CREATIVE EDGE

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MyCreativeEdge.eu: The Creative Showcase for Europe's Northern Edge

Developing an Online Export Platform for the Creative Industries
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Executive Summary

In order to be sustainable and grow, many creative businesses need access to international markets. However, evidence from rural and peripheral regions has found low levels of export activity by creative enterprises. Organisations from four regions in Europe's Northern Periphery therefore came together under the *Creative Edge* project[1] to

> *... ensure that an open access freely available 'export platform' will be created for all the participant regions and ultimately beyond.*

The aim of the export platform/website – MyCreativeEdge www.mycreativeedge.eu – is to facilitate access to global markets for creative goods and services from micro-enterprises and SMEs in the partner regions. Fig. I shows the process of developing this from initial idea to reality.

Fig. I: Process of creating MyCreativeEdge

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[1] The project partners are NUI Galway and the Western Development Commission (Ireland), SEED/Craigavon Borough Council (Northern Ireland), Film i Västerbotten (Sweden) and Kemi-Tornio University of Applied Sciences (Finland). Further details of the *Creative Edge* project can be found at www.creative-edge.eu

Step 1: Research & Consultation

The first step in the process involved researching what creative enterprises required from such a platform as well as consulting widely with stakeholders from the sector. An online survey of creative enterprises in September 2012 provided an insight into their exporting behaviour and their priorities in terms of export support. From the survey, 80% said they would be likely to use an online export platform if one were available.

The results of this quantitative research were supplemented by the establishment of an Industry Advisory Group (IAG). The IAG was largely composed of creative enterprises and support agencies and they provided their input on how the platform should be developed and what are the key exporting issues for creative enterprises, based on their experience.   At the same time, all project partners consulted with the sector in their own regions.

The project partner organisations then held a detailed design workshop in November 2012 to reach agreement on the essential elements of the platform before recruiting a web designer. It was agreed that:

- There can be no cost for participation by a creative in the platform.
- It should increase visibility of creative businesses, and also operate as a sales platform.
- Emerging creative talent who wish to do freelance work should be included with creative businesses, while creative talent who are seeking employment should be featured in the talent bank. When registering they can choose which section or be in both.
- Platform must be easy to use and manage and needs to be self-sustaining – creative businesses must be able to create and edit their own profile page.
- Visitors need to be only three clicks away from what they want.
- Language of the platform needs to be simple and clear (and in English).
- It needs to be the "go-to" site for information about exporting and if links to external sites are used, the information needs to be uncomplicated.
- Business to Business (B2B) and Business to Consumer (B2C) products/services need to be communicated differently. Platform to be primarily a B2B site, with a B2C showcase element with external links to member's own site for direct selling.
- Integrated with social media activity.
- Democratic in terms of what companies are displayed first on the Home page. When people land on the site they could be shown creative sectors from different regions on a rotating basis.
- Need to measure tangible results from platform pilot to strengthen marketing efforts.

Step 1 concluded with agreed specifications for the export platform and terms of reference for recruiting a website designer.

Step 2: Website Design & Development

Once the essential elements had been agreed, a website designer was recruited to design and develop the platform. A detailed workplan, aiming to have the website go live in mid-June 2013, was agreed. A joint workshop was held with the IAG and project partners in March 2013 where the web

designer presented initial design ideas, and specific issues about how the site would operate and be promoted were discussed and agreed.

The platform was developed over the following months which included agreeing the domain name www.mycreativeedge.eu and strapline **MyCreativeEdge: The Creative Showcase for Europe's Northern Edge** as well as the logo (Fig. II).

Fig. II: MyCreativeEdge logo

The architecture of the site was also finalised and content for the site's static pages was drafted and copy edited to a web-friendly format. The site has four main sections: Creative Showcase for profiles of creative enterprises; Employ a Creative for profiles of creative talent; About MyCreativeEdge; and a Members' Area.

