

Museums as a source of inspiration for tomorrow's brand experience

Consumers have more knowledge about the products and services they buy than ever before. According to research agency Forrester, 70-90% of the buyer's journey is complete prior to engaging a vendor. How can brands reach these so-called 'informed consumers' and build a relationship in a positive manner? By offering a brand experience on location that goes beyond selling your product or service.

For years, leading museums have shown that they are able to inspire and engage their customers. Museum visitors don't mind to travel long hours and to queue patiently. They know they will be rewarded by rich museum collections. This contrasts sharply with shopping areas, which find it hard to attract consumers to their shops as people increasingly buy products online.

What could brands learn from museums?

As designers of interactive, transformative experiences worldwide, we share the 5 most important aspects of a museum experience in this blog post. These should be central to each brand experience as well.

1. Create an environment where people can learn



A museum has always been a place where people go to to learn something new in an informal way. The educational aspect of museums closely connects with the needs of the informed consumer who does not want to hang around cheap commercial areas on a Sunday afternoon. He wants his leisure time to be educational and inspirational. Brands have to ask themselves how they can contribute to these informal ways of learning in an innovative and authentic way. This is what NorthernLight helps its clients with on a day-to-day basis. A good example in this perspective is the Windlab we created for the Dutch energy brand Eneco. Here schools and corporate clients can meet while learning about wind energy.

2. Pay attention to aesthetics



If you have ever been in the Gallery of Honour of the Rijksmuseum, you know what it feels like to be overwhelmed by beauty. Aesthetics should be an important aspect of each brand experience. Whether it concerns a retail area, public space, visitor centre or place to meet business relations. Brands are morally obliged to guard the aesthetics of a place. Even if you use technology to tell your story, like many museums do nowadays, this should be done in a subtle and elegant manner.

3. Be social and facilitate a dialogue between people



One of the core objectives of retail has always been to demonstrate products and services on location and inform people how to use them. The relevance of this function is slowly disappearing because consumers carry out the biggest part of the product orientation process online. If they would like to know how a headset works, they go to YouTube. If they would like to know which headset to choose, they visit a product comparison website. Nothing is unknown.

Positive impact

To understand what people *really* need, you just have to watch how an average family is spending time at home; all family members have their own tablet on which they play a game or watch a programme of personal preference. Brands could become more relevant if they facilitate a dialogue between adults and children and amongst adults. Museums have proven to be a place where dialogues happen. Museums like the Rijksmuseum and Philips museum create interaction between visitors with the help of innovative games, interactive displays and iBeacons. They create an experience that leads to conversations and discussions even after the museum visit. That's what brands should contribute to as well. Then you know that you have created a positive impact on someone else's life.

4. Tell your story with passion and authenticity



Everyone talks about storytelling, but museums really know how to tell a story. They do this with passion and authenticity. Museums that really stand out understand how to integrate social and aesthetic aspects and use technology in an innovative way. They build layers in their stories which make exhibits and areas interesting for those whose prior knowledge is limited, as well as for people who are very knowledgeable on a certain topic.

Aligning values

Brands that really want to build impact need to focus on outcome, not output, claims Umar Haque, writer of the book 'Betterness: Economics for Humans'. According to Haque, people ask themselves questions that touch the essentials of their existence. Informed consumers choose brands whose values are in line with their values and lifestyle. As a brand you can only align your values you're your customers' values if you share your story in an honest, authentic way and pay attention to the people behind your brand. It should no longer be your products that take centre stage.

5. Tactile – looking for the real deal



Consumers browse the web to find information about the products they would like to buy, however, they finally want to see, touch and experience the 'real deal'. That's what we have learned from museums. You might have seen hundred of images of Rembrandt's *Nachtwacht*, but it is the real painting you would like to see. It is about experiencing the magic, being close, being able to (almost) touch it. The same goes for an expensive camera, a unique bike or another product that is of emotional value to a consumer. This won't say that products need to dominate the retail space. It is all about integrating the experience with authentic products and materials and offering the ability to feel and try. The experience is more important than the purchase itself. That's what can be done in another place or online.

To conclude. Museums have been associated with dusty, boring places while the reality shows that brands can learn a lot from leading museums in the world. Museums are a source of inspiration for the retail experience of the future. Besides digital experiences, brands need to keep on creating engaging and inspirational physical spaces. Not by filling up areas with hundreds of similar products, but by creating an experience where carefully selected authentic products are part of what can be seen, sensed and touched.