



THEORY | PRACTICE

MUSEUM FUTURES: SHIFTING TECHNOLOGY, CULTURE, AND POLITICS

A Publication from the National Emerging Museum
Professional Network and The Museum Scholar.

Volume 1, 2018

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Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP
5558 S. Kimbark Ave, Suite 2, Chicago, IL 60637
www.rogerspublishing.org

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The Museum Scholar

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Shifting Perspectives: The Millennial Influence on Museum Engagement

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Keywords Millennials; Digital; After-hour programs; Museum visitors; Cultural engagement

Abstract Currently, millennials, or Generation Y, are one of the largest demographics. Though museums usually attract an older audience, cultural organizations are changing their operations, the content on display, and the way content is valued, because of millennials. Millennials are consuming information from their phones and tablets all over the world, giving these institutions a global platform and a new form of engagement that makes their accessibility (or lack thereof) clear. Museums are utilizing both digital and on-site strategies to engage a younger audience. Digital engagement consists of targeted social media posts and applications for electronic devices. Millennials want to spend their money on experiences, which puts museums in direct competition with places like amusement parks and movie theaters. Museums are incorporating unique on-site experiences into their programs to engage a young adult audience. With new engagement practices, museums are becoming relevant with Generation Y.

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This article was published on June 19, 2018 at www.themuseumscholar.org

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, are known for their influence on society, from politics to consumer trends. At 75 million, millennials or individuals born between 1981-1996, now make up the largest portion of the population.¹ The US Census Bureau adds that this demographic is poised to make up 50% of the workforce by 2020.² This amount of representation and weight has inevitably caused a significant impact in the cultural sector. The majority of patrons to museums and heritage sites have traditionally been made up of older audiences; however, this is starting to change. As a consumer group, Generation Y comes with a different set of perspectives, desires, and expectations, and museums are striving to adapt and advance to better connect with them. This article will examine how museums and other cultural institutions are evolving to satisfy, excite, and engage this influential audience.

For the sake of organization, these developments will be organized into two main groups: digital and on-site engagement. Within these categories, various strategies being employed by these organizations will be explored and explained to better highlight the impact of this demographic.

Digital Engagement

In 2018, newspapers can be read on a computer, friends who live across the world can send messages instantly, and anyone with a cellphone can access an infinite amount of information within seconds. 4 billion people, roughly half of the world's population, are internet users, accessing the World Wide Web through smartphones, computers, tablets, or even watches.³ Millennials, in particular, are incredibly internet-savvy, embracing the internet to shop, read the news, talk to friends, study, and play games. The average millennial spends 17.8 hours a day interacting with different types of media.⁴ The American Alliance of Museums explains that, "Millennials are the first generation of digital natives, and they expect their museum visits to seamlessly conform to their digital lifestyle."⁵ Through various programs and initiatives, cultural institutions can utilize digital and increase their relevance to this group.

One of the biggest benefits of digital, in general, is the accessibility it provides on a day-to-day basis; it can be much easier to purchase something online than to go to the store or settle an argument with a quick Google search. Part of having that access involves being able to connect at any given time, and the absence of connection can be both noticeable and deterring. A small but crucial detail, museums are installing wireless internet for visitors so they can connect during a visit; some are even investing in charging stations to prevent the dreaded drained battery. Providing these kinds of amenities is a practical strategy, museums create an inviting and open environment that welcomes these devices while enabling digital interactions on-site.

A WiFi connection allows for access to a variety of social media networks, already a large part of millennial patrons' lives. Websites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter can play an important role as a form of digital engagement, allowing people to connect with museums and other heritage sites in a variety of new ways. Whether it be through comments on a Facebook photo or a tweet about a current display, these social channels offer engagement beyond the physical building. It is not uncommon to see this presence in the gallery space with the organization's social media handles and specialized hashtags on signage with a request to post about their visit. With 29% of millennials saying that Facebook is one app that they "could not live without," tapping into that preference is crucial.⁶

While Facebook remains the most popular social media platform, Instagram has proven to have a significant Generation Y following as well. 59% of individuals in the United States under the age of 30 are Instagram users, which is more than any other demographic according to Pew Research Institute.⁷ As millennials have embraced the app to document their lives and experiences, so have museums. The photograph-fueled layout lends itself well to these places, encouraging them to share their collections and events with the public in a highly visual way.

