The multi-platform museum:
A planning toolkit

CCD x Smartify

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SMARTIFY

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human behaviour

Introduction

In May 2020 Smartify and CCD came together to publish a planning toolkit for reopening museum buildings following social distancing guidelines. We worked with partner organisations to identify the key points to consider and we suggested physical and digital solutions to support a new socially–distanced visitor experience.

In this updated edition of the toolkit, we re-look at museum remobilisation strategies and include a 'multi–platform' approach: the museum functioning both physically and online. In the past year, audiences have developed new habits and expectations for accessing experiences remotely at home. Although many people wish to return to physical museum visits, the accessibility and convenience of engaging with culture from home will ensure multi–platform thinking continues to be central to museum planning.

This toolkit is the product of many conversations with a range of museum professionals and researchers, as well as drawing on the combined experience of CCD and Smartify in interaction and mobile design in the museum and heritage sector. Everyone we spoke to has echoed the feeling that things could not and should not go back to the old ways of doing things - with experiences and business models focused solely around the physical visit.

This toolkit seeks to offer some suggestions on how a multi–platform museum may function. Our goal is to support non–specialists to better understand user experience design and resourcing considerations, and empower a wide range of museum professionals to develop strategically, ethically and operationally robust strategies.

We hope you find it helpful!

https://www.designbyccd.com/

https://about.smartify.org/

How to use this toolkit

This toolkit takes a design-led approach – thinking through audience needs and behaviour as a starting point. We look at four main areas where audiences expect to interact with the museum:

- At–home online learning and entertainment

- Preparing and planning for a visit

- On–site at the museum – navigating, learning, socialising and sharing

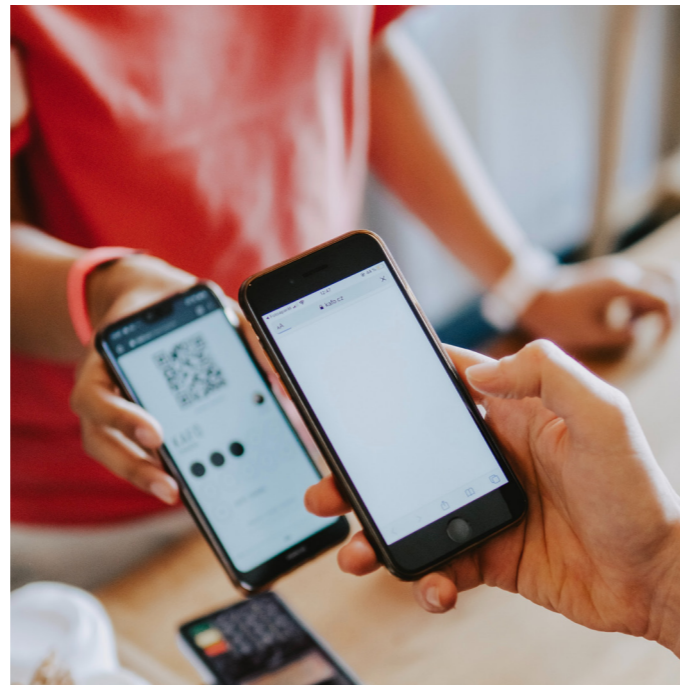- Shopping for cultural products (online and on-site)

