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Museum Observation #2

How the Brooklyn Museum Improves Visitor Engagement Through Digital Technology

At a time when the needs and demands of visitors are increasingly centered on digital technology, museum professionals are well aware of the importance of digital strategies that offer new and engaging opportunities for audiences to connect with museum content. In the last ten years, for example, the majority of art museums across the U.S. have launched large-scale digitalization projects, creating online collections databases that are accessible to Internet users around the world. Yet as the NMC Horizon Report 2016 Museum Edition notes, digital strategies are “more than the development of a website; they are the multiple channels of technologies that provide unique opportunities for audience engagement.” Given that visitors’ expectations are now shaped by their daily reliance on digital technology across various devices and platforms, museums must now implement multifaceted, institution-wide digital strategies in order to cultivate and sustain online and in-person visitorship.

According to the NMC Horizon Report, effective digital strategies are based on a shift in institutional values that prioritize agile, flexible, and usable technologies, which can be expanded and thus survive the demands of the future, whatever they may be, as the nature of society’s reliance on technology changes. Citing multiple initiatives, the report lists the Science Museum Group’s three-year digital strategy as a useful example that outlines a set of principles and objectives for creating interactive (and crowd sourced) content, outreach campaigns via social media, and new approaches to existing

data for researchers and scholars. The Science Museum Group's digital strategy emphasizes how museums can provide audiences with the digital tools and information resources that are needed to create their own (meaningful) content.

In order to facilitate this type of digital engagement the Science Museum Group outlines the objectives of its digital strategy as follows:

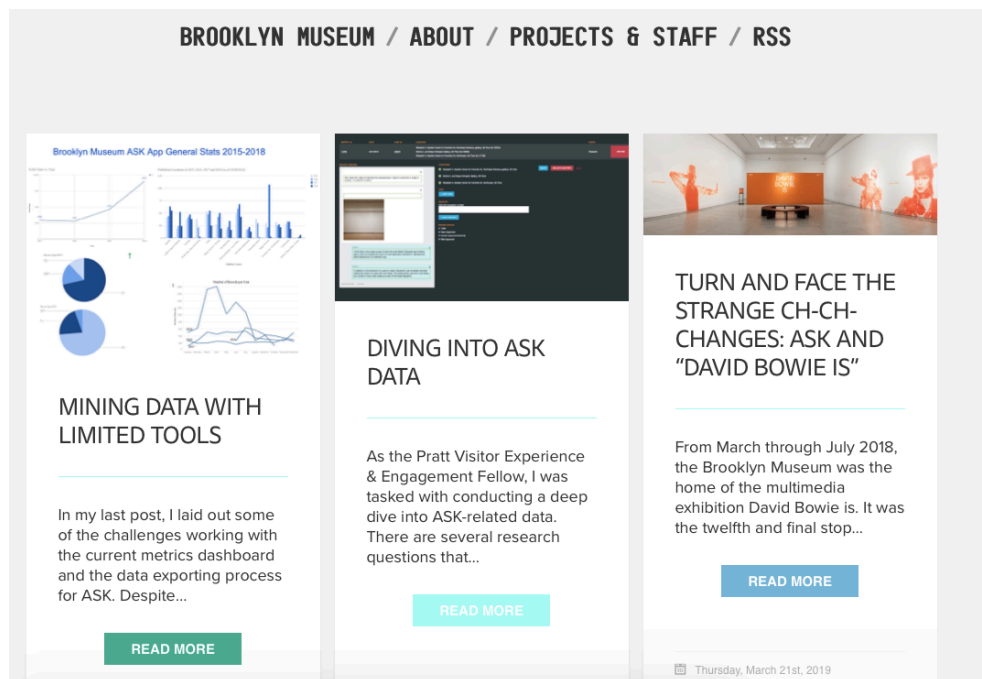
- To improve audience experience through a user-centered and holistic approach to digital engagement.
- To create an institutional culture of digital engagement guided by user data.
- To enhance the use of museum's online collection with tools that empower audiences to research and contribute to its digitized database.
- To use digital tools to tell the stories behind the subjects of its collections, thus enhancing narrative content.
- To create a single, shared technology platform, or a digital infrastructure.

This multiyear strategy will be audience-centered, sustainable and scalable, entrepreneurial and innovative, open, reusable, and sharable, and embedded across the organization. Together, these digital objects and digital principles can serve as a roadmap for other institutions seeking to strengthen their position as go-to cultural heritage institutions and accessible, information rich environments.

