Seven Reasons the Past Never Dies

Digital Engagement Perspectives

Trusting Teens with History
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ON THE COVER
These Junior Historians from Dallas Heritage Village proved you can, indeed, trust teens with history as they created new exhibits and interpretation of the institution’s doctor’s office and the Worth Hotel. Photo courtesy Dallas Heritage Village
n one of the most beautiful areas of the Netherlands lies the former royal Het Loo Palace, which doubles as a national museum and one of northern Europe’s most beautiful gardens. Recently the organization appointed a new director and initiated an ambitious program of changes to prepare for the future.
Although still a favorite with the public and one of the Netherlands’s most popular cultural attractions with close to 300,000 visitors annually, change is needed to counter declining visitor numbers and reductions in funding. In late 2012 I was asked to help the Palace develop an online and digital media strategy that would support their changes and the vision and mission of the Palace and put them on the (online) map.

Online and digital media such as social networks and smartphones have had a considerable impact on society and vice versa. The rapid changes and innovations have had experts like Brian Solis label this era, “The end of business as usual.” What comes after business as usual, however, is not always as clear.¹

Over the years many cultural and heritage institutions have approached me to help them figure out what is next and what they should do, digitally and otherwise, to stay relevant in the twenty-first century. Many discovered it was not enough just to be on Facebook, to launch a mobile app, or to print QR codes on their labels. Institutions seek a more integrated approach to the opportunities and challenges of online and digital media. This has encouraged Jim Richardson and myself since early 2012 to take a broad look at digital strategies in the cultural and heritage sectors and define influential trends and perspectives. What approaches work well? Which ideas point to greater truths? What seem to be the underlying factors in successful projects? This process has led to the development of the Digital Engagement Framework, a tool that helps organizations structure thinking about digital engagement and develop actionable digital and online strategies (see page 10). In this article I will reflect on the two main observations underlying the framework and explain how they worked out for Paleis Het Loo, concluding with general recommendations for those wishing to get the most out of their own digital engagement activities.²

**Assets and Audiences**

All media (and especially digital media) are about connecting content with people, much like cultural and heritage institutions that for decades have been making such connections with their exhibitions, catalogues, educational materials, etc. Although we sometimes feel otherwise, it is my firm belief that digital engagement comes naturally to many institutions once they have overcome their initial reservations. The content of most institutions is well suited for the digital age. In a 2012 TED talk Kevin Allocca explained that for content to go viral in digital culture it needs to be completely unexpected.³

The good news is that most of our collections, stories, exhibitions, and even buildings are already so. You only have to search on Instagram or Flickr for the name of an institution to find visitor photos that document that unexpectedness, which they use to brand themselves on social media. Research also shows the general audience goes to museums and heritage sites exactly because of the direct connection with the unique content. Therefore it is only logical to start looking at digital engagement from the perspective of content, and the relation this content has with our audience.⁴
In the digital world, we’ll have to look at more than our collections for our content. On websites such as TripAdvisor you will see visitors talk about the quality of the restaurant, attitude of the staff, and everything else that distinguishes one institution from the next (and from the Starbucks around the corner). In a workshop in Brussels I learned that a large national museum was considered a good place to find shelter from the rain, while participants in a masterclass in Sydney stressed the importance for visitors of the animals that walked around the institution. All these assets should be taken into account for digital activities, and with a bit of creativity the most unexpected of them can be a major draw for (online) audiences. An example of this thinking is how the Walker Art Center used the popularity of online cat videos to draw 10,000 people to their grounds.

It is not enough to simply digitize assets and make them available online. For years cultural and heritage institutions have lived by the rules of the long tail, digitizing collections and press releases and putting them online in the hope that someone, somewhere, will care. Even if this worked in the past, it is unlikely to continue to do so in the future. In their (aptly named) study Extracting Value from Chaos, John Gantz and David Reinsel show that the amount of information in the world more than doubles every two years. The only way to spread your message and connect with people in such information density is by being recognized and acknowledged as the value in the chaos. It is what you do with your assets in the digital realm that makes your institution stand out rather than be lost on page fifteen of a Google search.

To know what to do with your assets you will need to have an understanding about your audience. The second building part of successful digital engagement therefore is what we call audiences: the people you reach already and the people you want to reach one day.