For each of these areas of interaction we ask a design question to provoke your thinking and offer some initial thoughts. Design thinking is helpful because it offers a framework not only to make changes but also to sense how well they are working and iterate on them.
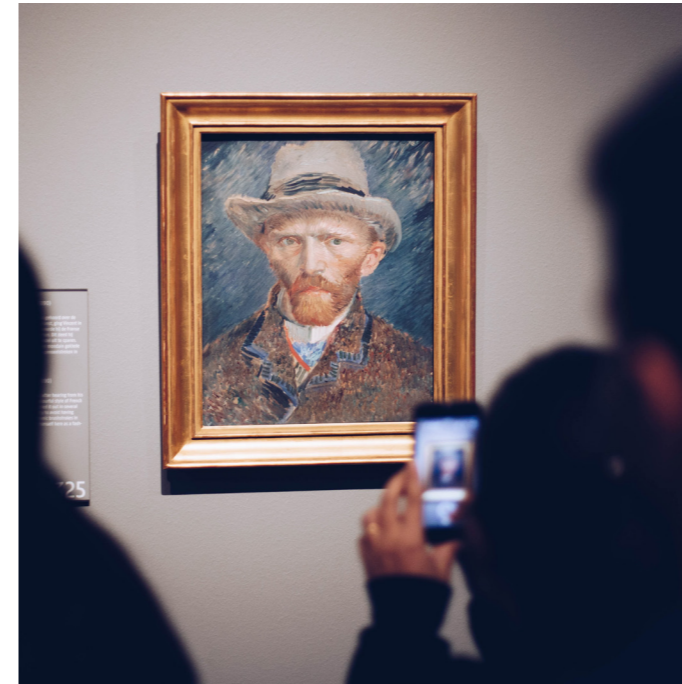
The new museum experience

At–home online learning and entertainment

Preparing and planning for a visit

On-site at the museum – navigating, learning, socialising and sharing

Shopping for cultural products (online and on-site)

The Bigger Picture

Re-opening and visitor confidence

The pandemic has had a profound impact on the museums and heritage sector. The Art Newspaper reported an average 77% drop in museum attendance in 2020[1] and UNESCO has found that museums worldwide have lost 50% of their income with museums based in Africa and Latin America most affected.[2] It is difficult to find an institution anywhere in the world that hasn't had to deal with the impact of extended closures, massive reorganisation of schedules, huge reduction in income and consequent impact on staffing levels and activity.

Extensive rolling 'visitor sentiment' research from the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) in the UK[3] has offered some cause for optimism. Their March 2021 research indicates that anxiety is easing and that the extensive safety measures put in place by museums in 2020 have helped to lay the foundations for visitor confidence in 2021. Nevertheless most experts predict that tourism will not return to pre–pandemic levels before 2023.

Smaller teams, new ways of working

The financial impact of the pandemic has forced a downsizing of museum teams, particularly in those countries where governments have not intervened with funding to make up the level of income lost. The challenges of working with so much uncertainty and with fewer resources has led to job dissatisfaction and burn-out among many museum staff. According to Prudential's latest Pulse of the American Worker Survey, conducted in March 2021, 1 in 4 workers (26%) plan to look for a job at a different company once the pandemic has subsided.[4] A survey from the American Alliance of Museums found a fifth of museum staff and students do not expect to be in the sector three years from now.[5]

In spite of these challenges, some organisations will have learned from this time of experimentation and could emerge as more agile, human-centred and collaborative organisations – able to provide new opportunities for staff, new ways of working remotely and with a renewed focus on their mission. Cross–functional collaboration and empowered teams will distinguish those who make a strong comeback from the rest.

Race equality and climate emergency

The most pressing agendas shaping the future of museums are the Black Lives Matter movement, decolonizing the museum and climate emergency. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break from the past and imagine new futures. The events of 2020/21 have provoked museums to take action to deconstruct systems of inequality that exist within the industry. We should expect to see greater urgency and financial backing for this work in the coming years. The multi-platform museum experience will contribute to these agendas, for example by restructuring staff around the needs of audiences; by valuing nuanced knowledge from outside the organisation; and by re–thinking the dependence of museums on environmentally unsustainable buildings, exhibitions and travel.

"Organisations will have learned from this time of experimentation and could emerge as more agile, human-centred and collaborative organisations."

At–home online learning and entertainment

How might we help people at home access compelling stories and learning materials that relate to their interests?

Consider

- Making content convenient to access and impactful across various devices and On-Demand. Unless there is a significant community element, content is best delivered with high production values and On–Demand rather than live streamed. This makes it more accessible for those with other commitments (work/children etc.) and requirements (for example those with chronic pain or fatigue).

- Avoiding content that promotes or mimics a physical exhibition. Lindsey Green of Frankly Green + Webb recently wrote that this "reinforces the idea that online is 'less than' rather than different. While other sectors see online as a tool to deliver new products and services designed specifically for online, museums have maintained a view that online works in the service of the on-site experience." Instead of using content as marketing, focus on telling a complete story on each platform.