Looking at the digital initiatives that the Brooklyn Museum has launched in recent years using this set of principles and objectives as a guide demonstrates how it has attempted to blend its digital presence with its physical setting in new and exciting ways. Although the Brooklyn Museum has yet to fully implement this strategy across all of its

different departments, several digital projects speak to the range of its encyclopedic collection and are geared toward the diverse communities it serves as New York City's second largest art institution.

A 2014 report commissioned by the Wyncote Foundation (aptly titled “Like, Link, Share: How cultural Institutions are Embracing Digital Technologies”) found that the Brooklyn Museum has been adjusting its digital strategy based on the fact that its most engaged online visitors are local. This was concluded through a close examination of user data, and shared on the museum's BKM Tech blog, which is authored by its various staff members and includes candid reflections on some of its digital initiatives in addition to insightful posts on some of the tools that support the museum's digital strategy.



Screenshot of the Brooklyn Museum's BKM tech blog showing recent posts.

Here, it is important to note that the BKM Tech blog allows the museum to be transparent about its attempts to improve the visitor's experience through digital

technologies and points to a larger institutional culture of digital engagement. Having this type of information online improves the museum's standing among other institutions, as it demonstrates an open, reusable, and sharable strategy, and a conscious effort to make data sets and other types of information available to external researchers.

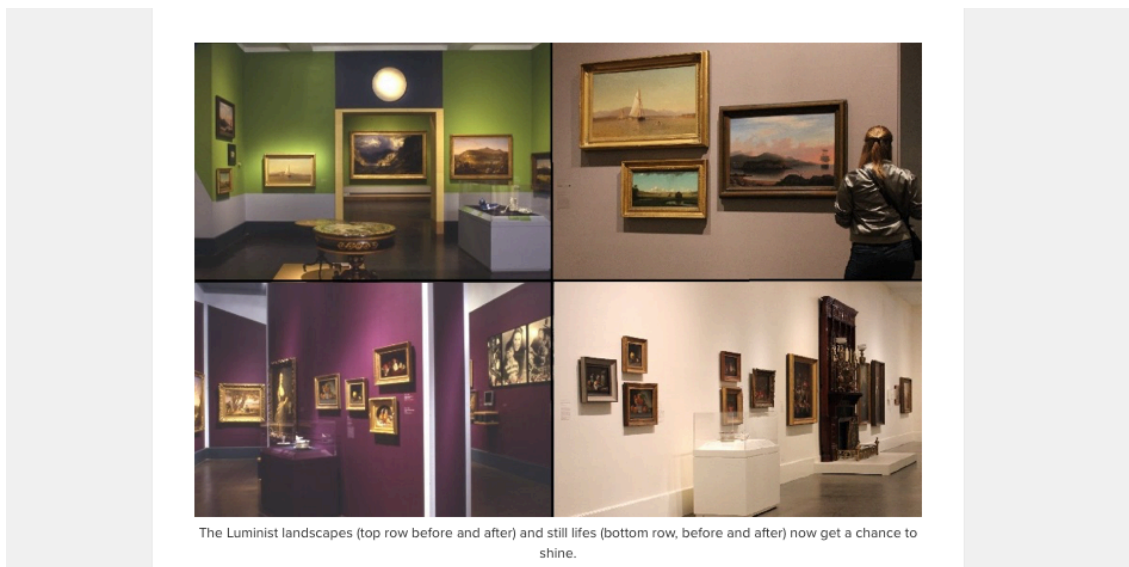
The tech blog traces the development of the Brooklyn Museum's digital strategy by including information on how popular technologies like the "ASK" app, which allows visitors to inquire about objects in its collection by communicating with educators and curators via text messages or online chats, have been fine-tuned or expanded over time in order to better serve its visitors and build on its existing narrative content. For example, in a 2017 post, Sara Devine, the museum's Director of Digital Engagement, describes how her department sought to incorporate the ASK app into its information kiosks in the galleries. Devine's team began by testing the app on the iPad kiosks of the museum's Luce Visible Storage Study Center, an open storage gallery that is part of its American Art department. In doing so, the museum hoped to provide access to the app for onsite visitors who might not have mobile phones while encouraging its use among those who do but are not familiar with this free digital tool.

Several issues arose when testing the app on the kiosks, however, including the fact that users were stationary in the process, and would easily grow impatient waiting for a response to their collections-related questions. In order to make the app successful on this existing museum technology, it would have to be adapted to its digital *and* physical specifications.

The ASK app is the most consistent and central way that the Brooklyn Museum seeks to engage its online and onsite visitors. On the BKM blog, its staff shares how its

various uses have evolved since it was first launched in 2016 from wall labels in the galleries that prompt visitors to use the app to organized scavenger hunts that are directed by museum staff through its unique technology.

