

Museums and Storytelling: From the last trends to the future

In 2010, Kelly found that museums' adult visitors were deeply aware of their learning preferences and that they wanted experiences both educational and entertaining. On a more general scale, LaPlaca Cohen "Culture Track Report 2014" reveals how the meaning itself of what a cultural experience is like, expanded to activities more related to nature and entertainment. According to this report, audience values a TED talk or a visit to a Botanic Garden just as culturally engaging as going to the museum or attending a theater performance. The public is more demanding and wants to satisfy more than one need at the same time, pursuing activities that are educational, entertaining, interactive and customizable.

This expanded notion of culture is on top of the priorities of professionals, as it challenges them to find continuously newer and more unique attractions, able to deal with a much wider range of competitors to the public attention. In order to address the increased uncertainty, museums reshaped their programs to include more and more extra-ordinary events, such as family days, curators' talks, nocturnal exhibitions, and so on. On the one hand, special events are successfully flourishing and tend to be more participated, to have a wider impact on social media and to be more easily sponsored than ordinary programs. On the other hand, it seems that museums would be struggling at actually improving the ordinary visitors' experience, which is a much more radical transformation affecting deeply each department, from the Curatorial to the Visitors' Services and it is often extremely costly. In this gap among special programming and ordinary visit, the organization Museum Hack has found a fertile environment for its growth.

What Museum Hack offers to its audience was described as a "highly interactive, subversive, fun, nontraditional museum tour", meaning that the tour guide – who is not necessarily an art history graduate – would not even try to provide detailed information about all the exhibited artworks and may not even be able to answer to your questions. Visitors are informed about these rules of the game since the beginning and are increasingly more willing to give the tour a try, often thanks to word-of-mouth or to the impressing reviews on TripAdvisor –where the Hackers rank #13 of the 470 "Tours & Activities" reviewed in New York City.

In a recent article, Museum Hack defined themselves as lovers of "those who don't like museums" and their tours are mainly addressed to them; according to Mark Rosen, Artistic Director of the company, the problem with engaging general young audience is the boring connotation linked to the idea of a museum, often caused by an unsuccessful first visit. After all, a person who is visiting an art museum for the first time would easily get bored of a four-hour, information-packed tour; on such an occasion, a visitor would need instead to be intrigued simultaneously by place, space and experience. In line with this notion, Museum Hack provides a tour based on fun activities, deprived of any highbrow attitude, where visitors and tour guide can, for example, play games together, take selfies, sprint from one room to the other and disclosing interesting anecdotes on many more artworks with respect to an ordinary tour.

As an arts management student, always struggling with the museum ticket price issue, I could not help being surprised by the \$59 ticket – in the case of the Metropolitan Museum, entrance included. By paying what cannot be called "cheap" sum, it becomes clear that when it comes to visiting a museum visitors do not value the price tag as their primary concern, but rather what they get from such experience.

The added value Museum Hack creates is high and lies on the performance of the tour guide. The entire tour is conceived as a show where the guide would cunningly lay out an itinerary and manage both the

tone of the interaction and the relevance assigned to each artwork according to the participants' personality. Therefore, improvisation is everything. Moreover, visitors would not just walk and listen, but they are supposed to expose themselves to the group and to participate actively to the ongoing jokes, games and fun facts.

If looking for a reasonable comparison, it can be said that a tour with Museum Hack is closer to stand-up comedy than to a museum. This liaison may sound odd, but it actually depicts two of the unique psychological phenomena on which the Hackers build their value. Firstly, as noted by Victoria Ando of Oxford's department of experimental psychology on the Guardian, "Humor requires the ability to think outside the box or see unusual connections where others don't". Obviously, Museum Hacks tours need to be fun in order to be successful; however, behind the fun fact or anecdote lays extensive research, because the performance of the tour guide does not embed just hilarity, but it is based on interesting, smart and funny connections on stories of the museum collection. Therefore, it is indeed storytelling.

Secondly, the comparison with a stand-up comedy describes audience attitude, a key element to its participation and consequently to their learning process. Visitors' expectation of engaging, collaborative, three-hour, art-related experience reflects another element: "adult gaming"; almost all museum figured ways to gather the attention of whole families by planning game-based museum activities addressed to children and teenagers. This strategy, endorsed by professionals, has received harsh criticism among those who are concerned about the trivialization of the collections. Despite the undisputed relevance of an education department able to communicate with kids, the bone of contention lays on the overall style of the events, as to reinforce the distinction between a museum and a kindergarten. With regards to such game-based activities, it must be stressed out that Museum Hack tours do not mean to make these intellectual contents banal and ridicule; on the contrary, the visit is focused on the amusing connections among artworks, history and contemporary society. "We are able to give our clients an experience focused on the delightful, the hilarious and the human in art – in all its sexy, juicy detail!", said Museum Hack founder Nick Gray, in a recent interview. Audience seems to be attracted more by such experience rather than by the amount of information they would be taught; in particular, recent trends emphasize the appreciation for playful activities such as "Sleep Over for Grown-ups", launched this summer by the American Museum of Natural History.

Museum Hack is based in cities like New York, San Francisco and Washington, which are wealthy and culturally developed metropolis and surely this is a condition that influences positively their business; under several points of view they seem to fit the needs of the public and, in addition to this, they are reestablishing the importance of human capital as opposed to the increasing value created through technology. Despite their young age – they were founded in 2013 –, the founders have built a multifaceted company full of meaning and interest for museum professionals, that adopted in fact very discordant aptitudes: apart from the enthusiast ones, some expressed concerns to the possibility of someone else giving tours, while others are doubtful of the learning outcomes of such a communication strategy.

Both the perspectives are indeed useful to draw from this case some applications to the museum sector. As noted by many, any museum would outsource their education department to another organization and it would be unfair to underplay the extensive work of these departments to giving tours only. However, the Hackers refocused the attention of Audience Development on the importance of the first visit, finding an effective way to communicate with museum-sceptics from the millennium generation as well; this purpose is achieved in a way as simple through an assertive and friendly attitude and an increased human contact. If engaging young people into art is just a matter of language, of making art approachable and comprehensible, museums could enhance their audience's experience merely by rethinking their narrative

in a way more connected to the environment and backgrounds of the public. It should not be forgotten that culture is also entertainment hence it should be enjoyable even to non experts and that the general public is not as indifferent to museums at all.

In conclusions, storytelling is a powerful marketing tool that can truly have an impact on long term audience development only when it hails from consistent knowledge of the collection and awareness of its value; therefore, in order to design a narrative specifically addressed to first-time visitors, it is necessary to involve curators in such process as they are creators and repositories of the overall meaning of the collection. Under this light, an increased dialogue among curators and educators is needed, as well as a realistic comparison of this discussion with the visitors' backgrounds.

Culture, therefore museums, should bring people to lift up to deeper meanings than just anecdotes, since it has the power to be impacting without being shocking, to speak universally to people of different age and race. Undoubtedly, culture needs efforts and dedication, two words that in a fast paced world seem to lose meaning. Every love story has a silly start and culture makes no exception; this is why initiatives able to let common people fall in love with museums are welcomed. In the end, behind effort and dedication there has to be a passionate person.



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