- Offering general content for free and charging for niche and specialised content. Audiences are busy and have endless entertainment options. Offering more of the same content is not a premium experience worth paying for. Premium content is targeted and specialised for specific audience interests.

- Bringing in outside voices and collaborating in order to reach a larger or different audience and to avoid cannibalising each other's virtual events. There are many stories left to tell about our collections, but your team might not have the best voices to do so. Think about community curated content; outside organisations like Black Blossoms School of Art & Culture who can bring their expertise to the table; and how diverse hiring practices play into your future plans.

- Promoting your content on existing channels rather than building new websites or apps. For example, Smartify is used by millions of arts and culture lovers and hosts live events, courses and videos.

- Respecting your audience's data privacy by moving off platforms that rely on targeted advertising – like Facebook.

- Creating spaces for audience feedback and discussion. For example, using hashtags on social media, or on Zoom live captioning with tools like Otter AI.

- Re-launching your membership programme to connect audiences with the creative and charitable work of your organisation (rather than solely a transactional model based on exhibition and shop discounts). Membership has proven to be one of the most stable and sustainable revenue models throughout the pandemic and there is an opportunity to grow your audiences of supporters with premium online content.

- Ensuring your website is discoverable by undertaking an access audit to ensure audiences understand your navigation and that your site content complies with WCAG guidelines. Analytics and user research agencies like One Further can help with this analysis.

Case study

An interview with Bolanle Tajudeen, Black Blossoms School of Art and Culture

Bolanle Tajudeen, curator, educator and founder of Black Blossoms School of Art and Culture, shares tips for museums considering paid online classes. She discusses the importance of including different voices; finding the right class sizes and price points; and ways to keep the conversation going after the class.

Preparing and planning to visit a physical museum

How might we encourage audiences back to museum buildings and reach new audiences?

Consider

- Being very clear on what makes your venue unique and special. What is the one of a kind experience that people will have missed most and be willing to travel for?

- New opening hours to fit new habits. As working from home becomes more popular and crowded cities see migration to the countryside, think through the new visiting patterns of audiences.

- Taking a digital-first approach with online booking, QR codes and data capture as standard.

- Learning from the best retail experiences to re-think the museum welcome. For example, Apple stores place hosts up front to help customers find what they are looking for.

- Approaching exhibition design in an agile and iterative manner, listening to audiences and changing in response. As Chris Condron, Head of Marketing at 180 The Strand asks "What if no two visits were the same and you had a continually evolving exhibition. If that was your objective from the start how would you build it?"

- Centering the process of programming and acquisitions around consultation and co-curation with audiences that are not represented.

- Showcasing complex subjects and a non-Western art canon in the stories you tell. Developing tours, exhibitions and content around these topics is not only good practice but attracts audiences looking for arts and heritage institutions offering diverse and representative experiences.[6]

"What if no two visits were the same and you had a continually evolving exhibition. If that was your objective from the start how would you build it?"

Case study

An interview with Chris Condron, 180 The Strand

Chris Condron, Head of Marketing new London arts venue 180 The Strand, discusses neighbourhood localism; interactive exhibition design; and ways to infuse the best of retail into the museum experience.

"It's about activating existing audiences and finding something interesting for them but also engaging entirely new audiences for whom these spaces can feel very unwelcoming by examining the barriers and breaking them down immediately."

On–site at the museum

How might we ensure audiences can navigate, learn, look, socialise and share experiences while still feeling safe?

Consider

- Allowing visitors to roam freely while still avoiding congestion - this might be through timed tickets or capping visitor numbers in each room. The UK Association of Independent museums writes "visitors should feel measures are there to keep them safe, not inhibit them from visiting."[7]

- Ways to disrupt and play with coded museum behaviour like 'shushing' people. An important part of belonging is feeling that you do not have to change your behaviour to 'fit in' at a museum. This thinking applies to digital designers as well - design should set people up for success, for example supporting those who struggle with reading, offering multiple languages and providing clear 'back' buttons.

