How web presence strategy can help museums to be a digital breeding ground for innovative communication

Introduction

80 billion Euros: that is the estimation of the value of culture in Italy, corresponding to 5.8% of the GDP. Therefore, culture should be a strategic asset to restart the country. Instead, Italy is still lagging behind the rest of the Europe and the world on how to adequately enhance its cultural heritage.

According to the data unveiled by Museum Analytics – a platform that deals with online reviews and analysis of some indicators of the major museums around the world – there are only 48 Italian museums, on a total of around 6000 ones, that can boast an online presence, communicating through at least one social channel, such as Facebook or Twitter. At a glance in one figure, this corresponds to less than 1% (precisely 0.8%) of the immense Italian museum heritage. Ranking the first three positions for number of Facebook fans, there are the MAXXI Museum in Rome (73,841 likes), the Triennale Design Museum in Milan (57,047) and Mart in Rovereto, Trento (52,732 likes), while the museum with largest number of Twitter followers is the Musei in Comune, a large museum system in Rome (45,031 likes).

Although the number of Facebook likes cannot be considered one of the essential parameters for measuring the online presence of a brand or a cultural institution from a qualitative perspective, it is interesting to highlight how the museum with the largest community of fans in the world is the MoMA in New York, gathering more than 1,500,000 users, corresponding to more than 20 times bigger than the MAXXI Museum, the Italian museum with the largest community. The first Italian museum in the ranking of Museum Analytics, MAXXI, ranks 85 in the world. Despite it is the most visited Italian museum in the world, the Uffizi Gallery in Florence ranks 17 in the world, while Louvre ranks 1.

As this article aims to understand if an efficient online presence of museums can strategically impact on and improve their promotion and the way they can be perceived by potential visitors, we have to step back in order to better define what an "efficient online presence" means.

Just a website used as mirror-showcase is no longer sufficient to create an online presence. The same is for a Facebook page. Cultural actors need to guard the net through listening, monitoring and openness to the audience. A good online presence always starts from an integrated communication strategy and from a content plan to generate real value in terms of emotions and knowledge. It deals with the creation of a roadmap tracing the path towards the goals of branding and online reputation that each cultural institutions – whatever its size is – should have. It is not Facebook in itself that makes the difference; it is how creatively you use social platforms to enhance arts and culture.

The Report of Unioncamere for the year 2012 reveals that in Italy culture gives a return equal to 5.4% of the wealth produced, equivalent to almost 75.5 billion Euros, and employing almost 1,400,000 people. Therefore, culture can really generate social and economic value, although too often in Italian the words "culture" and "innovation" seem completely unrelated to each other.

The Andy Warhol Museum of Pittsburgh: harnessing integrated social media strategy

To ask the question if a working online presence can positively influencing museums promotion in a strategic way – the answer would seem obvious, but not so much to most of Italian museums since their

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very low use of social media to communicate their heritages – we can answer with some virtuous examples.

For instance, the Gibbes Museum of Art is a small museum in Charleston, South Carolina that started using Twitter in a very clever way. It uses the social channel to share announcements about exhibitions, to share awareness for events and to converse with groups scheduled to visit the museum(1).

Another good example of a larger museum that believes in having a digital strategy is the Andy Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. This is the US's largest and world's most comprehensive single artist museum. Its vast collection and archive of works in a range of media show both Warhol's art and life. With a particularly active traveling show, for example their upcoming opening in Beijing for an Asia tour, The Andy Warhol Museum focuses heavily on building their global audience and awareness(2).

Currently active on Facebook, Twitter, Google plus and Vine, the Warhol Museum signed up for Facebook in December 2008. During the first two years, its presence on Facebook was lacking. The museum had a substantial amount of "likes" simply because of the name, but the administrators at the time were doing little aside from posting event information every couple of weeks.

When Joshua Jeffery, the current museum's manager of digital engagement, began working at the Warhol Museum in March 2010, he was enthusiastic about engaging with the already present community on the museum's Facebook page and wanted to create a following on Twitter with @TheWarholMuseum. According to him, it was not a marketing thing. The whole strategy was just understanding how people interact with the collection through digital means. Through creativity blending strategy, the museum reached out 613,619 followers on Twitter and 63,072 likes on Facebook.

