Reporting Research 6 – attracting young people into museums

Engagement with a younger audience remains a challenge for some museums even though a range of probable attractants has now been fairly widely identified and discussed. These attractants include activities and events which are tailored specifically for a younger audience and place a strong emphasis on being interactive, hands-on and potentially co-creative. The development of areas of the museum's website tailored specifically for younger people and their families as well as a greater and more collaborative use of social media generally to attract and then enhance their visit has also proven to be important. A recent study from Italy provides further evidence of the demands of a younger audience and usefully breaks this down into the differences between small, medium and large museums. This brief paper shares their results.

Historically, the traditional museum 'stereotype' (as reported in Black, 2005:79) has tended to suggest that younger people have often found museums as being 'imposing' and 'dull' places and in consequence aspects of leisure (restaurant, café and shop) as well as focused and imaginative interactions (hands on exhibits and creative activity packs, tailored guided tours, night-time experiences as well as a range of digital tools) have all typically been identified as being important when creating a 'layout and feel' for a younger audience in a modern museum (Black, 2018; Mason & McCarthy, 2006). Digital media and on-line social interaction are two tools at the forefront of this modern visitor experience, with digital content in particular offering a personalised opportunity for engagement both before and during the visit as well as potentially continuing after they leave the museum, notably by encouraging feedback and reflection typically through images and text posted on-line. Amongst the current research literature there appears to be a renewed focus on younger audiences – the nature of their expectations prior to visiting, their engagement with the museum and its artefacts on arrival, their overall visit experience and also and perhaps most importantly, how best to attract them in the first place.

The study highlighted here explored the practices of 4,967 museums in Italy of which 83.5% were recorded as being 'museums, arts galleries and/or collections' (Manna & Palumbo, 2018:509). The remainder included monuments, historical sites and archaeological areas. The size classification was based on the number of staff employed, such that small (less than four staff), medium (four to fifteen) and large museums (more than 15 staff) (Manna & Palumbo, 2018). The survey took into account both students on educational visits as well as young people (aged 18-24) on a leisure visit.

Table 1 below provides a list of the range of variables identified by the researchers as being worthy of being tested through the study. These variables were grouped into five broad categories.

Table 1. Variables investigated within the study
(adapted from Manna & Palumbo, 2018: 510-11).

Group 1: Inter-institutional partnerships Variables included: Museum Friends Associations; collaborations; regional networks; extended local links; combined research and associated activities and local / regional campaigns.
Group 2: Web-based services and digital tools Variables included: presence of Wi-Fi; dedicated website; digital catalogue; virtual tours; other on-line activities such as bookings and merchandise, on-line social presence including a newsletter and/or on-line community.
Group 3: Ancillary services Variables included: presence of a restaurant or café; bookshop; child-care services; opportunities for guided tours and/or an audio/video guide.
Group 4: Value-added services Variables included: undertaking scientific research; organisation / hosting of conferences, seminars and/or live shows; scientific publication; space rental for local events and teaching activities for students and young people.
Group 5: Additional spaces and laboratories Variables included: access to archives, library, document centre and/or video room; access to teaching and restoration laboratories.

Their results are summarised by size of museum but also by the perception of the museum's market share of a younger audience (graded here as low, medium or high).

Small-sized museums

Web-based services and digital tools were important across all small museums with access to Wi-Fi, dedicated areas on the website and social networking being the most significant attractants. Other significant areas included 'raising awareness of local identity' and offering 'tailored and interactive guided tours'. For those museums with low – medium share, 'on-line information and tips about the visit' were important, whilst for those with a higher share, 'live shows' and the presence of a bookshop were significant (extracted from Manna & Palumbo, 2018: 513-4).

Medium-sized museums

Web-based services and digital tools remained important across all medium museums with access to 'social media activity' and 'on-line communities' being the most significant attractants. Other important areas included 'a dedicated area on the website', on-line merchandise and an on-line newsletter. 'Inter-organizational relationships' also appeared to positively influence young people with 'local and regional campaigns' as well as 'being part of a regional network' being specifically identified. Published research activities also proved to be attractive. The web-based activities mentioned above were a less significant attractant for those museums with a higher market share than those with a lower share (extracted from Manna & Palumbo, 2018: 514).

Large-sized museums

Interestingly in this study, for larger museums 'web-based services and digital tools' were less important than they were for small and medium-sized museums. Indeed only 'access to Wi-Fi' and 'on-line booking' were found to be significant. The effect of both 'social networking' and 'web community services' were negligible. The most significant variables for larger museums included the 'use of space for cultural activities' as well as the presence of a restaurant or cafe and a bookshop. The opportunity to visit a restoration lab was also of significance notably for those with a higher market share (extracted from Manna & Palumbo, 2018: 514-5).

In summary, some of the key strategic activities which should be considered in order to attract and/or boost a younger audience would include:

~ providing dedicated but also interactive areas on the website which attract and build a connection prior to the visit but also encourage a post-visit conversation;

~ providing a visitor-centred, leisure experience in the museum itself which is welcoming, engaging and encourages and stimulates an interaction between visitors;

~ delivering social networks which encourage a friendly interaction and a co-creating relationship which in turn builds lively and entertaining on-line content;

~ offering interactive and imaginative hands-on activities and events which encourage a sense of belonging and a feeling of being part of a bigger community;

~ and for larger museums, ensuring the quality of tailored value–added activities and the availability of appropriate ancillary services (summarised from Black, 2018 and Manna & Palumbo, 2018: 515-6).

Whilst this study may not be entirely generalizable and the summary listed above certainly requires further evaluative work, it is suggested that there are ideas revealed here which would seem relevant to any museum: the potential and power of an on-line presence as an attractant; the significance of tailored interactions (both on-line and on-site); the importance of the added-value experience as well as the ancillary facilities available when in the museum.

(999 words + Table 1)

References

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Dr. Philip Ryland (MAHI) teaches tourism and is also Associate Dean (Student Experience) in the Faculty of Management, Bournemouth University