

## **Why are museums afraid of digital technology?**

Let's start with a bold assertion, museums are not afraid of digital technology or innovation; for the most part museums are simply afraid.

I say this as a lifelong lover of museums and having been in the trenches with museums and digital technology for my entire career which spans over 20 years and dozens of museums of every sort and scale.

When I first started my career in 2001, working in-house at the Smithsonian American Art Museum I was completely energized to change the museum and compel them and the industry to embrace the new. At the time this was mostly Flash sites and early mobile experiments, still I had little sympathy for those that didn't share my vision or enthusiasm. I saw so many opportunities, even then, to leverage technology to tell better stories, to bring visitors into a better understanding of our content, which I loved and I wanted others to love and understand too.

My enthusiasm was not always met with open arms. At the time I was baffled. Now that I'm 45 with three small kids I get it. Working at the Smithsonian was a great gig. They had amazing healthcare, childcare, a nice gym among the many intrinsic rewards of working with great content and people. To that end my post-punk spirit must have seemed downright threatening - or possibly pathetically immature - to those who probably didn't want me to risk their career and perks, for a cutting edge experiment.

The risks for failure were real. After all, if you work at one of pre pre-eminent cultural organizations in the world and manage to get yourself fired for taking a bold risk, where do you go? If you work at Google and take a bold risk that devolves into a failure you can cross the proverbial street to Twitter, Uber, LinkedIn, Salesforce, the list goes on. How many world class American art museums are there and how many have openings when no one leaves?

While the downsize for failure is severe the upside for success is negligible. At Bluecadet we've had some extraordinary successes in the cultural sector. At the Art Institute of Chicago we did a version on Immersive Van Gogh, but with actual scholarship, in 2016. It was a huge hit. Still, since AIC isn't relying on earned revenue to keep the museum viable - more on that later- an uptick in attendance was a nice data point but didn't change the way they were going to do business.

In fact, I'd assert that in most museums the visitor is not the customer. Again, I get museums encompassing a range of business models - and certainly I'd exclude science centers from this gross generalization - but for the most part museums are not designed to be profitable. They are not really even designed to be businesses. They are non-profits masquerading as experiential education or entertainment. Their real customer is the mega-donor and I've seen more innovation stem from the wants, wishes and impulses of a wealthy donor than the desires of the market at large.

Further, despite being the playground of the ultra-wealthy most museums are totally underfunded. They have huge budgets for a new capital project and then have next to nothing much to work with in the operational budget. What they do have is brilliant staff members who are often way smarter than their family members and college classmates that are working in tech or some other less intrinsically rewarding profession. This breeds a scarcity mentality where innovation is seen as frivolous and an academic mindset that places great value on iterating the art of the tombstone label.

This would all be well and good, if this fear served museums, but I think it actually makes them extremely vulnerable to disruption. There is a tremendous amount of competition to engage visitors and donors alike. Museums are not competing simply with other museums or even other places to go but any other way someone might spend their time. If a museum is in the business of presenting art, they are competing for time and relevance with Netflix, Amazon and Spotify who are all masters at monetizing time and attention. Even donors have more options for how they can spend their wealth or host their parties.

But the thing is, if museums can get out their own way, they have an enormous amount to contribute to society. As we see more assaults on truth from social media, to established media to AI, there has never been a time when museums had more to offer. Museums need to develop a new orientation towards their mission as well as a methodology for safely embracing risk. Not embracing change is simply too risky.