

Designing museum's "experience"

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On Culture in a worldwide information society¹.

Museums and cultural tourism represent a rather broad field that can range from paintings and sculptures to musical instruments and traditional food. Designing personal and fulfilling experiences in these environments can vary greatly, even though the goal is the same: to offer tangible enjoyment, cultural enrichment, and possibly foster interest in the arts and traditions among citizens. However, the methodologies, products, and services may differ.

Over time, the enjoyment and interest in cultural heritage have changed, or rather, evolved. In analysing this evolution, we must consider the impact that digital technology, and the Internet in particular, have had and continue to have on citizens². Some authors consider today's environment to be increasingly competitive. In recent years, museums have found themselves competing with other leisure and educational offerings, such as new museums and collections, theatres, cinemas, and amusement parks. The need to better respond to citizens' changing interests and the concept of offering an "experience" have become of interest to museums. Naturally, this document focuses on the "experience," not on specific works of art and cultural heritage and their intrinsic cultural value.

Since the 1990s, the term "experience," sometimes abbreviated to "XP" or "CX," Customer Experience, has been used to holistically describe something that went beyond a traditional visit, show, performance, and more. The clear goal was to influence attendees by creating something that added value and, hopefully, would remain etched in their memory.

Customer Experience, as marketers theorize, means reshaping the approach from the "host" side by designing not only the interaction but a 360-degree context, involving a multidisciplinary group of experts covering a wide range of skills to plan every single aspect of the entire relationship with citizens, from promotion and engagement before the visit, during the visit, to creating a connection and a potential new interaction afterward. As it often happens the "experience" approach was suddenly offered to a wide range of market sectors. CX is rooted in the market culture that views citizens as customers: are the citizens who populate museums visitors, customers, or both?

Visitor or Customer?

To identify the role of citizens when they enter museums and other cultural institutions, we can refer to different terms. The most common is "visitor" or sometimes, in a more commercial perspective, "customer," but also others such as "art enthusiast", "tourist", "user", and more. Scholars typically divide the mission of museums into three distinct areas: conservation, research, and cultural enjoyment, as well as the dissemination of knowledge to the public. The first two areas prevailed for a fairly long time, see UNESCO's subsequent definition of the mission of museums, while the third has assumed increasing importance over time. Museums create exhibitions and installations for the benefit of citizens. We often describe these citizens as "visitors." The term "visitor" is associated with several specific aspects. In everyday life, a "visitor" is someone invited and desired. The typical characteristic of a visit involves non-participatory behaviour, a passive role. If we consider the other term, "customer," it's a word that might seem at odds with museum culture. In everyday life, this term implies

¹ This title recalls a document submitted to the G8 in 2001

<https://re.public.polimi.it/bitstream/11311/690095/1/Future%20OnLine%20Culture%20G-8%20report.pdf> – (2001)

² The term "Citizens" is chosen as "neutral" instead of "visitor", "customer", "tourist", etc.

a transaction and the transfer of goods or, nowadays, even services; all of these aspects are not typically central to museum culture (although they do occur in museums). Both terms, to some extent, describe this role.

Anyway “customer” is a useful concept that refers to today’s service economy culture boosted by the Internet. Customers are being who are treated well and who gets to determine what well means. Business companies invest money to create the right customer culture. They can't afford to get it wrong. Everything that happens on-site influences citizens' perceptions, because they're accustomed to a customer-centric culture. Any negativity will reflect on the rest of their experience and will be reflected in word-of-mouth reviews. We can find a sort of compromise: museums have "visitors," but with a strong background of "customers." Yes, museum visitors often pay for their visit, but the relationship between museum and visitor is different from that between a for-profit company and its customer. Thus, museums evolve from a classical assets-focus to a visitor-focus and “experiences”.

Customer Experience in Marketing

The concept of Customer eXperience (CX) has been fully developed in the field of marketing, becoming a major concern for business leaders worldwide. Analysing customer experiences is a key factor in long-term business success. Scholars and researchers have developed studies and research programs to improve understanding of the key principles of CX and the relevance of current best practices. How can we define customer experience: "Customer experience is composed of the cognitive, emotional, physical, sensorial and social elements that mark the customer's direct or indirect interaction with a team of market actors."³ A better understanding of CX can lead to direct changes in day-to-day practices and can also induce a significant shift in long-term strategic thinking in cultural institutions.

