



Visitor-centered and Digitally- enabled:

Lessons Learned for
Museum Audience
Engagement During COVID



March 2022

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Background & Objectives

In 2019 the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) engaged Lee Groves Consulting to conduct a series of ideation workshops on digital engagement strategies. At that time, visitors told us that digital tools should be as user-friendly as possible and make the museum more approachable and relevant by supporting connections and meaning-making.

In consideration of the digital shift during the COVID-19 pandemic, the AGO asked Lee Groves Consulting to update those research findings and explore: **How has the pandemic changed the way audiences engage with museums, and the way museums engage with their audiences? How can digital tools enhance the visitor experience and help museums transition through what comes next?**

We engaged a “think tank” of museum leaders in digital engagement and summarize their thoughts in this report on moving towards a visitor-centered, digital-enabled future.

18
interviews



36-45
minutes in length



Fall 2021

October 29 – November 12, 2021



PROJECT OVERVIEW

Interviewees

Representing a cross-section of roles, types of institutions, sizes of institutions, and locations.

Also spanning a wide spectrum in terms of re-opening.

Name	Role	Institution
Canada		
W. Ryan Dodge	Chief Digital Officer	Ingenium
Ryan Doherty	Chief Curator	Contemporary Calgary
Robin Etherington	Executive Director	Bytown Museum
Gerry Lawson	Oral History and Language Lab Manager	Museum of Anthropology at UBC
Graham Ruttan	Marketing and Communications Officer	Galt Museum & Archives
Corey Timpson	Principal	Corey Timpson Design
International		
Conxa Rodà	Co-director of Postgraduate in Digital Strategy	Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya_Universitat Oberta de Catalunya (UOC)
Peder Wuth	Head of Digital Media	Louisiana Museum of Modern Art

Name	Role	Institution
United States		
Dana Allen-Greil	Vice President of Marketing	Monterey Bay Aquarium
Sofie Andersen	Head of Digital Content and Editorial	Metropolitan Museum of Art
Chad Curtis	Head of Digital Platforms	Saint Louis Art Museum
Ellice Engdahl	Digital Collections & Content Manager	The Henry Ford
Liz Gardner	Director of Interpretation	Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
Pamela Martin	Senior Digital Content Manager	Albright-Knox Art Gallery
Mark Osterman	Digital Experience Manager and Head of Education	Lowe Art Museum
Jasmine Patel	Director of Digital Experience	Philadelphia Museum of Art
Seema Rao	Deputy Director	Akron Art Museum
Katharine Uhrich	Senior Social Media Manager	Field Museum

THE DIGITAL SHIFT



Contemporary Calgary @ContemporaryYYC · Apr 6, 2020

UK-based artist, [@lukejerram](#), speaks with Chief Curator, Ryan Doherty, about [#MuseumoftheMoon](#) and draws parallels to his latest [#GlassMicrobiological](#) sculpture of the [#COVID19](#) virus. Watch the full video on our website—bit.ly/2JGmB24 [#LukeJerram](#) [#ArtWhereYouAre](#)



#ArtWhereYouAre series from Contemporary Calgary



“There's been in a huge shift in appreciation. There was almost no digital [before]... And there's no turning back. People have become very used to and understanding the important role that digital can play.”

THE DIGITAL SHIFT

What is digital engagement?

Every digital touchpoint with a museum's audience

This includes public-facing social media channels, virtual programming, the website, interactives in the galleries, etc. As well as internal infrastructure such as the collections management system, Wi-Fi network, online ticketing system, and more.

Who is responsible for digital engagement?

Based on inherited functions but moving towards a cross-functional support role

Digital staff sometimes sit under Education, Marketing/Communications, or IT departments. In larger or more mature institutions, digital roles are becoming less siloed and evolving into more of an independent, institution-wide role for digital resources and content strategy.

THE DIGITAL SHIFT

When museums shut down, there was an initial rush of digital content.

There was panic to do *something* and the sector became over-saturated with online content. Museums refined those early efforts and interviewees share their lessons learned in this report.

There was a massive increase in appreciation of digital work and in digital literacy at museums.

As one interviewee said, it “shook museums out of auto-pilot” and forced re-examination of their missions and audiences and how to engage with them. Previously, staff had to push for resources for digital and their work felt “invisible.” The pandemic accelerated digitization and digital became everyone’s job.

However, online audiences have waned and there is limited staff capacity for digital upkeep.