Permitting patrons to turn their experience into “Instagrammable” moments leans into the popularity of the app amongst this group. The Broad, a contemporary art museum in Los Angeles, was a stop for the *Yayoi Kusama: Infinity Mirrors* exhibition in 2017. These immersive spaces use a combination of light, mirrors, and color that are whimsical and eye-catching. When tickets went on sale, they sold out within just a few hours. Even though patrons are only allowed in the room for 45 seconds, people lined up for hours to experience the space, taking pictures that flooded the app.⁸ The Field Museum in Chicago similarly encourages photography with their iconic Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton named Sue. Museums encouraging this type of interaction with pictures on Instagram not only enthralls millennials and beyond to document their experience but highlights the institution’s presence online.

Snapchat is another image-focused social media platform that is extremely popular. This platform allows users to interact with pictures and videos, sending them to friends for a determined amount of time before deleting. According to a study conducted by Business Insider in 2015, 45% of Snapchat users are ages 18-24.⁹ This application combines the visual focus of Instagram and the social interaction of Twitter, creating playful content for audiences that sometimes includes animal filters and voice changers. The lighthearted approach of Snapchat goes directly against some of the more traditional views of what museums are—rarefied, “stuffy” spaces where people cannot have fun.

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) has made headlines with their creative and humorous use of the app. While showcasing objects on display, the museum will use movie quotes, emojis, and even puns on photos and videos that last ten seconds or less. Earlier this year, the LACMA account celebrated Valentine’s Day by using funny pick-up lines over pictures of artwork— for instance, a Monet waterlily painting was paired with, “Girl, you’re so fine you could make an impression on Monet.”¹⁰ Media companies that target millennials specifically such as BuzzFeed and Huffington Post publish articles with headlines like “An Art Museum in Los Angeles is Killing the Snapchat Game” in response to their content, and it is undeniable that they are exciting millennials with the application.¹¹

Social media also operates as a form of communication between current and potential institutions and audiences. With the knowledge that many visitors utilize these platforms, museums are taking advantage of the popularity of these websites to encourage interaction with their collections and missions beyond the on-site visit. The National Museum of Women in the Arts (NMWA), located in Washington D.C., has combined the accessibility and sheer use of the online forum with their mission of raising awareness of women in the arts. The social media challenge asks people to name five female artists from history using the hashtag #5womenartists. The campaign takes place during Women’s History Month and has grown in participation over three years as both individuals and other museums are getting involved. In this case, NMWA is using social media as a tool for education and promotion that has a significant reach.

Beyond the use of social media channels, museums are also utilizing other digital platforms to better engage with millennials. Building off the use of cellphones and tablets for on-the-go information and access, mobile software applications, or apps, created by and for these institutions are also coming into prominence. Having a digital hub that contains ticket pricing,

exhibition information, and virtual tours, is becoming a useful device for a variety of potential patrons and offers another way to connect.

The American Museum of Natural History is one institution that is utilizing mobile apps as a tool for engagement. Beyond the basic visit information, the Explorer app has a virtual map of the building that highlights certain displays and specimens with facts and pictures. There is also a feature that allows patrons to save memorable objects in the app and take amusing quizzes. Though studies have shown that museum apps are not widely downloaded and are not regarded as a preferred form of engagement, the fact that 74% of visitors have a mobile device with them on an average visit has led museums to generate initiatives that are utilized on that platform.¹² Creating content for this audience, whether it is successful or not, shows that museums are listening and making attempts to engage in new ways.¹³

Statistically, millennials are the leading users and consumers of digital media. Whether it is through Twitter or Google, this demographic “expect to be able to gather and share information in many places...the internet plays a special role in their world.”¹⁴ Digital is engrained in this generation, and museums are growing and changing to better reach them. By offering opportunities to engage digitally, whether through social media or institution-designed apps, the options are growing to satisfy and excite this audience.

