Texas Association of Museums White Paper
July 2022

RESETTING THE AUDIENCE RELATIONSHIP:

Online Programming & Community Engagement

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Resetting the Audience Relationship: Online Programming & Community Engagement

Executive Summary

The Texas Association of Museums[1], The Experience Alchemists[2], and ExposeYourMuseum[3] present this white paper as part of the Finding Alternative Futures, Phase 2 (FAF 2)[4] project. This report looks at how museums engage with their communities, rethink who those communities comprise, and highlights online efforts from FAF2 and beyond that have been successful in capturing local audiences and building community as we emerge from the COVID shutdowns into whatever the next era is becoming.

Introduction

This white paper aims to provide guidance to Texas museums on resetting their relationships with their audiences in-person and online, and building on some of the successes that peer organizations have had in engaging new audiences and strengthening their connections to the communities in which they reside. Along the way, we'll look at what the research is telling us about what Americans are feeling and doing in the digital realm. We will explore how museums are experimenting and adapting to these new norms and expectations and focus on suggestions for using digital tools to help museums and increase their ties to their communities.

The pandemic spawned a huge number of online programs and events as museums scrambled to translate their in-person operations into the digital realm. From this collective innovation, there have been successes and failures, and many surprises for museums discovering online audiences they didn't know they could interest. Deciding whether or not to maintain digital programs and if so, which ones, once in-person visitation resumed has been a concern shared throughout the field as workers shifted to online programming have had to return to their pre-pandemic duties.

The pandemic also made clear the extent to which museums were perceived as vital to their communities…or not. In a recent CultureTrack report, when asked to vote on their agreement with the statement " I hope arts and cultural organizations will become more relevant to people like me."[5], the results were startling. Over half the respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the statement. Given how uniformly the museum field and the cultural sector at large has fretted over their ability to sustain operations in an

[1] https://www.texasmuseums.org/
[2] https://theexperiencealchemists.com/
[3] https://exposeyourmuseum.com/
[4] https://www.tam.org/faf2/
[5] Culture+ Community in a Time of TRANSFORMATION: Key Findings From Wave 2

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age of slowly declining attendance and support, the idea that most Americans don't have any desire to see cultural organizations become more relevant is a clear indicator that they already don't see them as particularly relevant in their lives. Solving the engagement equation will require museums to think differently about how they view their audiences and what work they undertake.

The State of Cultural Audiences in 2022

It should come as no surprise to anyone that the CultureTrack Wave 2 report found that Americans feel more disconnected, more sad or depressed, angrier, more worried or afraid, and more bored than they did before the pandemic. The disruption has been almost incalculable and touched every aspect of our lives. As a result, audiences report that they are looking for fun, calm, adventure, connection with others and humor. In a word, they're looking for respite.[6] Their Rethinking Relevance report found that most Americans believe cultural organizations should play a role in helping their communities, but haven't seen many examples of it yet. They identified three things audiences are looking for from their arts and cultural organizations. They should:

- Serve as an emotional outlet (83%),
- Provide connection and learning (77%), and
- Give practical help (54%).[7]

Let's look at what the research says about how museums are doing in meeting these needs.

Looking for opportunities for emotional outlet is connected to the increased levels of depression and isolation Americans reported and it is telling that audiences are seeking it wherever they can find, even outside of traditional arts and cultural organizations. An example of this can be seen in sudden popularity of "Immersive Van Gogh" type, projection-based experiences, that sprouted like mushrooms all over the country during the pandemic. What is driving this popularity? One possible answer lies in a 2021 study of art museum visitors. The authors found that visiting art museums stimulates positive emotions, promotes feelings of engagement resulting in an improved quality of life, and reduces the production of cortisol (a hormone related to stress) in our body. Interestingly, both the artworks and the presence of other visitors at the museum make us feel connected and less isolated. The authors claim this can even encourage the building of like-minded communities among museum goers.[8] The large-scale immersive productions likely produce the same positive emotions and cortisol reduction effects.

[6] Culture+ Community in a Time of TRANSFORMATION: Key Findings From Wave 2

[7] Rethinking Relevance, Rebuilding Engagement: Findings from the second wave of a national survey about culture, creativity, community and the arts.

