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Are museums a thing of the future?

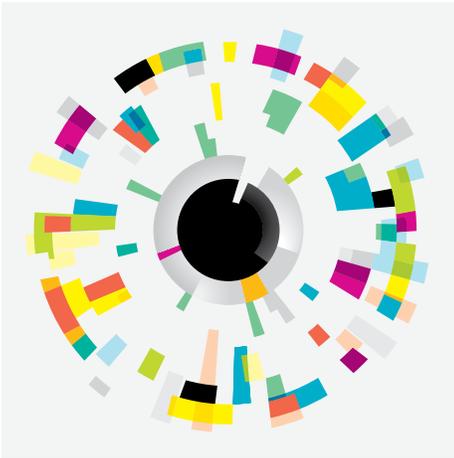
BRAVO ECHO

For most of the lifetime of even the youngest museums in this country, our experiences happened in the “real” world. They were live encounters occurring one at a time in physical spaces. But then along came the Internet, and things got complicated. Now the world has an extra dimension, where things happen in digital, virtual ways and we are exposed to more than we ever have been before, in an uninterrupted stream, all the time. “Experience” has been commoditized. We’ve become spoiled, in both senses of the word, for choice.

Museums are not alone in grappling with this transition. At BravoEcho we’ve worked with many different kinds of organizations – public institutions, corporations, and brands – once secure, now struggling to inspire and motivate their public. It isn’t that any of them have lost their potential meaning in an individual’s life, it’s that the demand on that individual’s time and attention has become overwhelming.

For many of our clients, maintaining and growing the goodwill of their public is a way of life, and they have structures and people in place to do it. But earning that goodwill anew entails fresh understanding, different knowledge, and sometimes new skills. In a word, disruption. It’s a changed marketplace out there, with an evolved customer and different competition. Few firms and brands (even if it were possible) need to re-invent themselves. But almost all need to re-position what they offer in order to answer a new public mindset. How is it done? In our experience, three core principles drive this kind of change.

The first is Persistent Truth. At the center of an organization, a corporation, and certainly a deep-rooted institution like a museum, there's a beating heart. A simple, inspiring idea which motivates the internal culture and the public. The second is Pattern Recognition, a synthesis of current and predictable behaviors from which to distill actionable human insights. And the third is a core narrative combining Heat and Light – light being knowledge, which informs, and heat being emotion, which motivates. The right narrative can re-frame a conversation gone stale, which is the only way to shift long-term behavior.



Human insight has driven the Steelcase design business for 100 years. The centenary logo celebrates this focus.

Steelcase is an American company which has made office furniture for over a hundred years. It is now global and leads its industry. The CEO asked us to use the corporate centenary to position the company for its second century. We first identified the persistent truth which has driven its evolution. The answer wasn't "work solutions", or "office systems", which is what people inside the organization might have answered. It was "Unlocking Human Promise", a human-centric higher purpose. This is the red thread that has run through the company's history, and crucially, the needle that points a clear path to its future.

Universities also face the "legacy problem". The business press is telling two stories about higher education today: the model is broken, yet students from emerging economies can't get here fast enough. Recently we've worked with the University of Michigan, and Northern Michigan University. NMU is a traditional public institution in danger of losing its share of market, and so, its reason for being and its funding. It was perceived as a local option and the default choice, and centered its positioning on its rural setting on the Great Lakes. We found its persistent truth to be a unique crucible of mind and character, and initiated marketing around the theme "Fearless Minds." A fearless mind has universal appeal – while lake views and dog-mushing do not.

It would seem that museums may have the legacy problem too. People who visit museums love them. But people who don't, perceive no reason to care. And worse than this, their time and attention is already over-subscribed, therefore one less choice is a positive relief.

It's a matter of priorities. In a sense, people living in a torrent of data are forced to become curators themselves, taking in only what presents urgency and editing out everything else. In this scenario, time is the currency. How do you spend it? And where?

All that said, the first-hand, "real world" life experience is alive and well. Going to a professional sports game clearly isn't the same as visiting a museum, but like visiting a museum it is an investment of time, when a computer or television screen might suffice.



First hand life experiences are alive and well: 2014 saw record numbers at many US National Parks.

Yet attendance at professional games is high. So is the spirit of outdoor adventure. Last year the U.S. National Parks set a new attendance record.

In fact, tourism is an interesting window on how Americans in the post-recession economy choose to spend time. While we leave more vacation days on the table than any other country, research shows a huge surge in demand for shorter, more frequent, and more unexpected vacation experiences. We've worked with a number of destination travel companies in recent years, and people once content with turnkey solutions – say, a time-share – are now active explorers of more diverse physical experiences. And this is true at every price point – just consider the impact of airbnb on the hospitality world.

In a recent study on museum visitation by Reach Advisors Museums R+D, museum-goers say that the experiential qualities which mean most to them are authenticity, truth, curation, focus, a different reality, variety, control, and a sense of serendipity.

Interestingly, together these are the antidote to the firehose of commoditized content in our digitally-connected world. In fact, our research for clients in many fields bears this out. People say these are the very qualities they feel are now lacking in modern living and that their scarcity only makes them more valuable.



*One thing that never changes:
Our obsession with detective stories.
And what is a museum, if not a real-life
detective story?*

What is the museum experience, in essence? It is a detective story of history and culture, with rare objects as evidence, and the paying guest as detective. There is a profound irony here, since the detective genre is one of the most enduring and lucrative memes in our culture – a staple of our literature and pulp fiction, and of our film, television and computer gaming industries. We just can't seem to get enough of it. It most certainly translates to Google Search, where amateur sleuths conduct trillions of inquiries daily in order to get to the bottom of it all. And yet for a large swath of the population, the entertainment value of "figuring it out" doesn't currently translate to the museum.

So yes, there is a real gap between the highly relevant, life-enhancing role which museums can play, and the outlook of an outsized portion of the public that is oblivious. But the solution isn't in saying what you do in a louder voice, it is in new behavior that speaks for you. To be relevant to your public, you must first become relevant in a new way.

About BravoEcho

BravoEcho works with the leaders of organizations to evolve their business through brand, strategy, and communications. We are a catalyst for change. Founded by senior executives with backgrounds in business innovation and advertising, we have key staff in Denver, Grand Rapids, and San Francisco. We helped to reposition the Grand Rapids Public Museum and have been its lead strategic and creative partner for some years. Recently we were invited to write the commentary above for the quarterly Reach Advisors Museums R+D Report.

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