On-Site Engagement

Beyond recognizing digital engagement strategies, cultural centers are reevaluating their on-site programming as a vital tool to engage with Generation Y. While museums are developing different online engagement strategies, on-site programming is an integral factor in engaging millennials. After-hour programs devoted to this audience has led to an increase in attendance for the programs.¹⁵ In recent years, museums all over the U.S. have created after-hour programs to tap into these visitors. Millennials are seeking experiences.¹⁶ In contrast, the baby boomer generation typically would use the museum as an educational experience. Millennials appreciate the educational value of the museum but crave experience over education. Usually, young audiences are seeking ways to engage with their peers that will have a lasting impression on their lives. This section will examine a few after-hour events across the U.S. and show the changing landscape of millennial engagement through programming and exhibits.

According to the National Endowment for the Arts, “[y]outh attendance at art museums and galleries has declined over the last decade...it’s dropped at a roughly 20% rate among 18- to 34-year-olds from 2002 to 2012.”¹⁷ To attract millennial audiences museums are engaging in the experience economy. The experience economy incorporates four unique aspects: education, entertainment, esthetic, and escapist.¹⁸ Placing museum programs among the experience economy aspects create a picture that can be utilized to understand the value of experience programming for museums. According to Eventbrite, “3 out of 4 [millennials] choose to buy an experience rather than something desirable.”¹⁹ Creating events that provide a unique experience for millennials will lead to a better attendance of after-hour events in museums. Museums are leveraging the experience economy to bring in a young adult audience. The experience provides this audience with new ways of connecting with one another. When a museum program contains two or three of the experience economy aspects,

the program has a higher likelihood of succeeding, i.e., more millennials in attendance at the event. Armed with this knowledge, evaluating the after-hour programs a museum provides, shows the importance millennials place on experience.

The cultural sector needs to continue to improve audience engagement. Historic visitor numbers are on the decline, i.e., visitors that have come at least once in the last two years.²⁰ With declining visitor numbers, museums are starting to use different strategies to bring in visitors. According to Colleen Dilenschneider, "The average US adult visits 0.61 cultural organizations each year. This includes cultural organizations of any type—exhibit or performance-based."²¹ With adults less likely to attend a cultural organization, targeted advertising to promote an after-hours event can vastly improve the chances of bringing out more visitors than previous events. Once at the event, allowing for visitors to have a shared experience contributes to a successful event. Colleen states, "According to our visitors, the best thing that we do is connect them to one another."²² Providing an experience that makes the visitors connect with one another will bring in more patrons wanting to relate with one another. Museums are leveraging on-site events to bring in millennial visitors that want to share experiences with one another.

Cultural organizations have created after-hour programs that cater to the millennial audience. The after-hours events usually incorporate an exclusive atmosphere, food and beverage, and cater to an audience who prefer to go to evening events.

Arizona State University (ASU) Art Museum recently held two after-hour events, Escape the Museum and Get Weird. The former event, Escape the Museum, afforded a new experience for the audiences by having them solve a series of puzzles to "escape" the museum. The event brought in about 100 participants. From the population of participants, 70% were first-time visitors and 66-75% were millennials.²³ The statistics indicate that a majority of the visitors to the after-hours event were part of Generation Y. The escape room experience demonstrated a new level of engaging Generation Y. Providing this experience to millennials has allowed for new visitor growth to ASU Art Museum. Through holding experience-driven after-hour events, new younger audiences will come to engage with their museum.