[8] Katherine N. Cotter & James O. Pawelski (2021): Art museums as institutions for human flourishing, The Journal of Positive Psychology

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As the pandemic has stretched on, American audiences have also connected more and more with cultural producers for their online learning, rather than interlocutors like museums. CultureTrack found that the percentage of people consuming online content provided by individual artists or performers, performing art centers, and libraries all went up, while the percentage viewing content from museums went down.[9] This would seem to indicate a desire to have direct connection with artists and makers and less interest in having curators or experts mediating that connection. A small example of this phenomenon is the sudden rise in popularity of history organizations finding success on TikTok demonstrating historical methods of cooking, crafting, and clothing. Whether these kinds of programs replace standbys like virtual tours of exhibitions and curator talks is unclear, but it does seem to indicate a desire to see work being done and not learning about it afterwards.

Even more worrying than this increased competition is the perception among Americans that museums and cultural organizations aren't being helpful. Only 27% of respondents knew of examples of cultural organizations helping in their communities, and this number had fallen since the beginning of the pandemic[10]. Interestingly, a majority of respondents felt that cultural organizations, regardless of their stated missions, should be tackling the social issues of the day, starting with systemic racism. Looking at the four main findings of the report, the enormity of the work ahead for cultural organizations becomes clear. Americans want their cultural organizations to:

- Promote community well-being.
- Embrace the possibilities of hybrid experiences.
- Identify what matters most to their community to co-create new possibilities.
- Take a holistic approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion.[11]

Whether you're working at an historic house or arts center, or a museum small or large, these audience expectations show no sign of going away. In the latest CultureTrack report, only 8% of Americans disagreed with the statement that arts and culture organizations need to change. Millennial and younger Americans, the rising generations of museum supporters and donors (or not!), feel that we should be addressing these issues simultaneously. How your organization adapts will require a thorough rethinking of the audience relationship.

[9] Culture+ Community in a Time of TRANSFORMATION: Key Findings From Wave 2

[10] Rethinking Relevance, Rebuilding Engagement: Findings from the second wave of a national survey about culture, creativity, community and the arts

[11] Culture+ Community in a Time of TRANSFORMATION: Key Findings From Wave 2

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Equity, Engagement, and Museums

The cultural sector isn't immune to the larger issues and conflicts gripping American society. This is evident in the differences in attitude towards cultural organizations found in the various CultureTrack reports. Perceptions of systemic racism in cultural organizations were significantly higher among Black and African Americans (77%) in comparison to White Americans (35%).[12] History museums and attractions were at the top of the list with more than half of Black and African Americans (54%)[13] saying that, based on their experience, they'd encountered systemic racism at these places. Shifting that perception is going to require substantial effort, but Americans also seem more hopeful (53%) than they were at the start of the pandemic that change can happen (30%)[14]. What those hopes look like can be seen in this graphic.

[15]

So, if you've been reading this report and wondering what "change" might look like, here are some very concrete suggestions offered up by audiences. As you're looking at your strategic plans and next year's programs, this could be a useful yardstick to measure them against. Are your current and planned offerings4 addressing these concerns? If so, how can you make that apparent to your community. If not, how might you incorporate them? The report authors ask five more questions as being the most

[12] Rethinking Relevance, Rebuilding Engagement: Findings from the second wave of a national survey about culture, creativity, community and the arts pg 6
[13] ibid pg 33
[14] ibid pg 33
[15] ibid pg 34

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important for cultural organizations to consider as they rethink how they engage with their audiences.

- *What would it look like for your organization or art-form or cultural practice-area to become more welcoming, not just to current participants but also to other people in your community who may not feel that the experience is intended for them?*
- *What connections do (or could) exist between your art form or cultural category and the kinds of social issues that matter to your community?*
- *How do (or would) efforts to dismantle systemic racism align with your organization's mission, values, and role in the local ecosystem or national field? Who are the stakeholders, internal and external, who would need to be (or already are) involved in this work?*
- *Do you honor equity in your collaborations through shared decision-making, respect, and reflection of ground-level community priorities?*
- *Have you charged users/audiences for online content? Why or why not? Do you believe it can become a revenue stream?*[16]

How Digital Offerings Can Help

Another reason for considering "more digital offerings" is the extent to which BIPOC audiences were more likely to be "digital only" consumers of cultural content during the pandemics. For botanical gardens, natural history museums, and art museums, the "digital only" subset is significantly more likely to be Black/African American. In science or technology museums and libraries, the "digital only" subset is significantly more likely to be Hispanic/Latinx. [17]The report authors postulate that digital offerings lack some of the social or cultural doubts and discomforts associated with in-person attendance for BIPOC Americans. They also ask the question of what might we learn from these online experiences to make in-person experiences more accessible for BIPOC Americans?