Aside from Facebook and Twitter, the museum has a presence on Google plus, too. The style of each post is created to make sure that everything is still genuine, creative and conversational. The most important thing is keeping the voice of the Warhol consistent on every outlet(3).

In a wider perspective, the Museum is treated as a brand, whose awareness and online reputation have to be nurtured and protected.

The Warhol uses #WarholQuote to tweet out memorable quotes from Warhol and #SoundSeries to promote monthly sound series events. Using these hashtags, the museum sees a great deal of feedback, according to Jeffery.

In order to make the visitor's experience more interactive, the museum encourages social-media engagement by setting up several iPads that link back to these sites for guests to use during their visit. The Museum has also created an app for smartphones called "D.I.Y. Pop", allowing users to create a silkscreen-style image, just like Warhol, and then post it to social media, tagging the museum. The museum is constantly looking for new ways to keep up with its fans and strives to respond to the many fans that tweet throughout the day. From this point of view, the web platforms are great places for feedback from users.

Visitors can engage and support a museum more if they feel like they had a part in providing feedback or have ownership in something because the feedback they gave was implemented(4). The Andy Warhol Museum case history shows how museums can harness social media to increase brand awareness, virtual engagement and public access to their collections. Through digital strategies used as a bridge to

get in touch with people from all over the world, cultural institutions can most effectively harness their promising potential, engaging the audience in a deeper emotional way.

Arena di Verona: the #TweetSeats campaign to reach the new target audience of young adults
Constantly looking for new ways to engage users means striving to stand out. Here is a positive example from the most famous Italian theatre in the world, Arena di Verona.

Last year, the Italian cultural landscape saw the first digital campaign of Arena Di Verona, the globally-known Opera Theatre. On the occasion of the 100 years anniversary of the Arena, the #arenadiverona100 campaign has been launched to increase the awareness on the opera and find the digital influencers turning them into brand ambassadors. In summer 2013, Arena di Verona created TweetSeats: some candidates have been selected to attend an opera performance from a privileged place, close to the stage, just paying a very short price. The only qualification requested to be admitted to TweetSeats was to have a minimum amount of 50 Twitter followers and a constant use of the social network.

Through Twitter, "ambassadors" told the opera live, using the hashtag #arenadiverona100, each one in his own way. The campaign reached the goal to approach young people to the opera experience, generating buzz and taking advantage from social DNA of young users.
Although the Arena di Verona chose to not be on Twitter with an official account, despite the choice of using hashtags, the campaign succeeded and the most used channels by passionate users were Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and also Vine.

Considering #arenadiverona100 as the very first digital campaign of the institution, outcomes unveil an undeniably success, displaying that benefits earned from the use of digital channels are concrete. In 30 days, the official hashtag was tweeted 734 times, 523 photos on Instagram and 33 short videos on Vine. Then, a tab on Facebook has been created to allow users to write their own memory about the experience lived.

As it happens for every brand, experience is the keyword for each cultural brand too. Social media can help to prepare the audience to a pre-experience of the cultural event, as well as it has the power to capitalize emotions felt by people. Not only before and after an event, social media is a powerful tool to turn passionate users into communication hubs during an event, as it happened with live tweeting in which users were involved.

The campaign can be considered the first digital initiative of an Italian theater, a big name of the Italian cultural industry. And we hope this is just the beginning.

Italy: opportunities that may be lost
The vastness of the Italian cultural heritage is under everybody's eye, as well as – unfortunately – the inability to promote it properly. Among the Italian museums, the use of social media for promoting online the cultural riches is almost nonexistent. A striking example is the museum complex in Florence, the most visited Italian museum, as written at the beginning of this article. Despite the Uffizi Gallery in Florence is proud of a huge number of international visits, it is also characterized by a very low online presence.

A similar case is the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, one of the symbols as well as one of the most important convergence point of culture in the city. Its complete absence from the world digital cultural scene is even more serious considering that in 2015, at the occasion of Expo, Milan is expected to host almost 20 million

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visitors from any part of the world. These are 20 million potential experiencers of the immense cultural heritage of Milan, too often considered only for its business side.