Loyalty is a buzzword in marketing. The importance of offering a unique loyalty or rewards program to enhance the customer experience shouldn't be underestimated. Some museums have quickly implemented various loyalty strategies⁴, but offering a robust loyalty program has an added value that shouldn't be overlooked: it offers a personalized window into what individual visitors appreciate, or even dislike, about a museum. Data collected from customer loyalty programs is incredibly valuable for museums in terms of improving, not just their customer experience, but their overall cultural interests and visits. In the field of marketing NPS (Net Promoter Score) is a specific and widespread metric measuring customer loyalty and potential advocacy by asking, "How likely are you to recommend us?" This parameter is relevant in the era of rating applications, such as for products, shops, hotels, restaurants and more. Word of mouth and scoring are key tools not only available to citizens, but if properly analysed and used, they can also prove to be a powerful tool for cultural institutions. Recommendations and recommendations to friends, family, and colleagues further increase long-term visitor growth, while customer loyalty can decline, technically “churn”, if they experience even one negative customer experience. Churn is a term used to describe how companies lose customers over time. Churn occurs for many reasons, including dissatisfaction with the offering, the inability to attract visitors, or the failure to provide a valuable experience. In some cases, customers may simply change their minds about what they want. Regardless of the reason, understanding how to identify and manage churn is crucial to improving retention rates, especially since it's easier and more cost-effective to retain current customers than to acquire new ones.

Emerging Cultural Experiences

We will not consider some new offerings as competitors to traditional museums, but rather they will contribute in some way to the museum's mission: to engage citizens in art and culture, improve their knowledge, and spark curiosity to delve deeper into art and cultural heritage.

³ Walhimer Mark (2015), Museum Customer Experience (CX), “Design Thinking for Museums”, Museum Planner

⁴ Customised cultural services, customised visits, general benefits, purple-ribbon online contents, etc.etc.

Cinemas are enriching their offerings, in addition to classical ballets and operas, they are expanding their programming to include films and documentaries featuring well-known museums and collections⁵, among which, although it cannot be framed as a virtual visit to a museum, it is worth mentioning *Russian Ark*, *Русский ковчег*, directed by Alexander Sokurov (2002) experimental historical drama film.

Furthermore, in the last decade flowered several virtual immersive environments offering an interpretation of some collections of painters' masterpieces⁶. A different example of innovation in cultural experiences can be represented by an opera with full stage⁷ interactive digital scenography joining together the masterpieces of two Italian artists Giuseppe Verdi and Michelangelo Buonarroti⁸, it was presented at the Kremlin Theatre in 2011, the "Last Judgment"⁹ by Paolo Micciché.

These examples find their place in a holistic vision of citizens' cultural enrichment as it happens in case of experts offering thematic video lectures or acting as online cultural guides visiting museums and archaeological sites. These specific offers were boosted on the pandemic. Citizens enjoy a presentation that will seamlessly transfer the "message" thanks to a professional script and imaging. These initiatives can elicit the interests and improve the knowledge of cultivated citizens but even more relevant attract newcomers to the cultural dimension.

Designing the experience

A few decades ago, thanks in part to the spread of the internet, museums began to identify three distinct phases in their engagement with citizens:

- Pre-visit: online advertising, key event announcements, teasers, easy-to-find information (hours, tickets, accessibility), streamlined online booking, clear orientation on websites, presentation of key collections, engaging stories. Newsletter subscription.
- Pre-Visit: Online advertisement, outline of some key collections, announces of key events, teasers, easy-to-find info (hours, tickets, accessibility), online rationalised booking, clear wayfinding on websites, engaging stories. Subscription of newsletter.
- During Visit (on site): Intuitive navigation, interactive exhibits, engaging interpretation (blending digital & traditional), comfortable spaces, and traffic flow inside museums.
- Post-visit: Opportunities to rate and share experiences (on social media), interact with museum experts, receive personalized information based on their profiles, build visitor loyalty through digital connections, and encourage return visits.