- Keeping up near constant, visible cleaning; plexi-glass at ticket desks; queue systems for popular works; and the removal of shared devices and interactives.

- Keeping your signage for Covid guidance up to date and looking fresh. After the panic-buying of floor graphics and one-way systems last year there is a risk they can get forgotten about and worn out. Take a moment to review the signage and instructions you provide so that visitors trust you are continuing to take the measures seriously.

- Continuing to use digital visitor guides. For example, the Smartify app and website allows audiences to scan and identify collection items, follow tours and save favourites into a personal collection. Learn more [here](#).

- Hiring and supporting a diverse workforce. One of the best ways to welcome diverse audiences is to have their experiences reflected not only in the content available but the staff body itself. For instance, could staff who speak multiple languages or sign language have this made clear on name badges?

- Providing facilities, seating and safety measures that allow people of all ages, energy and accessibility levels to participate equally.

- Personalising the experience as much as possible. Advances in AI, wayfinding and Open Data initiatives that could begin to offer personalised journeys and multiple perspectives on the collection. (Hint: Smartify and CCD are working on this and we are very excited about it!)

Case study

An interview with Lucinda Blaser, The National Gallery

Lucinda Blaser, Senior Product Manager at The National Gallery talks about the learnings from reopening in 2020 and the future possibilities of mobile technology in the museum visitor experience.

An interview with Emily Yates, CCD Design

Emily Yates, Head of Accessibility at CCD Design talks us through how accessibility and tapping into the purple pound isn't just an ethical choice but a good business model for the future of the sector.

Shopping for cultural products

How might we help audiences find and purchase products that meet their interests?

Consider

- Changing your stock to reflect key consumer trends such as wellness items, educational kits, local and sustainable items, unique homewares and prints.

- Ensuring audiences can move seamlessly between online and on-site browsing before finally making a purchase. Consumers expect to be able to research and purchase online but may wish to view the physical product in your shop.

- Quality over Quantity; following a recent survey carried out by Smartify, over 60% of products listed online across 20 leading institutions generated no impressions.

- Integrating shop items into your storytelling. In a study by Smartify and StoryFutures Lab at Royal Holloway we found that showcasing shop items next to online tours and collection items increased engagement and conversion.

- Drop-shipping to eliminate the need to stock or keeping valuable cash tied to merchandise.

- Brand licensing deals for products and video gaming. Naomi Korn Associates has recently written that the fastest growing licensing sector last year was Art.[8]

- Highlighting how your shop directly supports the work of your venue.

- Continuing the use of contactless payments and protective shields on-site at the register.

- Creating a Click and Collect shop journey for visitors on-site.

- Using sustainable products and packaging. One way to play your part in tackling the climate emergency is stocking sustainable products and reducing single use plastic.

"Showcasing shop items next to online tours and collection items increased engagement and conversion."

Case study

An interview with Ian Barham, King & McGaw

Ian Barham, Head of Business Development at King & McGaw discusses the future of museum e-commerce and how to embed a consumer needs approach.

"E-commerce is here to stay for the museum community; everything needs to start from a consumer needs approach followed by a marketing strategy with a compelling narrative."

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About

Smartify

Smartify is a social enterprise with a mission to make cultural institutions accessible for a global audience through innovative technology and engaging storytelling. The platform is a free guide to art and culture and functions across iOS, Android and web browser. It allows audiences to follow tours, scan and identify collection items, and access online learning, events and shop items.

Learn more about what makes Smartify a cost-effective, future-proof digital solution for your museum and take advantage of our 90-day free trial. (No strings attached!)

⌂ **about.smartify.org**
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CCD

CCD is a human behaviour-focused design consultancy with 40 years in practice. Using human factors and behavioural insights, we deliver better experiences and commercial benefits for our clients' customers. We specialise in wayfinding that helps people to explore and discover their environment with a unique blend of scientific strategy and creative design.

Clients include Tate St Ives, Royal Museums Greenwich, St Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey and British Library.

Our wayfinding strategy and design for National Maritime Museum won Gold at the 2019 Transform Awards.

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