Online audiences have declined as “Zoom fatigue” set in and people crave a return to the galleries and other in-person experiences. Museums are focusing resources on re-opening and already operating under reduced staff and lost revenue. While a couple of interviewees have added staff to their digital teams, others expressed concern about losing momentum on digital innovations.

THE DIGITAL SHIFT



BYTOWN MUSEUM @ · Dec 9, 2020 ...

[#WednesdayWisdom](#) DYK you can watch our "Bytown Bit by Bit" video guided tour series on IGTV AND while exploring our VR Tour? Let us know your favs, and which topics you'd like to see in Series Two. 🏛️

IGTV Channel 📺 bit.ly/3gugTQo

VR Tour ➡️ bit.ly/2lrrj6l



Behind the scenes filming and promotion for digital tours from Bytown Museum



“There was this huge surge of [digital] events but then there was a rapid decrease in engagement. With that came a realization that more is not more... You still need to be strategic. You still need to think about what does your audience actually want, not just what do you want to throw out there at them.”

“Are we building back up the physical place first or the digital? Are we doing them in tandem?... Looking at how much we've gotten out of digital in the last year, I would hate to see us neglect that. So it really is a balance of how do you build back up both your physical presence and your online presence.”

CORE PRINCIPLES OF ENGAGEMENT

From the 2019 AGO visitor research, we summarized **three mutually reinforcing principles** for supporting audience engagement digitally and beyond:

- Be approachable
- Make connections
- Design to be user-friendly

For this COVID-era update, we asked interviewees “How do these principles resonate now and how should they be updated? And what digital strategies or tactics underlie each of these principles?”

Interviewees say these core principles of visitor engagement are still broadly relevant, but the context, tactics, and emphasis have shifted during the pandemic. And since we were speaking with museum staff rather than visitors in this research update, these interviewees added more internal institutional considerations. We also expanded considerations beyond art museums to be broadly applicable to all types of museums.

BE APPROACHABLE



Liked by **grahams_art_gallery** and **others**

agotoronto It's time to reconnect with art! We're reopening today for #AGOmembers and #AGOannualpass holders and on July 23 to everyone purchasing single tickets. Take your cues from Hank, Violet and Duke in this video as they (slowly) walk you through some of our new visitor guidelines. We've missed you and cannot wait to see you again soon!

[View all 27 comments](#)

July 2, 2020

AGO introducing new visitor guidelines with the help of tortoises from the Toronto Zoo



“The pandemic gave museums permission to have fun because everything was so up in the air... [Museums went] from this hyper curated approach to being more spontaneous, from being super formal to having more fun, and from really professional and polished assets and video to more low-fi.”

BE APPROACHABLE

Pre-pandemic

- Close feelings of “distance” between notions of high-brow “Art”/complex content and visitors
- Offer a welcoming and accessible experience
 - ⌚ For content through interpretation, storytelling, etc.
 - ⌚ For gallery spaces through interactives, multi-sensory, informal spaces, etc.



Current Considerations

- Provide more convenient, easier points of entry
- Broaden geographic reach and accessibility for people with disabilities
- Promote equity and increase diversity of voices/viewpoints
- Consider touchless interactives

BE APPROACHABLE

Pre-pandemic:

Help close feelings of “distance” between what the museum offers and where visitors are. Relax traditional notions of high-brow “Art” museums and make both content (through interpretation, storytelling, etc.) and the gallery spaces (through interactive, multi-sensory, kid-friendly experiences, etc.) welcoming and accessible for all.

Current considerations:

Provide more convenient, easier points of entry.

Digital initiatives have made it easier than ever for audiences to engage with museums and their content. Digital engagement can be lower commitment, less intimidating, and mostly free compared to physical attendance. Digital productions and communications during the pandemic were also often more casual and less polished, which relaxed the formality typically associated with museums.

Broaden geographic reach and accessibility for people with disabilities.

Digital initiatives have also helped museums become more inclusive and build relationships with new communities. Even small community museums have opened up to global audiences. This also includes incorporation of inclusive design practices to increase accessibility with universal standards and assistive technologies.

