



## What visitors want

### The way to meet museum visitors' expectations is by defying them

by Nick O'Flaherty, Strategy Director at brand consultancy, Wolff Olins

**A** number of recent cultural shifts have shaped, and continue to shape, individual expectations: the ubiquity of the internet, constant connection to screens, desire for authenticity, heightened levels of service, alternative forms of communication ... and the list goes on. Museums have realised that in order to remain relevant in this modern environment, the experience they offer must evolve in tandem with visitor expectations. But to what degree? As museums rush to keep up with changing contexts, do they risk delivering experiences that are more quotidian and expected, and less the

departure from the day-to-day that many visitors seek?

For these visitors, museums are at their best when they surprise, awe and delight. They go to see in real life what a screen cannot provide, collectively experience the museum as a space, and to deepen and broaden their knowledge. It is when these elements come together that the visitor gets that transcendent, overwhelming, *unexpected* experience. As Mark Elliot, Senior Curator at the Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at Cambridge, puts it, 'we may go to see a famous artwork, and end up meeting someone special. We may go to get out of the rain and come face to face with an artefact that changes the way we think,

or lifts us somehow; something that sets us on a new journey of discovery. That's why I go to museums: because they are where the unexpected happens.<sup>1</sup>

So when should museums meet visitor expectations, and when should they defy them? For example, when does keeping up with technology enhance the visitor experience, and when does it detract from and ultimately diminish it? To make the right decisions, museums first need to be clear about their purpose and the unique value they bring to audiences. Any new initiative or investment should either augment this value or remove barriers that detract from it.

An experience designed around the visitor that incorporates service training, digitally enhanced ticketing, navigation and planning information can have a huge impact on visitors. It helps them reach the awe-inspiring good stuff sooner, without the frustration that many visitors (particularly first-timers) feel upon entering a museum. Museums should employ best practices from hospitality, retail and other sectors to help visitors access and find their way around the museum, and to make them feel welcome. Museums would do well to put as much thought into accessibility as they do into an exhibit or installation.

### Amplifying unique value

Many museums today are enhancing or augmenting their unique value to audiences by getting to know them better. This means understanding how visitors process or seek information, and that language doesn't need to be simplified in order to be understood, made relevant or to pique curiosity. More museums are providing tools that allow visitors to uncover a deeper understanding of their collections, helping them see connections and context in a way that is neither didactic nor overwhelming. With 80% of adults predicted to have smartphones by 2020,<sup>2</sup> we are well equipped to access data. With screens in our pockets, the need for more screens, which are constantly becoming outdated in galleries, is diminished. The value visitors seek from museums is help viewing patterns in the data—a role museums have fulfilled since their inception.

Museums are experimenting with digital technology more than ever—helped by organisations like Bloomberg Philanthropies, which recently expanded its grant funding for cultural institutions' digital projects to \$17 million. One grantee, the Brooklyn Museum, US, will equip employees with smartphones and an app to help answer visitor questions in real time as they move through the galleries. This innovation stays true to the museum's mission to bridge the gap between the museum's artistic heritage and the unique needs of each of its visitors. Last month, another grantee, Gardens by the Bay in Singapore, launched its first mobile app, which adds a layer to the museum experience with a multimedia guide to the plant life in the gardens, an interactive map and educational games. This allows visitors to go deeper, explore hidden locations and interact with its content and each other. In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, former New York City mayor, Michael

---

*That's why I go to museums: because they are where the unexpected happens*



Gardens by the Bay in Singapore

Bloomberg, commented, 'each of the institutions we're supporting use technology in different ways to engage, educate and immerse their visitors—and to make their world-class resources available to a greater number of people, more of the time.'

The Serpentine Galleries in London have recognised the central role a website can play in enhancing and extending the overall visitor experience. The museum has acknowledged the growth and power of the online community by enabling currently exhibiting artists to design and re-design their website. By allowing for co-creation, the galleries have redistributed power from the institution to the hands of artists—maintaining the museum's dynamism and relevance. It also recognises visitors' desire and expectation to engage with the museum beyond the physical space.

### Partners to unlock potential

New partnerships are being formed beyond the field of philanthropy to help museums find new ways to unlock the potential of their unique resources. Collaboration with online learning platforms like Khan Academy and tech giants like Google, or inviting thinkers and innovators to a permanent co-working space housed within the museum, are just a few successful examples. These outside collaborations are helping decision makers challenge the status quo, understand their audiences better and extend the impact of their institutions.

Museums are working to hit the sweet spot between what they alone can offer as an institution and what their visitors are looking for in the outside world. As they enhance the experiences they offer, digital or otherwise, museums must innovate by identifying their unique value, and find ways to augment it or provide better access to it. In doing so, they produce an experience as transcendent and unexpected as the content and space of the museum itself. ■

<sup>1</sup>University of Cambridge, 2013. *We ask the experts: why do we put things into museums?* <http://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/we-ask-the-experts-why-do-we-put-things-into-museums/>

<sup>2</sup>Andreessen Horowitz, 2014. 'Mobile is Eating the World'. *Forbes Online Magazine*. <http://www.forbes.com/sites/louiscolumnbus/2014/11/09/mobile-is-eating-the-world/>