One of the most important tasks at this stage was developing a user friendly process for creative members of the site to publish their own online profile. An online application process for the *Creative Edge* Talent Voucher Scheme[2] was also incorporated within the site at this stage. Regional administrators from each of the partner organisations received training in the site's content management system and in the moderation of applications to join the site.

Step 2 concluded with MyCreativeEdge going live in mid-June 2013.

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[2] From Q2 2014, a report on the *Creative Edge* Talent Voucher Scheme will be available to download at http://www.creative-edge.eu/publications/project-reports/

Fig. III: Top of MyCreativeEdge Home page

Step 3: Recruiting Members

The heart of MyCreativeEdge is the profile pages of the members and viewing these profiles is the central purpose of visiting MyCreativeEdge. Therefore recruiting creative enterprises, freelancers and job seekers to join the site and publish their online profile was probably the most important activity in the process of developing MyCreativeEdge. Raising awareness about the development of the platform began up to a year before it went live. This included presentations to creatives, organising seminars, attending events and engaging with organisations and leaders within the sector encouraging them to inform their networks.

Closer to the launch date, an expression of interest form was created on www.mycreativeedge.eu for interested creative businesses. The link to this form was e-mailed to trade associations and creative enterprises and it was also promoted through *Creative Edge* social media. On 11 June 2013 an e-mail was sent to the 156 people who had expressed their interest, providing them with pre-launch access so they could create their profile before the website officially went live.

Step 3 resulted in 100 profiles published within one month of the site going live and 500 registered members by the end of 2013.

Step 4: Creating Profiles

Ensuring the process to create a profile is as user friendly as possible, including for those with limited technical skills, was fundamental to the design and development of the site. Fig. IV shows the steps to create a profile.

Fig. IV: Steps to create a MyCreativeEdge profile

In each region a regional administrator took responsibility for approving or rejecting all registrations on the site. This decision is based on the applicant being located in an eligible region and operating in an eligible creative sector. Once approved, a new member receives their username and password and can then login to create their profile. This takes four steps:

1. **Edit Profile**: contact details, description, profile picture, social media links
2. **Edit Sector**: creative sector(s), tags/skills/services
3. **Edit Gallery**: up to 20 images and/or links to video content
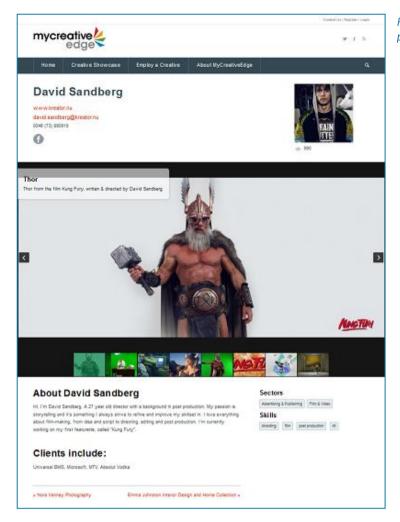4. **Preview & Publish**: making the profile live on the site

Fig. V: Example of a MyCreativeEdge profile – David Sandberg, Sweden

As members began creating profiles, a number of issues with the process arose and in response several changes were made. These included changing the image slideshow to accommodate different image sizes and establishing an automatic e-mail reminder system for members who had not published their profile.

Step 4 resulted in 84.5% of members reporting that creating their profile was Easy or Quite Easy.

Step 5: Promotion, Marketing & Advertising

Promoting and marketing MyCreativeEdge to potential members and customers was fundamental to its success. A strategic marketing plan was developed in April 2013 which identified the platform's four key target audiences and the marketing messages for each. The four audiences are:

- **Creative Businesses** – established freelancers, micro-enterprises and SMEs
- **Creative Talent** – new graduates and emerging creative talent
- **B2C** – Business to Consumer clients for the products and services of the profiled businesses
- **B2B** – Business to Business clients for the services and products of the profiled businesses

The marketing plan was implemented during the remainder of 2013 through a range of advertising and marketing channels:

- Digital advertising: The main advertising channel used was digital and this had a number of aspects:
  - Recruiting creatives: Facebook ads were used in July-August and October-November to encourage creatives to join the site. Some Google AdWords were also used in July-August. In total there were 10,800 clicks on these digital ads. A few online banner advertisements on trade-specific sites were also used.
  - B2C buyers: Facebook ads were used to advertise the Architecture, Arts, Crafts, Fashion & Jewellery and Photography sections of MyCreativeEdge to consumer buyers in the West of Ireland, Dublin, London, Manchester, Philadelphia, Boston and Chicago during September-December 2013. In total there were 16,900 clicks on these ads.
  - Christmas campaign: Facebook ads were used to target the Christmas gift buying market in Sweden, Finland, Northern Ireland, Ireland, London and the US. In total 6,300 clicks were made on MyCreativeEdge Christmas ads.
  - B2B buyers: Google AdWords were used to advertise the Advertising & Publishing, Architecture, Arts, Design, Digital Media, Film & Video, Software & Gaming and Photography sections of MyCreativeEdge to business buyers. These AdWords targeted the West of Ireland, Dublin, London, Manchester, Philadelphia, Boston, New York and Helsinki during September-December 2013. A total of 4,800 clicks were made on these Google AdWords.
- Showcasing at events: Project partners promoted MyCreativeEdge during creative and business events across the four regions. This involved having a stand, making a presentation, having the logo included on the programme and/or networking. MyCreativeEdge was promoted at 54 events during late 2012 and 2013.
- Distributing flyers: MyCreativeEdge promotional flyers were displayed at locations frequented by creatives and the general public and were posted to creative enterprises.
- Direct promotion to creatives and associations: Presentations were made by project partners directly to creatives and students encouraging them to join the site. Trade and industry associations were also asked to circulate details to their members.
- Traditional media: A number of press releases were issued about MyCreativeEdge's launch and its progress. These received newspaper and radio coverage.
- Social media: *Creative Edge* established a Facebook page and Twitter account in November 2012 and ran a proactive social media campaign. This included using social media to drive traffic to MyCreativeEdge and recruit creatives. By the end of 2013 the project had 1,552 Facebook likes and 433 Twitter followers.
- E-mail mailings: Two main mailing lists were established on MyCreativeEdge – members and a newsletter list. In its first six months of operation there were 19 mailings to members and those who had signed up for the newsletter with news and updates.

Fig. VI: MyCreativeEdge flyer designed to attract consumer buyers

Considerable effort and input is required to promote any new initiative. It is necessary to maintain this promotion and advertising on an ongoing basis if visitors are to continue to be attracted to the website. Only by doing so can the platform's ultimate aim of generating business for the profiled creative enterprises be achieved.

From the survey of MyCreativeEdge members, the most common ways in which they had learned of the site was directly from a MyCreativeEdge partner organisation, through social media, word of mouth and other (which included trade associations and third level colleges).

Step 6: Evaluation

By the end of 2013 MyCreativeEdge had 500 registered members. The largest sectors were Design, Arts, Crafts and Digital Media, though most members selected more than one sector. Of total membership 326 had published their profile at that time, just over 40% of these were women and about 4% were aged under 25 years. The majority of members work alone and almost all are in businesses with fewer than five people.[3]

In its first six months, profile pages on MyCreativeEdge received 61,700 profile views. The number of views each profile received varied depending on the length of time they were on the site, own promotion and attractiveness of imagery. A notable number had over 300 views. If someone viewing a profile took action, the most common was clicking the business's website link. In total there were 2,290 clicks on links on profile pages.

MyCreativeEdge received 36,800 visits between June and December 2013 with 27,800 of these being unique visits. Ireland accounted for just over half of visits, the US for 16% and England for 9%. This reflects the targeting of the digital advertising. The other partner countries were next highest and their capital cities were often the source of most visits. The main way visitors came to the site was by clicking a Facebook ad, Google AdWord or a link in a Facebook post. The Home page, Fashion & Jewellery, Registration, Photography and Crafts were the most viewed pages on the site and about a quarter of visits came from mobiles or tablets.