BE APPROACHABLE

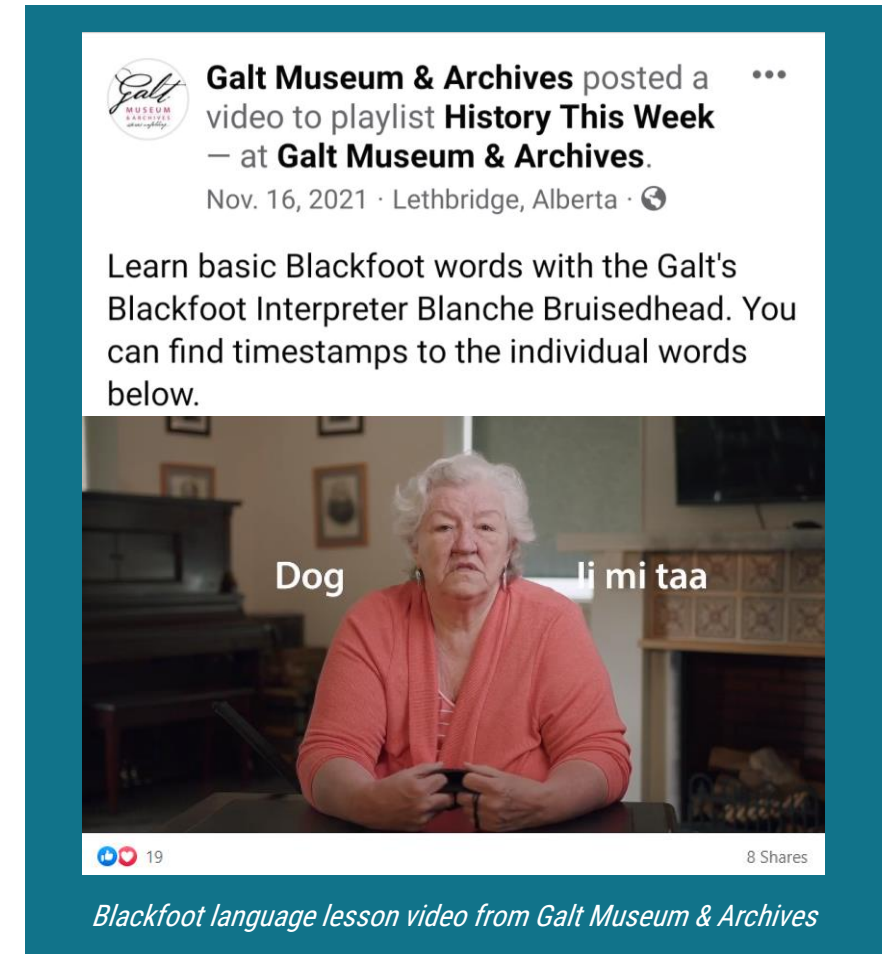
Current considerations (continued):

Promote equity and increase diversity of voices/viewpoints.

Truth and Reconciliation, Black Lives Matter, and other social justice movements have placed additional emphasis on museums to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion. Institutions have utilized digital initiatives to step aside and uplift marginalized communities and center their voices. However, a couple of interviewees cautioned that these initiatives can be problematic and performative if they do not result in real change within institutions or do not repair the harm done to originating communities.

Consider touchless interactives.

Some institutions have brought back in-gallery interactives while others have not yet. Many are utilizing QR codes in the galleries for now. Some have implemented or are considering touchless adaptations such as automated looping media, gesture-based interactives, pressure-sensitive plates on the floor, or immersive experiences. A few mention moving towards a Bring Your Own Device model where in-gallery digital experiences are designed to be accessed from visitors' own smartphones. Interviewees touched upon Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, but do not feel they're at the tipping point for mass adoption yet.



BE APPROACHABLE



“Once you digitize something, you've redefined community. Our local community is the core of our mandate... But we are now developing virtual programs that are more far-reaching and of national significance.”

“I would have people take a step back and look at what their real achievements are in including Indigenous people in staff and management roles at your institution. Not in partnerships, not in coauthoring, not in areas of bringing Indigenous voice in to temporarily comment and lifting up an Indigenous voice for five minutes... When we're looking at digital tools, are we looking at tools that better connects our collections to the originating communities so they can do the work they need to heal?”

“We have to think about all the vectors of human difference. How does a low or no vision patron participate through a Zoom meeting?... Is the programming available through community centers, friendship centers, libraries? How are we democratizing access, when we're relying on needing hardware and an internet connection?”

“We have to remember technology is just a tool. It's not the actual answer. It's a conduit to get to that end goal. So if we have staff and ideas and programming that's not representative of our community, our practices are not inclusive.”

MAKE CONNECTIONS

FIELD ART ACROSS CANADA TRIP

Field Trips. Art Camps. Partners. Contact. 

EVERYWHERE WE'VE BEEN. EVERYTHING WE'VE SEEN.