In the pre-visit phase, social media and ranking platforms, sometimes linked to navigation systems, play a significant role. A positive score is often due to a few details that positively impacted the visitor, while a negative score may be due to seemingly inconsequential aspects, such as an unregulated ticket line, insufficient information and signage, or difficult-to-find restrooms.

But even if visitors don't churn a negative experience makes them more likely to:

⁵ The Prado Museum. *A Collection of Wonders*, director Valeria Parisi 2019, *Uomini e Dei: Le meraviglie del Museo Egizio*, director Michele Mally, 2023, *The Relics of Egypt: Exploring The Largest Museum in the World*, director Jeremy Frey 2020 *Firenze e gli Uffizi 3D/4K*, director Luca Viotto, 2015 *National Gallery*, directed by Frederick Wiseman, 2014.

⁶ Van Gogh <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lxmh5m8hm8g>

Monet <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9qOSqnXvMtY>

Cezanne. Kandinsky <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG5hGfCLKs0>

Picasso <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uE3tPmwV0vA>

⁷ Projection of the six surfaces that delimit the stage

⁸ *Requiem Mass or Missa (Verdi)*, *Sistine Chapel's Last Judgment (Buonarroti)*

⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3uz9DztRf8g&list=RD3uz9DztRf8g&start_radio=1

- Post negative reviews online (which causes potential customers to look elsewhere for exhibits and services).
- Bad mouth an experience to their peers.
- Will not visit again the exhibition.

What is the “cost” of a negative review?

The cost of a negative review is severe; citizens will probably not visit a museum that other citizens have slammed online.

Recently, mainly thanks to experience design improvements, the phases involving citizens in their cultural experience have been enriched by:

- **Arrival & Entry:** Welcoming atmosphere improving humans’ wellness (clear signs, lighting, cleanliness, seating), smooth check-in/cloakroom, kids’ trolleys, friendly greeters, clear maps highlighting key points, and accessibility features.
- **Digital Integration:** Using apps offering ad hoc briefing, suggested visiting paths, eXtended reality, artificial intelligence services, or location-based tech for deeper info, but ensuring they enhance, not replace, human/physical interaction.

There are relevant expectations on the potential contribution provided by artificial intelligence. Here it comes one of the specific issues related to the selection of datasets used to feed the systems. AI if adequately trained can offer positive contributions to citizens experience almost in all the foreseen phases. AI can elicit interest thanks to storytelling and curiosities and customised content as an entry point engaging citizens. At the same it can contextualise the specific cultural asset leveraging the experience.

If we consider "experiences" from the perspective of citizens, they vary from visitor to visitor, as museum visitors construct their own meanings within the museums. Each citizen will have a unique museum experience based on their cultural background, different visitor expectations, previous museum experiences, lifestyle, personal feelings and sensitivities, level of perceptive ability, and cultural model. The combination of these factors varies from person to person, making each experience personalized for each individual.

How some museums improve CX

- **Journey Mapping:** Visualizing every key point to find pain points and opportunities.
- **Data & Personalization:** Using visitor data (like big data) to tailor experiences for first-timers vs. regulars.
- **Updating offer,** reshaping exhibitions, offering new interpretations and approaches.
- **Thoughtful Design:** create aesthetically pleasing, comfortable and stimulating environments without forgetting to contextualize the assets on display.
- **Staff Training:** Empowering volunteers and staff to better connect with visitors personally.

The potential outcomes of good museum experience design are:

- **Engagement:** Making exhibits relevant and interactive to capture attention.
- **Loyalty:** Turning one-time visitors (especially new ones) into repeat customers.
- **Accessibility:** Removing physical, sensory, and informational barriers for all visitors (e.g., supporting multilingualism and diverse cultural backgrounds).
- **Advocacy:** Encouraging positive reviews and word-of-mouth.

Closing remarks

The “new normal” ignited by the digital transformation does not mainly impact only automation, production, and our daily activity. One of the most relevant impacts affects our perception, behaviour, way of thinking, key values, influences opinions and way of life. This of course reshapes our approach to society and culture.