Digital audiences are often seen as one-dimensional. People either use digital tools such as smartphones or they don’t. Reality is much more complex. The widely used techographics profiles of Forrester Research show that even among the people who use a specific digital medium there are differences in how they use it. Some people make creative contributions, others respond to these, and yet others only observe. Digital engagement means different things to different people and a considerable percentage of the potential audience will never engage, even though they own a smartphone or have a Facebook profile. Digital engagement is as much about designing activities that engage as about finding an audience that is willing to engage.

For Paleis Het Loo, it did not take long to find some key assets for the organization. Visitors identified its beautiful gardens, the guided tours, and the events. Employees stressed the importance of the volunteers, the audio tour, and the connection with the royal family, to name just a few. The Palace tells stories and people come to enjoy these stories and imagine how it is or must have been. In real time, the audience will not necessarily be active with digital media—although they use it to find information and stay up-to-date, as well as associate themselves with the Palace. People engage because they want to enrich their visit with more (digital) information and build a sustainable relationship with the Palace that reflects well on them. It is a relationship based on a mutual exchange of value and on storytelling.

**OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT**

The next important question to ask is why and how the connection between assets and audiences is made using digital media. There are many different options for this connection. A recent study by Pew Internet of 1,244 art organizations from across the United States, for instance, found a bit more than half use digital media to crowdsource ideas, more than three-quarters use it to monitor their audience, and eight in ten institutions engage visitors in digital media before, during, and after their visit. In the same research 65 percent of participants said digital is very important for fundraising, 63 percent to increase organizational efficiency, and 83 percent reported digital media has helped make their audience more diverse. I am sure these numbers and the sheer variety of uses for digital media will be similar in other cultural and heritage institutions.

In the Digital Engagement Framework, we make a distinction between engagement activities, which focus on strengthening the relationship with an existing audience, and outreach activities that help the institution connect with entirely new audiences. Engagement is often done within the institution or an institution’s own digital platforms; outreach forces the institution to be active outside of its (digital) walls—for instance by partnering with an influential blog or online tastemaker.

The basic idea behind this distinction is that digital engagement is a long-term process rather than a one-off activity. Before people engage, they have to be interested in what you do and have to offer. Before they are interested, they need to know about and be able to connect with you. Only people who regularly engage with you might become highly enthusiastic about you and spread the word about your message and help your message go viral.

Understanding the difference between outreach and engagement is essential for success in the digital age. On your
digital engagement framework version 2.0

assets
What are your organization’s existing activities, events, etc?
What are your ideas and values?
What experiences do you offer?
How are you different from your direct competitors?

Tangible assets
Intangible assets

reach (outward)
How can you use your assets to connect with new audiences?
Where do you go to meet the new audiences?
What external communities can you connect with and how?
How do you make yourself known to new audiences?
How do you renew contact with former audiences?

metrics
What is success and how can you measure it?
What are relevant reporting mechanisms for your objectives?
How do metrics influence activities?

channels
Which media and technologies do you have available?
Which new channels and tools are needed for your activities?

guidelines
Under which conditions do you work?
What do you stand for?
How do you deal with unexpected issues?

audiences
Who do you want to reach with your assets? Who should you reach?
Who can only be reached digitally?
What new target groups are coming up in your industry/locality/etc.?
How about tourists and an international audience?

New audiences
Existing audiences

engagement (inward)
How can you create deeper and more sustainable relationships with your existing audience?
How can your audience contribute to your assets?
How can you create brand advocates and build your own community?

objectives
What do you want to achieve with digital engagement?
What are your formal goals and objectives?
What do you need to achieve to make the entire organization better?

vision
Why does your organization exist?
How will your organization be different in 5 years time?
How will you make the world a better place?
What will people say about you in the future?

trends
What are important developments in your industry, locality, organization and market segments?
What new technologies and media do you see coming up?
How will society be different in 5 years time?

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Facebook page, for instance, you will mostly connect with an existing audience. This means all updates and activity on Facebook should be used to turn an already interested audience into enthusiastic advocates. The ubiquitous “Like This Page and Win!” message (a weak kind of digital outreach) in such situations is counterproductive.

