Putting the “social” in social media: interactive new media for museums

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Abstract Social media, including Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, is having a growing impact on museum marketing and museum audiences. Providing real examples of successful, interesting, and impactful social media campaigns, this article explores methods and helps generate ideas for museums to utilize diverse forms of social media. By participating in effective social media, museums of all types can engage in and encourage a deeper relationship individuals and other institutions.

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Reports about the impact of social media on our daily personal and professional lives are common. You may keep in touch with classmates through your own Facebook account, participate in weekly Twitter discussions such as #MuseumEdChat,¹ or observe the teenagers in your life Snap chatting with friends. Perhaps your museum’s board of directors has suggested that your institution “be on social media” without offering much in the way of guidance. In most cases, your board is correct. Social media is a “must” for museums in 2017.

Whether your institution cautiously embarks on just one channel, or playfully embraces every new technology platform (note the Royal Ontario Museum, which even put Teddy the T. Rex on Tinder!),² social media can offer museums an unmatched opportunity for connecting with both existing and new audiences. Tools like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat can amplify your mission, extend your reach, and brand your institution with a distinctive personality - all at little to no cost.

For many visitors, social media enhances their relationship with a museum. These platforms offer additional opportunities for individuals to learn what is taking place at your institution, and allows visitors to feel more engaged with your museum than ever before. This sustained relationship can bridge the gap from digital to physical. Social media followers may turn into visitors, visitors may turn into members, members may turn into donors, and donors may turn into outspoken advocates for your organization.
Let’s assess a basic example of how social media can be effective in the museum world. If your institution is developing a new temporary exhibition, your museum can post pictures of artifacts coming out of storage on Facebook. It is possible to use a Twitter poll to have followers help select the exhibition title. You could share a hyperlapse video on Instagram to capture the hard work of installation. Designate a hashtag for the exhibition and invite visitors to share their photos on social media. Re-post photographs (with permission) from visitors, volunteers, and partners on your organization’s social media channels, website, and even in an annual report, showcasing a range of perspectives. Those followers will feel some ownership over the new exhibition, and are more likely to share their enthusiasm with their own networks, potentially increasing visitation, membership, and donations.

Social media is part of a major shift in communications called “new media.” New media includes blogs, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, etc.), user-generated media sites such as YouTube, Vimeo, and Flickr, and online guidebooks like TripAdvisor or Yelp. In contrast with traditional media, including print newspapers, magazines, guidebooks, radio, and television, new media content is always available on-demand, online. New media describes websites accessible by desktop computer as well as smartphone-based apps. In all of these digital tools, users are expected to participate by adding their comments, reactions, and reviews. Interaction defines new media, shifting communications from one direction to many.

While many museums have established a robust online presence for themselves at this point, some are missing out on the most powerful element of social media: the interaction. To truly take advantage of the interactive element, cultural organizations must approach social media with a particular emphasis on the “social.” Rather than using these tools to publish press releases and exclusively promote their own content, museums must take the time to listen. Digital tools like geolocation and hashtags offer an exciting opportunity to develop relationships and seek feedback from visitors. Interaction, be it retweeting a volunteer’s photo, thanking a visitor who checked in at your site, or liking a post by a local journalist who mentions you, demonstrates that your museum is relevant to the wider world. This is true for every social media platform.

Smartphones are ubiquitous. Numerous museum professionals view smartphones as an enemy, and I have seen colleagues shudder at the sight of millennials reaching for their phones mid-tour and witnessed docents ask visitors to put their devices away. Some museum professionals fret that fewer and fewer visitors will come in person if the organization posts more and more content online. I challenge these individuals to view smartphones not as a distraction, but an asset to museums.

If a younger visitor is glued to her phone throughout her trip to the museum, do not assume she is uninterested in the experience. Although that may be the case, she may instead use her phone to photograph artifacts that speak to her, encourage her vast social network to visit, make notes to research items or ideas later, or otherwise translate her museum experience into social media-sized nuggets. Among millennials and younger generations, smartphones can feel like an extension of themselves. Asking or even requiring visitors to keep their phones out of sight could instantly sour their experience at a museum. It is time to embrace this reality and to offer social media-friendly ways to experience all museums.
Social media 101
In the past decade, three main platforms have emerged as major players in the social media landscape: Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. (Note: keep in mind that social media, like all digital technology, changes very quickly. Some of the tools, trends, and techniques described in 2017 may be outdated by 2018.) Each of these big three have their own lexicon, tastemakers, and trends. In general, social media posts perform well when they are brief, timely, and include an image or video. While posts contain just tidbits of information, hyperlinks offer pathways to additional information. The social element is essential. Social media users can easily tag their friends, thus expanding a museum’s network from current followers to an additional universe of potential visitors.