The Power Plant · June 17, 2021

Aden Solway about Howie Tsui

Aden Solway is an artist and curator. He will discuss The Power Plant's Fall 2020 exhibition *Howie Tsui: From swelling shadows we draw our bows*.

[Continue →](#)



The Power Plant · June 11, 2021

THE POWER PLANT PRESENTS: Stanzie Tooth in conversation with Joséphine Denis

Stanzie Tooth is an artist working primarily in painting though she also makes collages, sculptures, and installations. She will discuss her artistic practice and recent works with The Power Plant's TD Curator of Education and Outreach Fellow, Joséphine Denis.

[Continue →](#)



Phi Foundation · June 3, 2021

Lee Bae: UNION – Curator's Tour: At a Distance

See the exhibition *"Lee Bae: UNION"* at a distance, through the eyes of the show's curator in this guided tour led by Cheryl Sim.

[Continue →](#)

Collaborative art sharing platform at fieldtrip.art



“I'm a real fond believer of this decentralized approach where it's not a hub and spoke model anymore, it's this interconnectedness. That's something that the digital world is leaps and bounds above anything we can do in a physical space.”

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Pre-pandemic

- Guide audiences to more meaningful art experiences through connections to:
 - ◉ Context of the art
 - ◉ Relevance to themselves
 - ◉ Other people for social connection
 - ◉ Other ideas to expand perspectives



Current Considerations

- Build a relationship with audiences outside of visitation
- Empathize with your audiences and evoke emotions
- Collaborate with partner institutions and share on other platforms

MAKE CONNECTIONS

Pre-pandemic:

Guide audiences to more compelling, meaningful art experiences by helping them relate to the art (context), to themselves (relevance), to each other (social bonding), and to other ideas (expand perspectives).

Current considerations:

Build a relationship with audiences outside of visitation.

Traditional museum models prioritized physical attendance and defined success by the number of visitors. While some interviewees say their institutions are still focused on driving in-person attendance, other interviewees have moved away from that convention. They argue that the digital “visitor” is just as important as the in-person visitor for brand awareness, audience development, and for fulfilling their missions. These interviewees value digital channels for encouraging real-time, authentic dialogue and connection to the communities they serve. Interviewees also emphasize that replicating the same content across social media platforms does not work. Instead, each social media platform serves a distinct purpose and audience.

MAKE CONNECTIONS

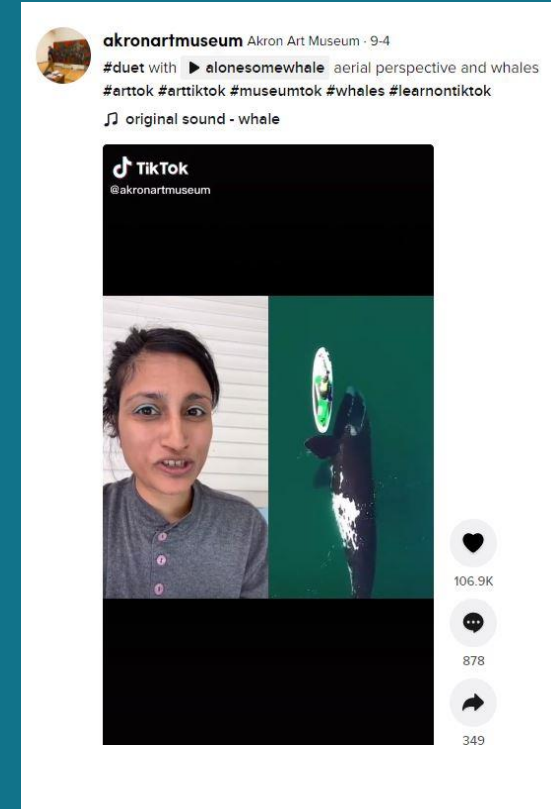
Current considerations (continued):

Empathize with your audiences and evoke emotions.

During the pandemic, institutions used digital initiatives to offer moments of joy and solace for their audiences. Interviewees say their institutions had greater impact when they empathized with their communities and centered their emotions.

Collaborate with partner institutions and share on other platforms.

Interviewees also mentioned the importance of connecting to other institutions. Collaborations help amplify each others' messages and work, as well as provide a valuable support network for institutions themselves. Interviewees also suggest exploring unexpected platforms (e.g. Animal Crossing, TikTok) for non-patrons to discover your institution's content and gain new audiences. A couple also mentioned exploring open access for their collections.



