

Letting Go is Hard to Do

Why museums must recognize disruption and redefine themselves

Prompt: 'What are we afraid of? Why have many museums been slow to embrace the digital?

Over the past twenty-five years, digital technologies have altered the way most of us experience our day-to-day lives. This transformation has not been of equal distribution globally nor has it affected us all in the same ways. From the early days of digital technologies, museum professionals saw ways that these tools could help reach new audiences, share more stories using multimedia, and make museums more accessible. There have been innovative ideas and people who truly have moved the field forward.

When museums closed for the COVID-19 pandemic, teams from across museum disciplines brainstormed and collaborated with digital strategists to offer digital programming with hopes of bringing joy and social relief into people's lives. Museums learned of new geographically diverse audiences hungry for stories and social interactions without needing to travel anywhere. Would this be the moment that museums recognized more fully the transformational potential of technology? Would seeing glimpses beyond museum walls offer the opportunity to rethink who museums serve and how they serve?

But this rapid forced transformation and all its learning didn't fundamentally transform museums nor ideas around technology's role in museums. With the need to make up for lost revenue and shore up reserves in an uncertain market environment, it seems like many museums have leaned into more traditional activities of designing popular onsite exhibitions to encourage visitation and ticket sales.

There are many storied business cases showcasing how successful companies can be the most vulnerable to the negative effects of disruptive innovation because it's hardest for them to let go of what has defined their success. The story of Kodak, a once extremely successful company in the photographic industry incorporated in 1892, provides a classic example. While inventing the digital camera in 1975 and understanding its potential, Kodak's leadership bet for decades that consumers would prefer photographs derived from film printed on paper. For Kodak the very definition of a real photograph involved an image printed on paper. After many bad decisions and an inability to respond to the disruption of digital photography, Kodak filed for bankruptcy in 2012.

Museums are well regarded in society and are afforded high levels of public trust. This puts them at risk of these blind spots obscuring disruptive forces. It's a dangerous position to not take a critical look at the competitive landscape and instead rest on laurels or make assumptions about the inherent value of museums in a rapidly changing world.

The global museum sector put on display its reluctance for redefinition during 18 months of debate in updating the International Council of Museum's (ICOM) classification of what constitutes a museum. While this debate didn't have anything to do with technology, the controversy centered around how far one should shift the very idea of a museum. Specifically, some felt an early proposal went too far and was too ideological. The definition that won out did not stray far from a traditional idea of a museum, even going so far as to list specific activities: "...researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage." Maybe it's not fair to call this out, but what business would feel the need to provide a list of tasks it accomplishes in service of its mission?

The heated debate around the ICOM definition is just one example pointing to the difficulty in transforming museums. In the face of rapid technology-driven societal changes, perhaps the question shouldn't be about what museums are afraid of. Perhaps more relevant provocations are: Why aren't museums more afraid of obsolescence? Why don't museums feel the urgency to critically redefine themselves?

For museums to avoid their own Kodak moment, the field can continue to learn from innovative museum professionals around the world who creatively respond to disruption. International field-wide discussions are more important than ever where ideas and experiments can be shared to create more resilient, relevant, and sustainable museums into the future.