Facebook dominates the social media landscape. The Pew Research Center’s Social Media Update 2016 found that almost eight in ten internet users in the United States, which equates to approximately 68% of all Americans, use Facebook. This compares to 32% of “online Americans” on Instagram, 31% on Pinterest, and 24% on Twitter. Each platform has its own demographic foci. For example, Instagram is used by 59% of online adults between the ages of 18-29, but only 8% of users 65+. Pinterest users are overwhelmingly female: 45% of online women use the tool compared to 17% of online men. The most common level of education for LinkedIn users is college or higher (50%), compared to 12% of users with high school diplomas. Another Pew report on demographics of social media users indicated that African American internet users are on Twitter at higher rates than other racial/ethnic groups: 26% of black, non-Hispanic internet users, versus 14% of white, non-Hispanic users.

Each of these social media services are free to use and do not require any technical expertise. Increasingly, however, social media sites rely on algorithms so that users do not see all content from all pages they follow, much to the dismay of nonprofit communications managers with limited or non-existent marketing budgets. These algorithms are designed so that organizations and businesses will pay to promote their posts to more followers. Algorithms, as well as the platforms in general, change often. It’s important to stay in touch with what is taking place on social media on a regular basis.

Listening techniques
How exactly does a museum staffer “listen” on social media? The same way that one listens IRL (in real life): acknowledge that conversations are two- (or many-) sided, and do not do all the talking. Here are a few suggestions for ways to ensure interactive communication:

- **Follow** relevant accounts: Invest time in seeking out and following other accounts. You may wish to follow partner organizations in your geographic area or museums across the country (or world) with a similar interpretive focus as yours. Follow your museum’s staff members, volunteers, and board members for a variety of perspectives on the site. Look for journalists or bloggers who write about museums or local travel; elected officials who represent your institution; professional organizations like the American Alliance of Museums, the Small Museum Association, the National Council on Public History, the American Association for State and Local History, or state/regional museum associations; and local universities with museum or public history programs. Identify your regular visitors based on mentions, and
consider following them (on Twitter and/or Instagram) if their profile does not raise any concerns. Seek quality over quantity, but put concerted effort into your role as a follower. Continue to grow the number of accounts you follow as you discover others.

- **Read** what others have to say: After you have cultivated a substantive collection of accounts to follow, schedule regular blocks of time for scrolling through your feed and observing what others have to say. Spend time, even just a few minutes each morning, checking each platform your organization is on. You may realize that you have overlooked an opportunity to post something from your collection (such as a photo of your donut roller on National Doughnut Day), discover a relevant initiative (International Archives Day), or read a local resident’s review of your new exhibition. Check early and often (the internet moves quickly!). Do not log in only when you are ready to post your own content. This is time-consuming, but it can be a very effective form of outreach.

- **Engage**: Beyond following and reading what is happening in your community or the museum field, interact with others’ posts by liking, sharing, and commenting. Demonstrate that your organization is listening - including posts that do not mention your museum. This takes very little time and effort, but can effectively nurture a relationship with partners, visitors, or followers.

- **Configure notifications**: Configure your notifications so that you receive an email or alert on your phone if someone mentions your organization on social media. The internet moves quickly, and responding in real time is essential to build a dynamic online presence. You may wish to download applications or start accounts with services that manage your social media feeds, such as Hootsuite, Echofon, or Buffer. There are both paid and free versions of these tools, depending on your museum’s budget and needs. A note on scheduling social media: if you do use tools to write posts in advance, stay in touch with current events to avoid appearing tone-deaf in case of a tragedy or breaking news story.