Considering the web presence, the Castello Sforzesco is very lacking starting from the website. In fact, this cultural icon of Milan, has a typical website that seems to be created because it can't not have a site rather than because it understood the real importance of communication. Then, the use of social channel as a sounding board of its cultural richness is almost inexistent.

There is a Facebook page gathering about 29 thousand fans, but at a first glance it is clear that any social strategy or content plan exist. The most striking element is that the page is run almost like a private profile, without publishing content relating to the museums of the Castle.

Perhaps many potential international visitors do not know that the Castello Sforzesco hosts several museums, including the Museum of Ancient Art, the Egyptian Museum and the Museum of Decorative Arts, as well as a Gallery gathering 230 prestigious artworks of the period between the 13th and 18th century, such as masterpieces by Antonello da Messina, Mantegna and Canaletto.

Despite the works contained on it as well as the importance that the Castle itself plays in the international capital city Milan, this cultural hub may not belong to that – even though scarce – 0.8% of museums and cultural institutions that can boast an online presence and a communication strategy.

29,000 Facebook fans in a channel not really professionally managed mean that people already love this cultural venue. Italian cultural institutions just have to assign the strategic role and expertise they deserve to communication.

The communication map that speaks human
"The man who stops advertising to save money is like the man who stops the clock to save time" said once the famous advertising man Bill Bernbach.

The majority of the most important Italian museums believe that they can coast because of the huge heritage they collect; instead, a communication map should be developed for a single temporary exhibition as well as for an entire institution, such as a museum or a theater. This roadmap is the "tool" that can help every institution to capitalize its own heritage in terms of paying visitors, brand awareness and web reputation.

This strategic plan is made up of three main steps.

First to be defined are goals: the goals of the initiative, of the entire museum and those of the audience to achieve. The definition of these goals bases itself on deep researches and analysis in order to establish the type of relationship to create with users and the persona archetype.

The second step is the identification of the institution assets. Mapping all the internal resources of the museum or theatre means already beginning to define the content strategy that will be conveyed through digital channels.

Finally, the third step is the one that connects the goals with the resources available; this is the part that defines what the institution needs to achieve the goals set and to establish parameters for the evaluation of the results that will be progressively achieved(5).

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If the supreme goal of a cultural institution is spreading art at an emotional level, we all need to speak human. Standing out in the web is getting really harder because of the overload of information, often not relevant.

Simplify the approach in how we communicate to who matters most, the customers. All starts by speaking human.

Keeping it simple sometimes can be really hard. In order to know what will resonate simply with the audience, the institution staff has to put itself in their shoes.

And about museum's exhibitions, do not try to "sell tickets" on social networks. A "commercial" language turns away people that want just to dream to live the experience of that museum or theatre. Storytelling art and culture is a great way to deliver interesting content, in order to engage users with the museum helping them discovering and loving art. Storytelling can help cultural brands to pursue the higher aim of every person, brands, company or community: spread the culture of beauty.

Although art is probably the earliest form of storytelling in human history, the Italian museums with a (low) digital presence rarely spread content about their art through their social channels. These ones are mainly used with an informative role – for instance informing about the exhibition dates – but rarely this function is striving to have an emotional impact on people's hearts.

Cultural brands have to immerse consumers in social cultural experience because social media has the power to spread passion for arts – towards people geographically far from the local context – in such a more powerful way than ever. It takes a lot of hard work to make something so complex look so easy.

That is speaking human. And that is the reason why storytelling can help cultural brands to pursue the highest aim of every person, brand, company or community: spread the culture of beauty, in every single way possible.

Notes
(1) http://www.npengage.com/social-media/11-ways-your-museum-should-using-twitter/
(2) http://blog.hootsuite.com/social-museums-art-organizations
(3) http://triblive.com/aande/museums/5571354-74/museum-warhol-media#ixzz2vThcGwTA
(4) http://triblive.com/aande/museums/5571354-74/museum-warhol-media#ixzz2vThcGwTA
(5) http://museumtwo.blogspot.it/2009/06/how-to-develop-small-scale-social-media.html