How to create the worst online exhibition possible - in the best of intention

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- Research on online exhibitions
- Some rules of thumb for creating online exhibitions
- Why these rules of thumb do not work
- Conclusions

- Museums and other cultural institutions offer online exhibitions on a regular basis.

- There exists a considerable amount of research literature describing the venture of creating exhibitions in the digital world of the Internet.

- But there is still a lack of research and/or publications on what factors make online exhibitions successful.

- There are no standard works describing the success factors for online exhibitions.

- The research literature helps to identify some measures that might result in a really bad online experience for your virtual visitors.

- All of them were indeed used by practitioners in the field – certainly not knowingly and deliberately but nevertheless quite effectively.

- If you want to follow these bad examples, stick to this how-to-guide and its popular rules of thumb.

- These rules of thumb are traded as recommen-dations, hints and so called tricks of the trade, they do the rounds on mailing lists, in discussion lists and on websites.

- Usually these pieces of advice sound good and convincing but in practice they do not work out, on the contrary, they might provoke quite the opposite effect.

- A view into the research literature explains why you should not follow them.

- Rely solely on your museum documentation database for the presentation of your content.

- Do not provide any guidance to your users, let them search and browse on their own.

- Allow as much interactivity as possible

- Trust in the slogan "content is king".

- Serve your virtual visitors with one information design that fits all.

- Don't care for blind users, they can't see your online exhibition anyway.

- Use cutting edge or even better bleeding edge technology to attract virtual visitors.

- Make your virtual visitor's online experience an exclusive one.

- Increase the attractiveness of your physical exhibition by not putting all your content online.

- Consider the virtual visit as a secondary or surrogate experience to the physical one.

- "Rule": Rely solely on your museum documen-tation database for the presentation of content.

- Rebuttal: Database content is collected, structured and enhanced by comments. But do virtual visitors who are no subject specialists really want to search a database using highly specialized vocabulary and complex queries? They do not have the necessary subject knowledge, especially in terminology, to create successful queries. Databases are not intellectually accessible for virtual visitors.

- "Rule": Do not provide any guidance to your users, let them search and browse on their own.

- Rebuttal: Allowing the virtual visitors to search a website and follow links is often considered to be the best way of information presentation because it follows the doctrine of interactivity. But instead of fostering interactivity, this technique leaves the virtual visitors "inter-passive" because they usually do not know the content of the website and are not offered any support in discovering it. (Study *Less Clicking, More Watching*)

- "Rule": Allow as much interactivity as possible.

- Rebuttal: The Internet is supposed to be an interactive medium. But what does interactivity really mean? It is definitely more than clicking. From an educational perspective, interactivity is a mental process called meaning-making which requires the users to reconstruct the information presented and relate it to their previous know-ledge and experiences. This can be obstructed by enforced interactivity. The narrative offers different points of access for the virtual visitors.

- "Rule": Trust in the slogan "content is king".

- Rebuttal: Virtual visitors are not looking for content only but for content in context. It is the context that provides added value. Visitors are a heterogeneous group. They need different access points they can refer to and activate their background knowledge or previous experiences. Digital storytelling is only one of many means for creating context.

- "Rule": Serve your virtual visitors with one information design that fits all.

- Rebuttal: Virtual visitors are a heterogeneous audience. Instead of referring to the audience in general relate to target groups. Different target groups have different needs, goals and interests. Therefore they need a different information design. Apart from content related information design issues, there are specific needs for instance for people with disabilities. Personas can help to find the adequate information design.

- "Rule": Don't care for blind users, they can't see your online exhibition anyway.

- Rebuttal: When creating online exhibitions, you should consider that the constitutive idea of the Web is to serve all users regardless of their abilities. Accessible websites do not only serve people with disabilities but also a broad range of user agents, all the search engines (Google is blind!) and numerous kinds of mobile devices, e.g. personal digital assistants, mobile phones (cf. the curb-cut metaphor).

- "Rule": Use cutting edge or even better bleeding edge technology to attract virtual visitors.

- Rebuttal: You should be careful to avoid cutting edge technology in order not to hurt yourself by excluding prospective virtual visitors from your website due to technological barriers. Study of the *National Gallery of Art* offering a high-tech version of an online exhibition (plug-in for Virtual Reality required) and low-tech version. Always remember: "The functionality exists. But building functionality into a product, however, doesn't guarantee that people will be able to use it."

- "Rule": Make your virtual visitor's online experience an exclusive one.

- Rebuttal: The physical visit is primarily a social event and the Web is supposed to be a social medium. Interaction design for online exhibitions is still for single user experiences only and there-fore creates solitary visits. Understanding the sociality of online visiting should be in the fore-front of the research agenda. It will take some time and effort to understand how to create colla-borative online experiences for virtual visitors.

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- "Rule": Increase the attractiveness of the physical exhibition by <u>not</u> putting all your content online.

- Rebuttal: There is no solid evidence for the claim that virtual exhibitions will prevent visitors from coming to the real exhibition as they have already seen it in the digital world. A study based on more than 100,000 user sessions found: the most popular information were opening hours, how to get to the museum followed by exhibitions, galleries and events. Museum visiting has high opportunity costs such as investments of time, effort, and money.

- "Rule": Consider the virtual visit as a secondary or surrogate experience to the physical one.

- Rebuttal: The discussion about the real-virtual divide that treats remote visits as secondary or surrogate experiences to the physical ones, prioritizing the unmediated experience of 'the real thing' over the mediated experience via technology. The focus should not be on the question of the reproduction of an object but on the question of the experience on the side of the visitor, considering both the real and the virtual visit in its own right, they can positively affect each other.

- Although there is a wide range of research literature available concerning online exhibitions, there is still little systematic research analysing the factors that make them successful.

- Instead there is a number of recommendations, hints and so called tricks of the trade that do the rounds on mailing lists, in discussion lists and on websites.

- Usually these pieces of advice are given with the best of intentions but might provoke quite the opposite effect.

- There is no handbook or standard publication for the design of successful online exhibitions.

- There is a lack of checklists or heuristics to evaluate what factors make online exhibitions successful.

- More research is required to indentify success factors for online exhibitions in the cultural sector.