

# New Ideas for a New Era

Here's how digital solutions can help you thrive as you move into an uncertain future.

By Brian Lemond

The world has changed in fundamental ways, and pre-pandemic patterns and relationships may never return. The only way we can move forward is to accept that old ideas may no longer work and that innovation has never been more needed.

With organizations pressed for creative thinking, we at Brooklyn Digital Foundry ([brooklynfoundry.com](http://brooklynfoundry.com)) are having daily conversations with clients about the role technology can play in responding to these disruptions. We know the best solutions are tailored to each organization's specific needs, yet the general themes emerging from these strategy sessions have value across the sector.

The five concepts below will act as conversation starters with your team and partners. These concepts acknowledge a core truth – that people around the world have turned to digital tools and experiences to lessen isolation, bridge distance, and create the connections that define our humanity.

To address that shift, mission-driven organizations are increasingly prepared to take bold steps. There's a newfound openness to experimentation, both by organizations and the audiences they serve.

## 1. Start Conversations

Many organizations – especially those built around visitorship, collections, education, and other location-specific public experiences – are asking how to get material out to their community. This is a natural instinct. In most cases, we agree that distribution of core content should be the first order of business. But that alone won't differentiate you from peers competing for the same audiences and funding.

Instead, think about digital experiences less as broadcast and more as dialogue. Create ways for audiences and communities to engage your team or, better still, each other. For example:

- **An activist organization might promote small-group discussions** between audience and staff, seeding new nodes in their network.
- **A research coalition might schedule virtual panel discussions** with program directors, experts, and funders, marrying livestreamed Q & A and social channel integration to advance visibility at the same time they invite audiences into knowledge-sharing and collaboration.
- **A theater company might host breakout sessions** with cast and audience following a virtual performance,



enhancing a fragmented performance by creating deeper, more memorable connections to the material, performance, and community.

These opportunities to build connection and community are powerful experiences for audiences.

They're also potent ways to demonstrate your organization's relevance.

## 2. Be More Personal

For years, organizations have sought digital personalization – complex, algorithmic software solutions that shape and deliver content to meet the tastes and expectations of individual consumers. Today, we're suggesting something faster and easier: *personification*.

Imagine a museum hosting small-group virtual tours, streaming Q & A sessions with conservators, or launching daily Twitter takeovers by curators. Bringing the experience and personality of behind-the-scenes staff to the foreground changes the traditional relationship between audience and institution. It builds intimacy while responding to our recent and sudden loss of social cohesion.

## 3. Reach New Audiences

Building on the ideas of conversation and personification, you might re-examine long-held assumptions about audiences. As the tools used to share content and engage people change, so might the opportunity to reach more diverse communities.

For instance, with the pandemic altering the terrain for engagement, we've seen rapid acclimation of older audiences to digital tools. We're also seeing an increased appetite for digital experiences across all demographics.

Shaping initiatives to new constraints and responding to emergent market demand can spark new ideas. To inspire your team, listen to the challenges expressed by your audiences, and think about solutions for relationships in limbo.

For example, a public garden may no longer be able to invite visitors to their grounds but with minimal staff could launch a virtual garden school. This initiative could then be marketed to summer camps and schools scrambling to provide quality programming.

Tailoring your organization's content and expertise to the needs of the moment builds lasting connections with new audiences. In the example above, many children and parents engaged by the virtual school will take away a positive impression of the organization; the same is true of the new partnerships established with educators and counselors.

Everyone who has a great experience is more inclined to visit, refer, promote, and support your organization. That will do more than help you thrive now; it will make your organization healthier in the long run.

## 4. Build Alliances

At a moment of profound dislocation, cooperation between organizations and institutions has the power to create new spaces for connection and community. Partnering with peer institutions or organizations across different scales and sectors can use common interests and aligned values as threads that bind people together.

Collaboration between organizations can also provide essential support to other mission-driven entities. Even an organization considered a direct competitor a few short months ago might yield a positive alliance. By leveraging the unique capabilities of each partner, conversations deepen, content becomes richer, discrete audiences become shared communities, and all partners benefit.

Candidly assess what your organization brings to the table as well as your blind spots. Then explore new models for digital collaboration. That might be as simple as aligning peer institutions around a common hashtag or content theme to promote awareness. Or it could be a fundamentally new approach to programming.

Imagine a group of small colleges subsidizing a series of outdoor, live-streamed conversations between climate scientists and environmental organizations with open Q & A periods from prospective students. The colleges provide space and technical facilitation, showcase their campuses, and highlight important work on urgent challenges. In turn, the schools speak directly to engaged members of their future classes and build partnerships with organizations struggling to be heard over the daily news crises. By coordinating publicity across many schools, organizations, and participants, the signal cuts through the noise.

## 5. Take Smart Steps

For each of the examples cited above, it's easy to imagine a full spectrum of implementations, from simple, fast, and free to complex, slow, and costly. Our recommendation is to identify a series of initiatives and pursue each at multiple points on that arc.

Start with what can be done immediately and with little expense; at the same time, build the strategy and resource allocations necessary to execute more robust versions. Phasing outputs in this way delivers a host of benefits:

- **Early experiments** test market appetite with minimal cost.
- **Developed projects and programs** provide essential qualitative and quantitative data to shape subsequent offerings.

- **Mature platforms** build awareness and expand audience reach at scale while signaling leadership and providing markers for peers and partners to follow.

In many conversations we're having, organizations are feeling the pressure to avoid mistakes. Budgets are tighter, resources are spread more thinly, operational paradigms continue to adjust to evolving circumstances. Often, organizations are facing existential questions that can make conversations about building communities and engaging audiences seem like distant goals from better days.

But many mission-driven organizations already have the oxygen they need to thrive – the ability and desire to connect with others, to inform people, and to inspire action. The techniques above are guidelines to build lasting partnerships, support aligned organizations, and chart your own path through this period. They'll help you improve visibility, expand audience reach, entice media coverage, and strengthen existing relationships while establishing new ones. Whatever your challenges and strategies, preparing for an increasingly digital future will pay dividends. 

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