

Why Millions of Visitors Must Matter to Museums

AAM Chicago, Monday May 14th, 2007

Anecdotal evidence would suggest that many museums do not regard the web and their website as a crucial to their mission or operations. It may even be the case that the majority of museums don't have a website. AAM recognizes about 17,500 museums in the United States. The Official Museum Directory lists 9,500 museums, 6,500 have a website. If the museums listed in the OMD are representative of all U.S. museums, then we have a statistic of 68% with an online presence. The worse case scenario is that the remaining 8,000 do not have a website, in which case our metric is that only 37% of museums have a website.

To test this anecdotal evidence, a survey was carried out in December 2006 which received approximately 100 responses representing a 15% return of predominantly U.S. museums. The intention of the survey was to compare museums' physical and online visitor numbers as well as a figure for the people and budget assigned to web activities. The information gained in the survey gives a sampling of what museums think of their websites from the perspective of the resources and budget they devote to it. The survey essentially asked four questions: How many physical visits to your institution? How many visits to your website? How many staff contribute to your website? How much money do you spend on your website?

The results of the survey can be seen at <http://mediaandtechnology.org/survey/>

The physical visits to these 100 museums totaled 9 million per month, the corresponding online visits totaled nearly 18 million. For some institutions in the survey, their online audience was at least 10 times more than their physical audience, it was less for only a few. A closer look at the survey results highlighted some interesting operational facts: 24% of respondents did not have any staff officially tasked with working on their website – a clear sign that the web is not seen as a core or important aspect of these museums' business. This 24% did however budget for web activities, they had a combined budget of \$95,000 and despite this underinvestment, online visits in this group totaled 300,000 visits per month.

One of the most fascinating statistics from the survey is for the museums that claimed no official staff and no budget, approximately 7%. This group reported over 100,000 visits per month to their websites.

The survey results can provide an average figure for investment against online visit. Excluding the institutions that did not measure online visits, roughly 10% of the respondents, we have 17.7 million visits per month or 213 million per year. Assuming a dollar-figure equivalent for a full-time employee of \$75,000, we can approximate a total cost of investment (staffing and capital investment) of about \$18.5 million. This translates to 9 cents per visit. How does that translate to a cost per visitor for your last temporary exhibition?

A final statistic: the survey results show that there is a 75% chance that if you establish a website for your institution, you will receive at least as many online visits as physical

ones, but likely twice as many according to the average. 28% of institutions in the survey are receiving at least one million visits to their website per year, 5% are receiving that number per month.

If you consider that the digital age we now live in started in earnest in the early 1980s, then the dawn of the 21st Century coincided with the coming of age of 'digital natives'. The youth of today, our future audience, have grown up with the Internet, they know nothing else, they have high expectations and demands of media and content. With this in mind, these results and statistics are a concern since they indicate that we are ignoring what is the primary mechanism for our audiences to engage with us. It is the case for most museums, as the survey results show, that online visits far exceed physical visits.

The intention of this panel is to present and discuss the issues surrounding what it means for a museum to fully acknowledge and embrace the web as part of its business and operation – not just an afterthought. For example, a museum audio guide that includes location information, “look up, look down, turn left, etc.”, makes no sense on the web. We should interpret our collections generically with minimal thought to a specific delivery platform or audience.

Holly Witchey, Director of New Media Initiatives at the Cleveland Museum of Art will present on how a better understanding of virtual visitors to an art museum website can be pivotal in the creation of a museum-wide vision. How can art museums begin to leverage what they are learning about the virtual visitor to online collections to better serve both the virtual and physical visitor? hwitchey@clevelandart.org

Lowell Robinson, Director of New Media Projects at the Exploratorium, will present on how the Exploratorium uses its website to interpret and teach its audience. The Exploratorium must be doing something right; they established their website in 1993 and now have close to 30 million online visits per year. Much of the content on the award-winning Exploratorium website exists purely online and does not relate to the physical space. What are the differences between developing content for the physical and online space? What were the strategic and business decisions involved? What criteria does the institution use to determine online projects and initiatives and how can museums adapt to a Web culture that rewards the constant updating of online content? lowellr@exploratorium.edu

Paul Sparrow, Vice President of Broadcasting & Programs at the Newseum, represents an interesting case. The Newseum have an award-winning website, but have been without a building for the last five years and as such have been developing content purely for an online audience. In October they will have a physical one. The Newseum has recently redesigned its website and so has taken a hard look at the model surrounding content development outside the constraints of a physical institution. Psparrow@newseum.org