An example worth considering is a project done by the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. In 2018 they brought VR headsets loaded with 360 video tours of the museum and a customized teaching program to public libraries in predominantly African American neighborhoods of Philadelphia where visitation to the museum was low. Visitors were asked if they wanted to try a VR headset and explore the Barnes. As they explored the tour, staff asked them what appealed to them and made notes that were used to build a customized tour of the physical space. When they were done with the tour, they were offered the opportunity to take a guided tour of the Barnes later, an offer

[16] Rethinking Relevance, Rebuilding Engagement: Findings from the second wave of a national survey about culture, creativity, community and the arts pp 8-9

[17] Centering the Picture: The role of race & ethnicity in cultural engagement in the U.S: An analysis of national survey data from the first wave of Culture+Community in a Time of Crisis.

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that was accepted by 31%[18] of the people who tried the VR experience. 80% of those people were first-time visitors and 14% had not been to the Barnes in more than two years.[19]

Online Programming

The tremendous leaps made in online programming during the pandemic need no further explanation. Faced with shutdowns and cessation of in-person events, most museums turned to online formats to continue their missions. Everybody learned how to use Zoom, and quickly. So after eighteen months of saying, "You're on mute!" what have we learned about online programming? Plenty, it turns out. The FAF2 program looked in depth at creating engaging online programming and how museums' digital programming over the course of the pandemic evolved from digitally replicating existing in-person programs to experimenting broadly with new kinds of programs. With this experience also came the realization that the concept of "visitor" now includes people who may never come to our sites and buildings.

Platform Expansion is Here to Stay

Despite the growing percentage of visitors hitting museum websites[20], one of the biggest changes has been the acceptance that the days of the museum website being the *sole* vehicle for online engagement are gone for good. We know visitors are much more likely to type a few words into a search engine and begin exploring from there, rather than learning and using our specialist vocabularies to query collections databases. They hear about online programs via social media platforms (more on those later) and access programming directly from them. They communicate directly with your staff through these platforms as well, and are displeased when they don't get an answer. As Colleen Dillenscheider revealed in an article on barriers to visitation, *"Cultural organizations do not get "bonus points" for being active and responsive online anymore. It's an expectation that has only grown stronger during the pandemic."* If that expectation is met, visitors can have a complete and (hopefully) satisfying transaction without ever visiting the website. Nowadays, even basic logistical information like contact info and opening hours are scraped from your website by programs and displayed to potential visitors before they even get to your website.

[18] Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities, Barnes Foundation Uses VR to Engage New Audiences. https://march.rutgers.edu/barnes-foundation-uses-vr-to-engage-new-audiences/

[19] Barnes Foundation, The Barnes Foundation Expands Virtual Reality Program. https://www.barnesfoundation.org/press/press-releases/virtual-reality

[20] Colleen Dillenschneider, Increased Digital Engagement is the New Normal. https://www.colleendilen.com/2021/09/29/increased-digital-engagement-is-the-new-normal-for-cultural-entities-data/

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Web 2.0's "Walled Gardens" Present Persistent Challenges

Eli Pariser wrote in *Wired* that our society faces a huge challenge in the digital realm. *"Much of our communal life now unfolds in digital spaces that feel public but are not."* Despite the democratic origins of the web and its promise of universal access to information, he compellingly argues that Web 2.0's greatest success has come from creating an ever-decreasing number of "walled gardens" that exist to monetize your attention for the owners.[21] The idea of a walled garden in the digital realm is simple. It means that the platform or technology is built in such a way that the owner of the garden has complete control over access, and someone in the garden is unable to escape except through the designated entry/exit points. As an example, if you place a hyperlink in a tweet on Twitter, it will be replaced with a shortened link generated by Twitter so they can track who clicks on what. Amazon will manipulate search results to favor sellers who pay Amazon for that privilege. So while they may feel like the digital equivalent of public spaces, they are most assuredly not. This is the reality museums face in the digital realm. If you've ever tried to get your museum's message out to its Facebooks subscribers, you've come face to face with the "pay us more money and we'll show your content to more of the people who have already asked to see your content." conundrum. Do you pay to play? How much do you pay? How do you know your payment is resulting in the right people seeing your content? Where do you devote your finite resources to reach the audiences you seek?