The latter event, Get Weird, drew in a little more than 360 visitors. The event advertisement indicated, "You know of our epic Escape the Museum events, but for the school year we're going bigger, better — and weirder. We don't want to give away too much, but we can guarantee games, gossip and some great photo opportunities. You in? Oh, and if you need more convincing, there will be free food."²⁴ The ad itself draws on numerous ways of engaging a young adult audience. Having food, photo opportunities, and an experience atmosphere, the ASU Art Museum is actively seeking a Generation Y audience. From the total visitors that came a sample of 114 participants were surveyed, 53% first-time visitors, 46% visited at least one time prior, 76% were millennials.²⁵ The event brought in returning visitors and new visitors. From those visitors, the majorities were from Generation Y. The audience was able to have a different museum-going experience that afforded them a new level of understanding art. The experience of new ways to engage with museums and their content brings in this audience.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met), located in New York, uses real objects to provide a unique way of connecting with art to engage the millennial audience. The Oktoberfest

Celebration event brings in a young adult audience to educate on medieval brewing practices and art.²⁶ Oktoberfest promotes an educational experience that is for a 21+ audience. The event page discusses the importance of fermented beverages in medieval times.²⁷ Through providing fermented drinks, the Met is connecting an educational concept to real objects. Drawing on connections to real objects provides another layer to their experience. The experience of the real thing enhances the event and provides a new way to connect with the content on display. The Met is changing the way millennials are connecting with content by providing an enhanced experience.

Hennepin History Museum in Minnesota utilized targeted advertising on social media to reach a millennial audience to support their Bee Night event. Their marketing efforts focused on celebrating the experience of the program to generate interest.²⁸ The language of the advertisement appealed to millennials because of the use of fun language, images, and a local connection.²⁹ The millennial audience wants to spend their time supporting their community and having a memorable experience. "Furthermore, 87% of millennials have shown the desire to make purchases that have an environmental or social benefit."³⁰ Through supporting the community and environment with the Bee Night event, millennials are more likely to attend because the event connected them to a cause they feel is essential. The program typically brings in 30 participants, but by using different engagement strategies, they brought in over 90 participants for the Bee Night event.³¹ Utilizing millennial drive for supporting local businesses allowed for a successful event, i.e. bringing in more visitors than before. Partnering with local companies for after-hour events has increased millennial attendees.

The Franklin Institute in Pennsylvania is engaging millennial audiences with unique experiences with science content. Science After-Hours provides a unique experience for the millennial audience with games, science, experiments, and demonstrations that are for a 21+ visitor group.³² Young adults are seeking experiences that allow for interactions with one another. According to a study by Eventbrite, "Nearly three quarters (71%) of Americans agree that attending live events makes them feel more connected to other people, the community, and the world."³³ Museums create events that connect young adults to one another; they feel empowered to make changes in the world. Young adults that seek experiences are looking for ways to positively change the world. The Franklin Institute is creating a positive environment around science by leveraging their unique way of presenting it to their audience.

Conclusion

Cultural organizations are going through a Renaissance in terms of how they engage visitors, specifically Generation Y. As this demographic begins to frequent museums as visitors, members, and donors, these institutions are expanding and evolving on their own to better meet the needs of a new clientele. Digital engagement strategies are on the rise in the museum world, creating new connections with millennials while developing a memorable impression across the globe. Utilizing social media to directly share and interact with millennials allows museums to reach an audience that is use to being interconnected and stimulated through digital means. Platforms such as Instagram and Twitter offer outlets for museums to foster new advertising strategies, as well as engage visitors in all aspects of the experience.

Museums are also leveraging the experience economy to bring in new audiences. The social aspect of museums creates a unique connection to the on-site visit. Museums all across the U.S. are using after-hour events that are exclusive to provide connections with museum content; this creates experiences that will connect the visitors to one another. Museums need to continue changing the way they engage with millennials both in the digital and on-site realm to continue to remain relevant to an audience that wants to have a different experience every time. Millennial engagement is paramount to the shifting role the museum plays in contemporary society. Museums are recognizing the shift in their visitors' basis. Cultural centers are focusing on internal aspects to engage with change. The change is coming from a change in text language, leadership, and feedback. By listening to these three characteristics museums can offer better digital and on-site engagement programs.

Future research on millennials will center on their role as employees in cultural originations. As the largest generation, they are poised to take over more jobs in the cultural sector than ever before. Further research will evaluate the changing role museum professionals play in creating change in the workplace. Millennials want a different experience when going to work. Millennial employees are very different than baby boomer employees. Continued research will also address the importance of the differences between millennial employees and those from former generations.

Notes

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