

Museums connecting cultural tourists: more substance over style, please

Published by [Interacció](#) [1] on 08/04/2013 - 10:37 | Last modification: 06/10/2020 - 14:25



Museums should engage tourists with content rather than brand, says **Sejul Malde**, for the sake of themselves – and the sector

[Museums](#) [2] with strong brands or those that inhabit iconic buildings are increasingly used as cultural motifs in the destination-marketing strategies of public tourist bodies. Recent examples include the use of the British Museum in Visit Britain's [Culture is Great](#) [3] campaign, or the Turner Contemporary as a symbol of [Margate's brand enhancement](#) [4].

The latest figures from the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions ([ALVA](#) [5]) once again underlined the importance of museums to the visitor economy. Meanwhile, the new Arts Council England and Visit England partnership, which aims to help destinations develop their cultural tourism, provides an opportunity for museums to take a strategic lead in this area. But could it also result in greater reliance on marketing-orientated approaches that might not benefit the entire museum sector?

Can marketing approaches maximise the value that smaller museums, sometimes without a strong brand or landmark building, bring to and derive from tourism? With [the threat of closure](#) [6] hanging over many such museums following budget cuts, their need to engage the tourism market has never been stronger. Promotional campaigns featuring iconic museum brands may advocate their importance to the visitor economy, but are hardly sufficient when seeking to generate tourist engagement with the wider sector.

Even where museums do have a brand to fit these destination-marketing strategies, this approach can quickly turn to cliché by treating the cultural tourism market as undifferentiated. Culture24's recent [Moving Targets research](#) [7] demonstrates that today's cultural tourists are individuals from a variety of backgrounds who travel more locally and on shorter trips to engage with a variety of interests. Increasingly, these people want niche inspiration and localised information.

Museums of all types are well placed to satisfy these demands. More than just brands and buildings, they are also storytellers who purvey distinctive forms of inspiration and information through their collections, exhibitions, events and narratives. Rather than being subsumed or sidelined by destination-marketing strategies, there is an opportunity for all museums to engage cultural tourists by pursuing content-driven approaches instead.

A content-driven approach

To do so, museums need to reach out to those places where tourists currently consume and engage with content. [Digital](#) [8] engagement is changing habits and behaviours. Tourists increasingly seek out content through a broad range of online channels, such as tablets and smartphones, and interact with this content in a more circular process. This flows from a pre-trip desire for inspiration and planning, through to a post-trip need to share

memories and recommendations, and back again.

To actively meet these changing demands, museums must maximise the provision and use of their digital content. The obvious example for many is their digitised collections which, compared to physical collections, have the potential to engage tourists outside the parameters of a visit. But what about museums and other venues without their own collections, or those unable to make their existing collections available online?

The good news: they still have other digital content fit for purpose. Almost all museums generate and gather venue-specific information describing their offer. This includes details of events, facilities, services, exhibitions and resources. Made available online, this content is hugely useful information to tourists planning trips, whenever and wherever they are.

Aggregate, curate, collaborate

But how can the simple availability of this digital content enable the wider museum sector to engage cultural tourists? At Culture24 we believe that the strategic value of this content is best realised when aggregated and curated alongside similar content from other museums. As well as presenting a sector-wide source, aggregation and curation opens up the possibility of shaping the access and use of content by tourists in more creative ways.

Aggregated digitised collections and venue or events content can be curated to fit particular niche tourism interests, thematically linked to tourism locations across the UK or made searchable across a range of potential queries. By promoting and sharing this content in partnership with a range of digital tourism publishers, it could reach target groups of cultural tourists through their most common channels of use.

The potential value of aggregation is currently being explored by [Europeana](#) [9], an access platform for millions of books, paintings, films, museum objects and archival records that have been digitised throughout Europe. And at Culture24, we similarly advocate the value to museums and other cultural venues of aggregating their visitor and events information across the UK.

We are currently working with Europeana to explore the ways that these two forms of aggregated content can be combined, curated and made more useful to cultural tourists. This could also be working towards an example of the museums sector adopting a digital content-led strategy to engage the tourism sector. But to truly succeed in this aim, museums must understand and adapt to the changing demands of cultural tourists.

Cultural tourism is a fluid concept. Niche interests evolve; information is accessed through a range of developing channels and used at different times for an increasing variety of reasons. In such a shifting landscape, there is a danger that what was a tailored content strategy one day could become as clichéd and generic as any marketing strategy the next.

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