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[3] The data on enterprise size refers to the 103 members who completed the survey in November-December 2013.

From the survey of members it was found that access to international markets, it being a free resource and networking with other creatives/finding partners were the main reasons members joined. Over half reported not being aware of any response to their profile, with e-mails and visits to their own site the most common reported responses. Almost all members had used MyCreativeEdge to view other profiles from their own and other regions, and while three-quarters did not make contact, of those who did most did so with people from their own region or local area.

Step 7: Further Development

All *Creative Edge* project partners are committed to continuing the operation of MyCreativeEdge. Resources are available to maintain and operate the site for at least the coming year during which the options for its longer term sustainability will be examined.

The evaluation of MyCreativeEdge has raised a number of issues which are important for making it a more useful resource for members and more user friendly for visitors. In the members' survey suggestions for the site's future included: greater targeting of business events and buyers of services; recruiting creative 'reps' locally to promote the site; limiting the number of sectors a profile can be included in to improve searching; making the site more interactive with live webinars and blogs by members; more updates on available supports; organising events for physical networking between members; and providing opportunities to meet with buyers.

MyCreativeEdge will continue to be developed as the Creative Showcase for Europe's Northern Edge, providing a platform for creatives from across the Northern Periphery area to access international markets, network with others in the sector and expand employment opportunities.

MyCreativeEdge in Numbers

After its first six months of operation some of the key outputs of MyCreativeEdge are:

- **500** registered members – **326** published profiles – **85%** said creating their profile was Easy/Quite Easy
- **37,000** website visits – **1 in 3** from outside the four partner countries
- **23,000** clicks on Facebook ads for consumers – **5,000** clicks on Google AdWords for businesses – **11,000** clicks on ads to recruit members
- **54** events where MyCreativeEdge was promoted
- **1,552** Facebook likes – **433** Twitter followers

Key Lessons

Based on our experience of creating an online export platform for the creative sector, the key lessons the *Creative Edge* partners would like to share with others considering a similar project would be:

1. **Consult with creatives**: Consult with the end users – creative enterprises and talent – to learn exactly what they need and want from such a platform. This will increase buy-in and make sure the platform meets their real needs.

2. **Clarify objectives**: Be clear and realistic about your objectives and how these are prioritised. Objectives need to be agreed by all partners and clearly explained to all stakeholders.

3. **Build consensus**: When a range of partners and interests are involved it is vital to build consensus about the platform's essential elements before beginning the actual design and development process.

4. **Be flexible**: There is a need for flexibility during the design process, as many issues will arise that were not considered in the planning stages and which need to be responded to. In particular it is critical to respond to the actual experiences of end users.

5. **Clear decision-making**: It is important to balance consensus and partner engagement with clear final decision-making. There also needs to be one organisation with responsibility for day-to-day decision-making.

6. **Recruit champions**: Recruiting members for the site can be done using many methods but word of mouth and gaining the support of leaders and influencers from the sector is particularly important for the longer term sustainability of the site.

7. **Adequate resources**: It is important not to underestimate the staffing, time and finance required to effectively design, develop, implement and promote such a platform. Sufficient and realistic resources need to be made available from the start.

8. **User friendly process for members**: As members will have a wide range of technical capabilities, creating a profile on the site needs to be as user friendly as possible with minimal input required.

9. **Reasons to return**: There is a need to create reasons for members to return to the site and continue to engage after they have published their profile. This could include live interactive events or using the site as a route to apply for other support programmes.

10. **Role of social media**: For an online service the role of social media is very important in raising awareness among creatives and in driving visitor traffic to the site. But social media does need to be managed and adequately resourced.

11. **Sustainability**: The longer term sustainability of such a website needs to be built into the planning from the very start.

Project website: www.creative-edge.eu

Export platform: www.mycreativeedge.eu

The creative showcase for Europe's Northern Edge