

EFFICIENCY OF WEB COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES. THE CASE OF ART MUSEUMS

Carmen Camarero (Corresponding author)

University of Valladolid

Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales

Avenida Valle Esgueva, 6

47011-Valladolid

Tel: +34 983 423332

Fax: +34 983 423899

camarero@eco.uva.es

María José Garrido

University of Valladolid

Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales

Avenida Valle Esgueva, 6

47011-Valladolid

Tel: +34 983 423331

Fax: +34 983 423899

mariajo@eco.uva.es

Rebeca San José

University of Valladolid

Facultad de Ciencias Económicas y Empresariales

Avenida Valle Esgueva, 6

47011-Valladolid

Tel: +34 983 423951

Fax: +34 983 423899

mariajo@eco.uva.es

EFFICIENCY OF WEB COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES. THE CASE OF ART MUSEUMS

Abstract

The success of a web communication strategy depends on the ability to construct efficient websites which spark the public's interest and attract visitors. To this end, organizations adopt a range of approaches: content web, transactional web, or interactive web. Such is the case of museums, organizations which are increasingly using innovation in their communication with the public via websites and by building new relationships through new technologies. The present research explores the impact which the approach or orientation to online communication has on online traffic as an indicator of success. The empirical work is based on analyzing information from a sample of the world's major art museums. Results show content orientation and interaction to be the main drivers of web traffic. Findings also reveal that it is the larger museums, mainly in the US and UK, which have most innovated their websites.

Keywords

Web traffic, content, interaction, transaction, web strategy, museums

1. Introduction

Strategic management of communication in museums is essential to disseminate museums' cultural heritage, manage the relationships between these institutions and their various publics, and changing their publics' attitudes so as to improve their reputation (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). In this communication function, Internet and websites provide museums with many communication tools to achieve these objectives: video channels, podcasting, streaming, access to gadgets and apps, personal sections, educational areas, multimedia access to the collection or relational tools such as blogs and social media. Moreover, websites enhance visitor experience by providing additional information, interactive media, and customized experiences (Sigala, 2005; Tallon and Walter, 2008; Capriotti, 2010; Bertacchini and Morando, 2013). In fact, these tools are revolutionizing the way museums and their target audience interrelate by creating a more interactive, collaborative and conversational relationship (Teather and Willhem, 1999).

Inquiry performed to date has underlined that websites offer museums a new channel of communication with different publics (Pavlou, 2012), but that how efficient they might prove depends on usability, visitor motivation, or the use of interactive tools. In fact, some authors consider that museums have far failed to capitalize fully on the advantages Internet offers as an interactive means of communication. The research conducted by Celaya and Viñarás (2006), and Dosdoce.com and Abanlex (2009) into the case of Spain highlights that most major museums and art galleries make little use of multimedia formats on the Internet, and that virtual visits are hardly promoted. Technology has been used as merely passive support, mainly for external communication purposes through the webpage and in an extremely simplistic manner

(Asensio and Asenjo, 2011). Continuing in this vein, Capriotti and Kuklinski (2012) examine museums' level of dialogic communication on the Internet and stress that museums fail to make the most of all the advantages the Internet has to offer in terms of dialogic communication and to establish open conversation with their audience.

Despite this insistence on the need for interactive strategies and dialogue with publics (Kang and Norton, 2004), little research has to date addressed the cultural sector in an effort to explore how different communication strategies can help to promote website activities and build relations. Although certain recent studies analyze museums' online strategies and performance (Cunliffe et al., 2001; Goldman and Schaller, 2004; Lopez et al., 2010; Padilla-Meléndez and Águila-Obra, 2013), said studies are descriptive and do not explore the causal relationship between online strategy and results.

In this line, the objective of the present work is to characterize different website communication strategies and gauge the impact of these strategies on website performance. Moreover, it evaluates the effect of the cultural and museum policy and the museum's size on the online communication strategies.

Thus, the main contribution of the current work is that it provides new insights into the success of online communication in museums. More specify, given such a diverse use of the online context in museums' relations with visitors, the first goal of the present study is to describe the various approaches art museums adopt to online communication: (1) content orientation, based on providing information to visitors, as well as a narrative and textual content, or as emotional and audiovisual content, (2) interactive and relational orientation, based on offering the visitors areas for interaction such as blogs, social networks, educational platforms, etc.; and (3) transactional orientation, when museums emphasize the website's commercial elements, including

online ticket sales, online stores and areas for gifts and donations. Since a museum can follow the three orientations, they must be considered as complementary and not as alternative strategies.

A further area of interest for marketing professionals and scholars alike is to ascertain to what extent relational and interactive approaches, compared to other more passive methods, can spark a greater volume of web traffic. Museum managers need to know whether breaking with conventional formats and seeking dialogue with visitors will lead to a greater presence and activity on the Net. In this sense, the literature has shown that communication interactivity over the Internet has a positive impact on persuading individuals (Cho, 1999; Sicilia and Ruiz, 2009). Following along this line, the second goal pursued by the present work is to explore the impact of the online communication approach on online traffic as an indicator of success. We include this criterion because online traffic has been considered an indicator of web effectiveness and popularity. Reaching a critical group of visitors is necessary to inspire communication and produce consumer engagement (Kleijnen et al., 2009).

The paper is structured as follows. We first describe different orientations of website communication in museums and the impact of these orientations on website traffic. We then seek to test the hypotheses by analyzing information from a sample of the world's major art museums. The findings, conclusions and main implications are presented in the final sections of the work.

Acknowledgements

The present study forms part of the research project “Innovating European museums. Analysing activities, determinants, and efficiency indicators” (ref. ECO2012-38552) funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. National R&D Plan 2008-2011.