more places your website points to, the better it will perform with search engines. It's also important to collect data that measures the volume and quality of the traffic to your website. You can easily capture this data by registering your website with Google Analytics (www.google.com/analytics), a free service that tracks to how many visitors your website attracts, how long they stay on your website, and what content they are most drawn to.

Blog
Blogs are a great platform for providing rich content about your current or upcoming performances and projects. A lot of people get intimidated by the idea of blogging regularly, but you don't have to write a long essay for every post, nor do you have to post something every day. You can use your blog as a platform to share links, articles, videos from recent performances, and other interesting news about your life and work. Many of the free website design tools allow you to create a blog and embed it directly into a page of your website. Updating your blog regularly can give fans a reason to come back to your website for updates and new content. You can make your blog as personal as you desire, or keep it strictly about your music. Another great advantage of having your own blog will become apparent when you start seeking coverage of your music or events by other music bloggers. You will have insight into how blogs work and gain credibility by having your own. For more on this, please see our "Publicity for Musicians" handout.

Your website will serve as the central and most comprehensive source of information about your work. However, in order to drive new people to your website and grow your audience, it is important to engage in a wide range of promotional activities through social media and other online platforms. Below is a short list of tools that you can use to drive traffic to your website and grow your following:

Facebook
Facebook supports a wide range of options specifically designed for artists. You can create a band/musician page and customize it with a variety of applications that will enable you to easily share audio and video content. Facebook is also a great way to advertise upcoming gigs and performances—you can buy ads and set very specific criteria for the demographic that the ads reach (for example, you could set your sample as women between the ages of 18 and 25 who list 'free jazz' as one of their interests). If you are working on a tight budget, there are ways to create buzz on your own for free: engage your fans with interesting, thought provoking, or personal posts; share photos from performances or daily life; post recordings and videos from your performances; pose questions about interesting articles that relate to your art; or just let your fans know what you're listening to that day.

In terms of volume of activity, try to find a good balance between posting so much your fans start to ignore you and posting so rarely they forget you exist. Depending on how active you are on other platforms, you could post as little as two-three times a week and as much as two to three times a day.   If fans comment on your posts, make sure to respond to let them know that you're excited to interact and appreciate their involvement. Go back to old events in your timeline and add as many details about your history as you can. Finally, don't be shy about using all of the different tools available - geo targeting, highlighting posts, checking in at the venue etc.

Some artists prefer to curate their personal Facebook page and use it as a professional networking and promotional tool. This is a fine option as well, and is simply a question of personal preference and the extent to which you want to join your personal and professional voice on Facebook. You may reach the point where you want to take full advantage of the tools and applications that are available for artist pages and you may also begin to deal with a volume of fan interaction that will require a separate artist page to manage. Regardless of which route you choose, stay authentic, friendly and personal.

Twitter
Twitter is a micro-blogging tool that allows you in 140 characters or less to share what you are doing with your friends, fans, and colleagues. It is also a platform that enables you to follow topics and individuals that relate to your artistic and personal interests. Because of the fluid and informal nature of Twitter, it can be a powerful tool for connecting with artists or supporters that you might not be able to reach through normal channels (e.g. email, phone or in person). When you set-up your twitter handle, start by following key people in your realm of music—musicians, administrators, organizations, venues, etc. Once you have settled into the twitterverse, start interacting with these individuals by retweeting their content, posing questions, or sharing content of interest.

Soundcloud
Soundcloud is a great tool for recording, uploading, and sharing recordings of your music. You can upload polished recordings or works in progress and Soundcloud will generate a wave form player that you can embed in your website, blog, or Facebook page. Soundcloud is also a social platform within itself—you can follow artists and comment on their tracks. Your fans can even comment on specific moments of your recordings, giving you valuable feedback about what they like and starting a conversation around it.

YouTube.com
YouTube allows you to easily upload and share videos—performance videos, promotional videos, or videos documenting your adventures. You can create your own YouTube channel, or embed YouTube videos on your website blog, or Facebook artist page.

Instagram
Is a social photo sharing site that enables you to take, edit and share images and short videos. This is a great platform to use if you already love taking photos and enjoy the aesthetics of photography, or if your work has a heavy visual component.

Mailchimp
MailChimp helps you design email newsletters, share them on social networks, integrate with services you already use, and track your results. If you have fewer than 2,000 emails on your list, you can send up to six newsletters a month for free! Mailchimp provides a wide range of modern, attractive templates to design your newsletter and has an easy to navigate interface. Email is a great way to distribute news about upcoming performances and projects, and keep your fans engaged in between events.

Conclusion

These are the basic concepts and tools you will need in order to begin the process of building a dynamic presence online. You can find a wealth of online resources to help you delve further into trends and topics in online marketing, social media, web development tools, etc. Below are a few links to resources that can help arm you with more information, ideas and tools:

- Mashable: a leading source for news and information about digital innovation
- Hypebot: a blog that reports on music, technology, and the new music business
- Seth Godin's Blog: DIY Marketing Guru
- Likeable Media: Keeps readers current on industry trends and new tools while also providing strategies and tactics for using Facebook and social media marketing.
- Music Think Tank: a blog that deals with a wide range of topics affecting the music business today, including digital marketing.
- Facebook Marketing Page: Facebook Marketing helps educate marketers on how to make their business successful using Facebook.