TikTok video from Akron Art Museum with nearly 1 million views

MAKE CONNECTIONS



“There's so many things an online community can do to help your museum survive in the 21st century. A big piece is that dialogue. Opening yourselves up to different points of view, different histories, allowing people to comment on that context, on your collections.... Online visitors do numerous things for your brand, your recognition, your reputation – good and bad – depending on the experience they have.”

“Our TikTok started because we decided that our digital content is not about driving people to the building... Facebook is where we drive people to programming, Instagram is where we show beautiful pictures of our institution, and TikTok is where we do our art appreciation, it's our lowest entry level... People don't like to be sold things and that's why we don't.”

“In the early days of the pandemic we took our live cams and did a guided meditation. There are a series of 10 of them, and they've gotten like 4 million views. It helped me think about the importance of empathy for audiences and what our audiences need at any given moment... It's not just about what we want to say, but what do people need and what can we give them?”

“How many places can I get [our] content embedded so somebody comes across it when they are the least expecting to think about art? How can I create a really rich world of connections for people across time, space, and cultures? I want to change hearts and minds. I want people to come away feeling transformed and changed or just delighted, and they had a good time.”

DESIGN TO BE USER-FRIENDLY

the process

The Goal

Easy to use CMS that reflects visitor needs and the development of a community of ongoing learning and support.

1 →

Design Thinking Workshop

1-day workshop will be held at the AGO for participants in the project. A series of facilitated sessions will define audience, goals and user journeys. These will uncover user stories and requirements for the build of the platform and define the research project.

- Requirements and user stories
- Audience, goals and user journeys for report

2 →

Reporting Back

The outcomes of the workshop will form the outline of a research report that will uncover how visitors to cultural organizations want to engage with technology. A technical specification document will outline the features and function of the platform.

- Research report outline
- Technical specification design document

3 →

Research & Production

With the outline and technical specification signed off by partners, the team will begin production and research. A draft of the report will be shared with the team during a Think Tank session held at the AGO.

- Toolkit CMS product development
- Research report draft and Think Tank

4 →

Results & Release

Research findings will be compiled in a report and presented at a symposium for participants and interested parties. The completed platform will be revealed and deployed to partners for use at their cultural institutions.

- Research report published and symposium
- Toolkit CMS review and deployment

A project led by the

AGO



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des arts
du Canada

Development process for Toolkit, an open source content management system led by the AGO at toolkit.ago.ca



“Using user centered design techniques is critical. Everyone has lots of ideas... but you need to start with interviewing your audience, understanding the motivation or problem, doing a prototype, and verifying that's actually a thing you should invest in.”

DESIGN TO BE USER-FRIENDLY

Pre-pandemic

- Lower barriers to engagement by providing an easy, clear visitor journey from pre-visit to post-visit
- This applies to digital tools and beyond



Current Considerations

- Integrate digital considerations from the beginning to provide a seamless user journey
- Employ design thinking process based on user experiences and an iterative process
- Plan your infrastructure

DESIGN TO BE USER-FRIENDLY

Pre-pandemic:

Lower barriers to engagement by providing an easy, clear visitor journey the entire way from pre-visit to post-visit. This applies to digital tools and beyond—from navigation to comfortable gallery spaces to explicitly connecting the dots between points of engagement and content.

Current considerations:

Integrate digital considerations from the beginning to provide a seamless user journey.

Interviewees advocate that digital tools should be integrated from the beginning, rather than thought of as add-ons. Designing with digital first in mind can remove barriers at the outset and make it easier and more resource efficient to port across devices and channels, rather than trying to retrofit digital touchpoints later on. The ultimate goal would be a continuous digital journey that allows users to explore freely and move from platform to platform seamlessly. And one which would be easy to use for both front-end users as well as back-end users for internal uptake and long-term sustainability.

Interviewees share that digital should also be considered a different medium altogether, rather than a direct replication of the physical museum experience. This was especially true for virtual exhibits. Stand-alone, bite-sized, interconnected content garnered more engagement through user-directed exploration than content with a rigid, linear progression.

DESIGN TO BE USER-FRIENDLY

Current considerations (continued):

Employ design thinking process based on user experiences and an iterative process.

Interviewees are still learning about who digital audiences are, what their needs are, and how to best engage them. But many agree that digital initiatives need to start with the audience in mind. For institutions just beginning to implement digital tools, interviewees suggest focusing on one or two initiatives that align with the institution's core mission. The digital space is less formal and museums can be lo-fi and move fast and break things. Audiences can be forgiving and passion for the topic matters more than the production value. For intermediate or advanced institutions, interviewees suggest taking some risks and experimenting. Then pause to evaluate initiatives and iterate on improvements or drop them if they are not working.