One truism of good outreach efforts is that you have to meet people where they are; intellectually, emotionally, and physically. In the digital realm, that means using the online spaces your audience is already using rather than expecting them to come to you. This might seem like a hurdle, but there are resources available to you to help understand how Americans are using online resources. This post from FlowingData[22] about social media use by Americans in 2021 is a great example of the kind of analysis that can help you strategically deploy your resources.

[21] Eli Pariser, "To Mend a Broken Internet, Create Online Parks" Wired 10/13/2020

[22] https://flowingdata.com/2022/04/13/social-media-usage-by-age/

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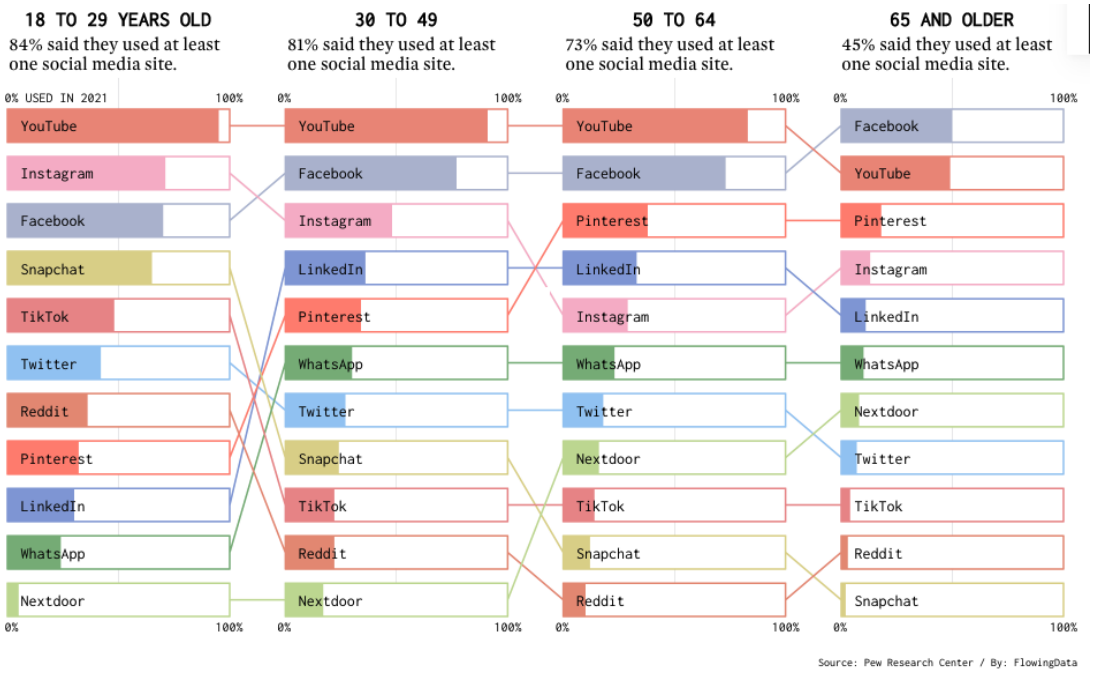

Talking to Audiences is Vital

But even more important than knowing where audiences are, museums need to talk with those audiences. All of the questions raised in this section can be studied by engaging with the public and asking them about their hopes and needs. Continuing to build more content into architectures that are already not being used by visitors is not a recipe for success. And when those audiences may be as-yet-unfamiliar to you, reaching out to them before you expend time and money on building content for them is essential. At almost every step of the online program development model shared with the FAF2 cohort, outlined below, communicating with audiences is an integral step.

1. Articulate your Value Proposition (requires audience input)
    - Analyze the Potential Benefit (requires audience input)
    - Determine the Impact (requires audience input)
2. Assess the Resources Needed to Succeed (benefits from audience input)
3. Assess the Risks (requires audience input)
4. Share the Value Proposition (benefits from audience input)

This lack of familiarity with online audiences is as important to overcome as technological fluency, and museums have the benefit of already understanding how to engage visitors in the physical realm. As Deb Howes reminded the FAF 2 cohort,

> *"You already know how to make meaningful, transformational and humanizing experiences. Think carefully about the visitors you want to engage and how*

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your collections and exhibitions might bring inspiration and value to them in an online context. Don't allow your lack of familiarity with digital platforms and tools prevent you from achieving these goals."