Surprisingly, in the instance of wall label prompts, the physical space of the galleries had to be changed in order for visitors to find an incentive to use the app. In 2017, increased onsite usage of ASK was generated with the removal of several “sensory attractions” such as multimedia displays incorporating video or sound. These competing technologies in the galleries for American art, for example, created an environment where sensory overload was hampering audience engagement.



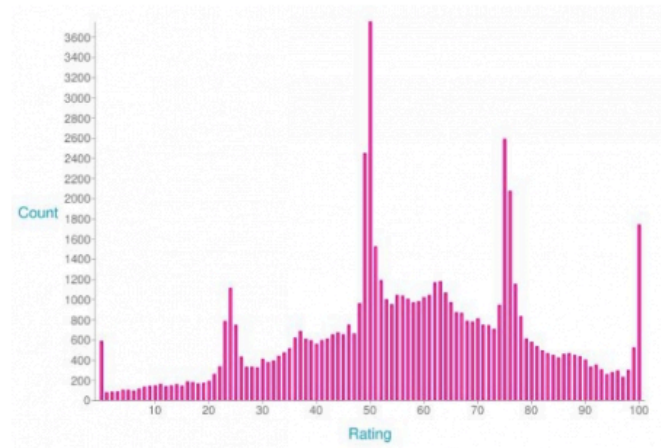
Screenshot of an April 2017 blog post describing how the physical environment was adapted to better serve the Brooklyn Museum's ASK app.

By painting the gallery walls a neutral, and calming color like white, removing a number of works in attempt to declutter the space, and replacing stationary multimedia displays with the mobile technology of the app, the museum also prompted viewers to explore smaller, less noticeable paintings, drawings, and sculptures that were often previously

ignored. Therefore, maximizing the audience-centered potential of the app meant that the digital *and* physical worlds of the museum had to be blended.

Other smaller, initiatives like crowd-curated exhibitions use digital technology to allow visitors to contribute content and temporarily shape the physical environment of the museum. The most successful of the Brooklyn Museum's crowd-curated exhibitions was *Spilt Second* (2011-2012), a selection of Indian painting from its permanent collection. Online visitors selected the exhibition's works by using a three-step process that simultaneously collected user data. This data was shared as fascinating analytics alongside the exhibition's installed works and didactic materials. Visitors were asked to share their split second reactions to randomly generated paired works through an online timed trial. They were then asked to react to a work in writing before rating its appeal, and lastly to rate a work after being provided with museum authored interpretative materials.

The works with the highest ratings (and sometimes controversial reactions) among online visitors were installed as a small selection in the museum's Asian art galleries. Several objectives were achieved by combining digital and onsite engagement this way, including an important assessment of how certain types of information shape viewer's reactions. At the same time, the crowd-curated exhibition allowed online and onsite visitors to contribute to museum content and the interpretation of objects from its collections, creating a unique and personal way to engage with its collection. The data gathered during the exhibition is available in the form of charts that are posted on the BKM tech blog.



Ratings Distribution: This chart shows the distribution of ratings people chose when using a slider. There's a clear preference for the quarter marks: 0, 25, 50, 75, and 100.



Screenshot of the Brooklyn Museum's user generated analytics from its crowd-curated exhibition Split Second.

Thus far, the Brooklyn Museum has continued to introduce innovative technologies that aim to have a positive impact on visitor engagement. As its multimedia displays are gradually replaced by digital applications like ASK, what other types of interactive technology can be introduced to expand its current digital strategy?

One approach that comes to mind is to reactivate cultural artifacts like my selected object, the *Gwa'sala Kwakwaka'waka Speaker Figure*, with a 360-degree virtual tour of the Art of the Americas galleries where it is currently on display. Much like the Tate Modern's 2012 virtual tour of Damien Hirst's retrospective, which included video

stills of the onsite exhibition containing embedded videos of various commentators, including museum curators, a virtual tour of the Art of the Americas galleries could feature experts in the field in addition to Native American community leaders and artists who continue to use and create the types of ceremonial objects that are on display. This interactive narrative content would enrich the current information that is available online and onsite in the form of wall labels, which are written from an ethnographic or art historical point of view, while emphasizing that many of the collection's Native American objects represent living traditions.

Incorporating contemporary voices through embedded videos would also allow for recent innovations to be highlighted, as practicing artists could reflect on how they continue or build on these traditions. In order to reach the greatest number of visitors, the virtual tour would have to be part of the content of stationary kiosks in the galleries while being accessible online. Onsite, visitors would be able to interact with displayed objects by using the virtual tour as a digital map of the galleries' content. Introducing a virtual tour in this specific department would expand the Brooklyn Museum's current digital strategy, making it one step closer to a fully embedded pan-museum digital vision.

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