Chasing the online audience

MARK CARNALL

Abstract

Museums have engaged with web audiences and web technologies with mixed success. Some careful consideration and analysis of general web browsing trends suggests that in order to enable museums websites to reach a wider audience, online museums should make sure that they are tied into relevant Wikipedia entries on the key themes and figures that a particular museum represents. In addition, translating websites into Asian languages significantly increases the potential global audience by several billion online users. These simple steps dramatically increase the availability of existing content. However, currently, few museums have done either.

Introduction

Although the situation is slowly changing, museum websites are typically very content-light, only listing events, activities and location directions. Museums were very slow to latch onto the seemingly endless possibilities available through the web. This was due to a combination of factors: the extortionate cost of employing web literate people in the early 1990s; the inability of a generation of museum curators to keep up to date with web technologies; and a genuine fear that people would stop coming to museums if they could access museum collections online. This slow start led to the gap observed today between the ideals of the semantic web and the typical museum web content. With rare exceptions, museum websites offer less content on subjects than Wikipedia has to offer, less scope for two-way debate than any typical forum, less scope for multimedia content than sites like Facebook and YouTube, are less intellectually stimulating than a typical blog and less interactive and visually appealing than most videogames. Museums do not have the resources to compete effectively with some of these competitors and arguably nor should they.

Measuring success

Measuring the popularity of websites can be problematic and ascertaining exactly what a 'hit' means in terms of visitor experience is fraught with difficulty. In a rudimentary analysis, the 'most popular' museum website appears to be the Saatchi gallery (ranked 16,505 on Alex.com with an average reach of 0.24% of global internet users).[1] Compare this to the top ranked sites www.google.com and www.yahoo.com which have an average daily reach of 30% of the global internet users. Search engines aside, user enabling sites feature highly in the top 100 rankings including websites like Blogger (9), Flickr (39), Deviant Art (77) and Photobucket (26) but the reach drops dramatically by 10% after the top 3 sites. Commercial sites such as Amazon (28) and Ebay (18) are predictably present, as are social networking and content-sharing sites such as Facebook (8), Myspace (6) and Youtube (3). The BBC (46), CNN (50) and ESPN (65) all appear close together. Wikipedia (7) and IMDB (29) seem to be the only reference sites in the top 100 ranked websites.[2] On the face of these statistics it would appear that in online space, museums are of niche appeal and that in general the most successful sites (in terms of reach) are those that enable users to generate or share content or those that provide convenience (online shopping etc.) and easier access to content.

---

[1] www.alexa.com (accessed February 24, 2009)
[2] This information was correct at the time of writing but obviously it varies from week to week and month to month. However, there is very little change in the top sites listed with rare exceptions such as twitter and facebook.

With so many users accessing online content through Google, Yahoo and Wikipedia it seems that to truly make content available to wider audiences museums should aim to structure their websites so that users interested in a topic, where a particular museum has something unique to contribute, can find that site easily. If users are interested in penguins, for example, it is difficult to make content that will beat Wikipedia in terms of quantity, quality and freshness. Expecting your web team to compete with the millions of users who add, edit and tweak content on every subject your museum represents is not feasible. If users are looking for information about the teaching of zoology at UCL, for example, then UCL's zoology museum will have relevant information to contribute. Rather than provide this information on a museum webpage and hope that users can find the content amongst the bitslag and millions of other sites competing for hits, the museum should put some of the relevant information on Wikipedia with links available for readers to find out more. At least 8% of the global online audience has used Wikipedia before and the site allows parsimonious browsing or moving from one subject to another. By providing enough information on Wikipedia, that will act as filter, and an increased number of web visitors with a genuine interest in the content will end up on the site.

Who is the online audience?

But what do we mean by online global reach and online audiences? This question is important to those museums which have tried to make collections available online. Online access can remove the geographical and physical barriers to entry to stored collections but this does not mean that museum collections are made available to everyone. Some quick calculations using the data from www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm show that online availability is very different from true global availability.[3]

Parsimonious solutions

Approximately only a sixth of the world's population is connected to the internet and that proportion is massively skewed, with Europe, North America and Asia making up 80% of those users. Although this constitutes over a billion people, how many of them can access museum content in a language they understand? A site in English creates a considerable barrier to the largest single group of internet users; the 40% based in Asia.

If web pages have not been customized for handheld internet portals such as mobile phones, or the latest generation of handheld games consoles, another section of the potential audience is excluded. If a site requires a downloadable plug-in to access content many students at schools and universities can not access that material from the learning place. A number of museums are engaging with cutting-edge technologies. This work is important for research but end products not designed for general users can act to alienate audiences rather than increase them. All of these barriers exclude sections of the potential audience even before design factors and the actual content subject matter has been considered.

In summary, the online audience is difficult to interpret, measure and predict. Online initiatives should only be undertaken once the end users have been identified and the strategic benefit to the museum fully evaluated. It is vital that web development helps the organization to achieve its strategic goals. Museums cannot expect everyone to visit their website nor compete with leading web companies. But if museums truly want to remove barriers to

---

[3] Miniwatts marketing group. 2001-2009. *Internet World stats usage and population statistics*. www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm (accessed February 2, 2009).

content and provide better online access to collections, they should translate their web pages into Asian languages and put images of and information about their collections onto Wikipedia. This is the most effective method of increasing potential access straight away.

Contact
Mark Carnall
Curator of the Grant Museum of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy
Address: Grant Museum of Zoology, University College London, Gower Street. London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom
E-mail: mark.carnall(at)ucl.ac.uk
www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/zoology