As if this weren't enough reason to tackle online programming, a recent study on community well-being found that online programs aimed at promoting social cohesion using art experience not only benefitted communities, but especially benefitted marginalized ones. The authors report this kind of engagement " may be particularly useful in promoting positive outcomes in communities that experience racism, oppression, or structural disinvestment if additional effort is made to reduce structural barriers.[23]"

Community Engagement

While successful online programming is an important tactical tool for Texas museums, the larger strategic imperative that underlies this is that of community engagement. All the concerns raised in the first section of this report point to a growing disconnect between museums and the people they serve, and raise possible avenues for closing that gap. Throughout the course of the Finding Alternative Futures program, teaching skills and providing tools to better engage with audiences has been a core goal. But what do we mean by community engagement. Candace Matelic, who led the module on this topic, describes it thus:

Recall my definition of community engagement is that the community has ongoing involvement in museum planning, governance, decision making, resource acquisition and allocation, and program delivery. It is more than consultation, more than outreach, more than DEI.

Note this is much larger than "delivering programs for a particular audience" and proposes a totally new way of operating that centers the audience in a way that may seem alien to museum professionals who have learned to privilege expertise in subject matters over all else. But the expectations of the audience and the larger trends in society all point toward this rethinking of the audience relationship being critical going forward.

Audience Development vs Community Engagement

A common error that museums make is that of confusing audience development (getting more people in) for community engagement (getting more people to care enough to engage). One is transactional, and the other relationship-based. Audience Development is a short term marketing strategy to increase the number of people who

[23] Engh, R., Martin, B., Kidd, S. L., & Nicodermus, A. G. (2021). WE- making: How arts & culture unite people to work toward community well-being. Metris Arts Consulting. pp 48-49

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visit your organization. Good audience development builds and broadens your audience, which can turn into support for your organization. In short, it's a vital tool. Community Engagement is a long term strategy of organizational develop to build community ownership, participation, relationships, and support for your organization. It builds a better community, which in turn, builds your audience and position of importance in the community.

Community Engagement Helps Foster Stronger Communities

One of the primary impacts of successful community engagement is stronger, more cohesive communities. If programs are the tools we use to reach visitors, community engagement is how we co-create the kinds of communities we want to live in. The tools are what we use to achieve that. Kelly Cannon recently hosted a conversation on the Museums As Progress (MAP) site[24] that brought together four different museum professionals to talk about how their online programming has fed into their larger engagement strategies. MAP is an initiative by SuperHelpful, an audience research and development firm based in New York, that seeks to help cultural professionals create more innovative organizations — primarily through audience research. The four key takeaways from that conversations were that the primary benefits included license to experiment with formats and topics, the ability to creatively expand beyond the constraints of in-gallery formats, an easy way to connect programming to participants' lives and surroundings, and a way to develop truly participant-centered programming.[25] All four of the conversations are worth watching. A quote that stood out for me was from Rebecca Harmsen from the Museum of Flight, who said:

> *"take the extra step of getting to know your audience in any small way, especially in the virtual realm when you can't see them. Try to build an experience around them. 'If you want it to focus on this, yes, we can do that.'"*

Conclusion

As the field continues to grapple with the continued disruption of the pandemic in 2022 and for the foreseeable future, the need to engage constructively with audiences online has become an existential necessity for Texas museums. It's our hope that this interim report will provide the Texas museum community with both food for thought, and actionable information they can incorporate into their planning.

Substantial research from the field and beyond indicates that cultural audiences are expecting all the institutions they support to become more engaged in the larger social

[24] https://museumprogress.com/

[25] Kelly Cannon, Museums As Progress. Here to Stay: How Virtual Programming Has Helped Museums Expand Community Engagement. https://museumprogress.com/letters/why-virtual-programming-is-here-to-stay

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issues facing their communities, and will likely cease to support institutions that fail to adapt to the times. How best to reach those audiences and establish lasting relationships with them will be determined by the quality of online programming that those museums can generate and the larger engagement strategy that they serve. Acknowledging their importance, FAF2 included two distinct modules addressing the ins and outs of successful online program development and community engagement.

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