Plan your infrastructure.

In terms of connections, a museum's internal digital infrastructure is important as well. This includes: digital asset management so information is organized and easily accessible, network connections for a seamless digital journey, the ticketing system, Wi-Fi in the galleries, etc. Externally, digital design needs to be considerate of the digital divide and bandwidth limitations for rural or remote communities in Canada.



Using the Augmented Alley app at the Canadian Science and Technology Museum

DESIGN TO BE USER-FRIENDLY



“There's still this challenge about digital literacy and building digital practices into workflow... They get all the assets, digitize them, and then it's like, oh, we need a digital version of this. As opposed to it being built side by side and conceptualized moving forward... That needs to happen [so] digital exhibits really become something distinctive and unique from the physical exhibit.”

“We started breaking out [content] and chunking it into articles and we brought on video production... We were able to share it in more manageable, contained, focused, and highly produced segments, and we saw a lot of really good engagement out of that... [These] can all be enjoyed and digested and understood in isolation from each other. And if people want to continue to go down the rabbit hole they can.”

“What I'm really missing is a digital development framework for museums that make sense at all... I would love to have tools to understand why audience are visiting our website and why they're using our digital services... But also how would I translate that, for instance, into a user interface that people actually appreciate? How would I structure my information in a way that people actually get what they're coming for?”

“Asset management is absolutely 100% fundamental to anything else that you want to do in digital... If we didn't have really good consistent data to start with, then it wouldn't be possible... It just gets to be a mess if you're trying to share stuff and you don't have a plan for how you're organizing it and tracking what you've used.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Wild Color exhibit at the Field Museum



“Let’s not forget that digital is just a tool to an end, not the end itself. The aim is to connect with audiences, to spread knowledge, to make the collection accessible to all, to foster creativity and critical thinking.”

KEY TAKEAWAYS

It's still a learning process for digital engagement.

It's a time of experimentation and success looks different for every museum. The pandemic forced an inflection point for digital engagement but most institutions are still in recovery mode and do not have firm plans moving forward yet. The arc of digital engagements is different depending on type of institution, resources available, institutional priorities, and many other factors.

The pandemic forced huge strides forward in digital and museums need to keep the momentum going.

With audiences operating in a hybrid world, there's no "going back." While the pandemic accelerated digital engagements at museums, there are still gaps in the understanding of user experiences and integration of digital across the entire user journey. However, digital ambitions are limited by staff capacity. There needs to be support for digital work to continue serving and expanding museum audiences.

Institutions need to be intentional about the purposes and target audiences for digital engagement.

Digital is just a tool, not the end goal itself. Institutions need to consider: who are we trying to reach? What's the impact we're hoping to have? How is this serving our mission? Interviewees also recommend a cross-functional digital strategy and content plan for better integration and alignment across the institution, rather than siloed initiatives.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



“We say we want to be hybrid now, but what does that mean? I'm a department of one in terms of the technology and digital experience... And it's not enough to have one person, especially now when we think about social media. Part of it is marketing, but part of it is engagement and it really crosses the line into interpretation... to be working with collections, exhibitions and education. So we want to go hybrid, but it's complex and challenging.”

“We've morphed into a content planning and strategy group... Instead of just getting together and saying, 'What do we want to do on digital?' It's 'What are our content priorities across the institution for every month and then what are we doing to actually communicate those priorities?'... That's better because digital becomes a part of the larger overall strategy, which is what I always wanted.”

“We want to think about our design intentions and our programmatic intentions, but what are the intentions of our audience?... We want to ensure that those intentions line up so that we don't create any barriers or we can mitigate those barriers as much as possible.”

“[Digital] is an investment in more work... Digital tools are something that people run to, to seem relevant. But if you're not relevant in the first place, the digital tool is not going to make you relevant.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A special thank you to the Art Gallery of Ontario and Mark McKay, Director Digital, for their partnership on this research. We are also grateful for each of the interviewees who generously shared their experiences and thoughts with us.

A webinar about this research entitled *“Spotlight on Digital Engagement: What works, what doesn’t, and how the pandemic changed the game”* was presented in partnership with the Canadian Museum Association on December 6, 2021. A recording of the session and presentation slides may be accessed here:
<https://www.museums.ca/site/conferencesevents/digitalengagement>

Questions or comments about this research report may be directed to:

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