The main challenge for Paleis Het Loo was not necessarily reaching people, but going beyond this first contact and building sustainable relations with the audience. The existing website was exemplary for this challenge. Although it contained all the necessary information to facilitate a visit, the website didn’t look inviting and it wasn’t clear whether the Palace was open to the public. We proposed using large inviting images and a welcoming message to turn the website from a source of information into a place where people are turned into interested (potential) visitors. At the same time, the website and onsite digital media such as smartphone tours should give the interested visitor an easy option to connect with the Palace for a longer period of time (such as via Facebook or a newsletter). Specific minisites and small campaigns help the Palace reach new audiences, especially around events and exhibitions.

**THE BIGGER PICTURE**

Assets, audiences, engagement, and outreach are at the heart of any successful digital engagement strategy. It doesn’t stop there, though. To make digital engagement work in an organization, digital has to be an integral part of an organization and be translated into actionable processes and technologies. The other parts of the Digital Engagement Framework help organizations answer the questions this poses.

The bottom part of the Digital Engagement Framework (the basis) helps institutions describe how digital fits in the overall vision and objectives as well as important trends that influence the institution and its surroundings, such as aging populations or the appearance of a new social network. At the heart of the framework are the processes and technologies the strategy influences. These often go beyond the scope of the
department responsible for digital. Engagement that starts online or on a smartphone needs to be followed up onsite with friendly, responsive staff. The direct exchange of ideas and information between individuals and the institution allows for a more direct value exchange (crowdfunding, donations) and creates more need for customer service—such as a Twitter account.

An organization where all technologies, processes, and strategies are in place to maximize the outcome of the connection between the audience, staff, and other stakeholders is called a social business, an idea based on older ideas of a Service Profit Chain in which all stakeholders equally contribute to the success of an organization.9

Pioneers of social business such as the Royal Dutch Airlines KLM show how a structured, integrated approach to the opportunities of the digital age have long-term positive effects on the whole organization. Although few cultural and heritage institutions might be considered truly social at the moment, institutions that manage to look at the opportunities of digital structurally certainly have an advantage over those that address it in isolation.10

The ambition for the online and digital strategy of Paleis Het Loo as defined in the strategy development process was to entice people to visit and initiate sustainable relationships with the institution. Using online media, the Palace should tell stories and inspire people, as well as facilitate the physical visit. The staff translated this ambition into a set of core activities for the coming year that include processes and ideas to take the first steps toward a social institution over the years to come.

In early 2013, as implementation of the initial elements of the new online strategy began, the Palace had an unexpected windfall. In late April 2013 the queen of the Netherlands abdicated and was replaced by her son. Coupled with an already strong exhibition program for the year—including a crowdsourced exhibition for the queen that turned into an homage to her reign and an exhibition about the three historical kings of the Netherlands planned for later in the year—the Palace received significant extra attention and visitors. Certainly this will help the institution implement its new online and digital strategy and generate the energy and ideas that are needed to help the Palace as a whole face the
Jasper Visser is the founder and principal of Inspired by Coffee, where he works with nonprofits, NGOs, and cultural organizations from around the world on strategies for the future, especially in the area of media, communication, technology and business models. He is the cofounder of several startups that turn his ideas into reality. Jasper regularly speaks internationally about his work and keeps the blog http://themuseumofthefuture.com.


2 See also www.digitalengagementframework.com.

3 The long tail is the large number of things that happen outside of the head or most popular part of any distribution. For instance, although a new book might sell a lot of copies in the first six months after being published, when people discuss it and newspapers review it, the total number of sales after these six months, although less per day, might exceed the sales in the initial six months. Before the Internet, long tails were difficult to manage, as space for objects and information was usually limited. A bookstore cannot keep a copy of every book because shelf space is limited. Online bookstores such as Amazon, however, can. The long tail also gives room for objects or information that traditionally had too small an audience to be part of the head (and so, following the analogy, would never end up in a bookstore), as at the scale of the Internet and with virtually free space to store information, there’s room for everything and everybody. See Chris Anderson, *The Long Tail, Revised and Updated Edition: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More* (New York: Hyperion, 2008).


8 See http://on.aaslh.org/PewArtsDigital.


10 Use Google Translate to read this interview with Lonneke Verbiezen, Manager Social Business at the Royal Dutch Airlines KLM, http://on.aaslh.org/KLMInterview.