- **Check geolocation**: Social media’s search by location function offers an unprecedented way to keep tabs on your “word of mouse.” You may find that visitors post about your museum, but fail to use the hashtag that you have established or forget to tag your account. Block out a consistent time to scroll through visitor posts and use the search function to look for your museum’s name (and perhaps other variations of the name if it’s long or complicated) on Twitter; find the “Check Ins” tab on the Facebook page manager; search “Places” on Instagram. Respond to visitors who have posted at or about your site with a quick, “Thanks for coming!” Or, if visitors share a negative experience, consider following up with them and offering a way to remedy the situation. You may discover patterns (dog walkers on the grounds in the early morning) or uses (geocaching, cycling, yoga, etc.) that you did not realize your site had to offer.

- **Tag others**: Whether on Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook, make an effort to tag or mention partners and speakers whenever possible. For example: if you have invited an independent local historian to give a presentation at your museum, check which
social media platforms she uses professionally and tag her in posts promoting the talk. This allows your followers to easily learn more about the speaker, and speakers are more likely to share your museum post with their own network - thus raising awareness of your museum with a potential new audience.

- **Test social media on your own:** Use your own social media accounts as a “sandbox,” a place to play before starting institutional accounts. When out and about visiting museums, historic sites, and other cultural institutions, share your experiences on social media and see whether these sites respond to you as a visitor.

- **Use hashtags:** A hashtag, a word or short phrase that describes the content of a social media post (either earnestly or ironically), is an easy way to tap into a broader conversation. Hashtags work best on Twitter and on Instagram, where automatic privacy settings make users’ profiles accessible to the public. Museums can utilize hashtags in several different ways:
  
  - Designate a unique hashtag for your museum or a specific exhibition. Make sure the hashtag is not already in use before printing it on marketing materials or including it in your exhibit labels.
  
  - Participate in a national conversation about a big issue such as history relevance (#historyrelevance), labor/workplace equity (#MuseumWorkersSpeak), or historic preservation (#ThisPlaceMatters). Or, take part in the #ArchivesHashtagParty happening each month at archives across the country.
  
  - Connect with colleagues across the country such as museum social media managers (#musesocial), museum professionals visiting other museums (#ITweetMuseums), or museum educators (#MuseEdChat).
  
  - Contribute to a discussion of current events unrelated to your museum. For example, post about a #SuperBowl from your collection during the Super Bowl. Football fans looking through hashtag will see your post and while they may be utterly confused at first, you may connect with some new followers.
  
  - Correlate with television events if the events relate to your museum. Many millennials consume two kinds of media at once: they watch television while scrolling through Twitter on a phone or a laptop. Tap into this phenomenon and share relevant content in real time. The National Museum of Civil War Medicine did this effectively during two major television events: the rebroadcast of Ken Burns’ *Civil War* series in 2015 and #MercyStreetPBS in 2016 and 2017.
  
  - Look for weekly theme days like #ManumissionMonday, #TextileTuesday, #ThrowbackThursday (#TBT), and #FollowerFriday and see how you can participate. Or, seek out special culture themes like #MuseumWeek or
Repost: Visitors, members, trustees, volunteers, and partners can capture moments in your museum that you will never be able to document. Social media offers an unprecedented way to see their perspective on your organization. If you get their permission, engage with these posts by retweeting (Twitter), sharing (Facebook), or reposting using an app (Instagram). You may wish to establish a rule-of-thumb ratio such as one repost for every five original posts on Instagram in order to keep your channel relatively consistent.

Open a conversation: Ask your social media followers questions. You may not receive a significant response, but you may learn something very interesting. It is hard to predict what kind of discussion a particular post will generate, such as a follower explaining that he a descendant of the family who once owned your historic house. Consider posting a historic photo of a familiar landmark from your collection and you will no doubt receive a bevy of childhood memories.

Social media managers should take heed: not everyone will be interested in everything that you post, and not everyone will be nice about it. Cranky people are inevitable on the internet. The more you post, the more likely you will encounter a negative response. You may wish to develop a policy that outlines if and how you will respond to negative comments. Internet users often become defensive if comments are deleted, claiming that they are being censored. Responding to negative comments with a link to more information (your social media use policy or a blog post about the issue being discussed) may be wiser than engaging in a heated public discussion.

Content ideas
In addition to the listening techniques outlined above, it is possible to experiment with different types of content to increase your museum’s interactivity on social media. Just like in-person communication, social media in museums is successful when the organization balances listening with creating and posting its own original content.

Voices from the past: Several historic sites and museums use social media accounts (mostly Twitter) to share the “voices” of historic figures using 21st century technology. Whether taking excerpts from the correspondence in their collections, or adopting a looser interpretation of an individual, this approach helps modern readers understand historic figures in a dynamic and sometimes playful way. A great example is Gadsby’s Tavern Museum in Alexandria, VA, which uses the voice of 18th century tavern keeper @JohnGadsby on Twitter.

Live-tweeting historic events: Mark the significant anniversary of an historic event (such as a battle, protest, or court case) by sharing a live account in real time. For example, the Missouri History Museum recently live-tweeted the East St. Louis Race Riots of 1917 using the hashtag #ESTLRiot100. Breaking down a major historical milestone into social media-sized nuggets of 140 characters or less often makes its significance more accessible to the public. While somewhat labor-intensive, these posts can be researched and scheduled in advance. Tag contemporary sites involved...
in the historic event and offer links to resources for followers to learn more.

- **Voice of a landmark**: Some beloved local landmarks (whether historic or otherwise) have their own social media accounts, and sometimes, a cult-like following. These personifications bring a sense of humor to residents and visitors who want to learn more about what is happening with this icon in their community. The most well-known museum example may be SUE the T. Rex, a dinosaur at Chicago’s Field Museum with over 28.5K followers on Twitter.\(^{21}\)

- **Now & then mashups**: If there are historic photographs of recognizable scenes or locations in your community that reside in your collection, print postcard-sized shots, and ask visitors to post contemporary images of each place using a designated hashtag. This simple scavenger hunt activity is fun for families. The Gettysburg Foundation has a great example on Instagram.\(^ {22}\)

- **Meetups**: Via email, invite your social media followers or high-profile influencers for a special experience like a behind-the-scenes tour, curator talk, or hands-on activity at the museum. Participants are expected to take photos and post on social media in real time. This is essentially a marketing tool, raising awareness of the organization through authentic, enthusiastic ambassadors communicating to their own networks. Set a unique hashtag and then summarize the posts in a Storify presentation after the fact.\(^ {23}\) No budget is needed to host a meetup, except for staff time and perhaps some snacks. A small museum example can be found in the #EmancipationInSharpsburg meetup hosted by the Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area.\(^ {24}\) The National Museum of American History invites Washington D.C.-area institutions to meetups regularly, including a July 2017 #ManyVoices meetup for the opening of a new exhibition.\(^ {25}\)

Regardless of which techniques, platforms, or hashtags you decide to use, consider your institution’s personality and let it shine through on social media. Invest time in listening to partners, current members, and potential visitors, and utilize social media to build those relationships, turning online followers into real-life ambassadors for your museum.

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**Notes**

1 See: https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=%23museumedchat&src=tyah
2 See: https://medium.com/@wrdodger/https-medium-com-wrdodger-so-we-put-our-t-rex-on-tinder-9c7770bf9925
4 See: http://www.pewinternet.org/files/oldmedia/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_SocialMediaUsers.pdf
5 See: https://www.instagram.com/p/BU2km9SglnS/?taken-by=baltimoremuseumofindustry
6 See: https://twitter.com/search?q=%23InternationalArchivesDay&src=typd
8 See: https://twitter.com/search?q=historyrelevance
9 See: https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=%23MuseumWorkersSpeak&src=typd
10 See: https://savingplaces.org/this-place-matters#.WgldwUyZpdR
11 See: https://www.archives.gov/archives-hashtag-party
12 See: https://twitter.com/search?q=%23musesocial&src=typd
See: https://twitter.com/search?q=ITweetMuseums&src=typd
See: https://twitter.com/search?q=%23MuseEdChat&src=typd
See: http://americanhistory.si.edu/blog/superb-bowls
See: https://twitter.com/CivilWarMed
See: https://www.instagram.com/p/1J6kednT0d/?tagged=manumissionmonday;
    https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/textiletuesday/;
    https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/throwbackthursday/;
    https://twitter.com/search?q=%23FollowerFriday&src=typd.
See: http://museum-week.org/en/
See: https://twitter.com/JohnGadsby
    https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=%23ESTLRiot100&src=typd
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