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REVEALING THE MOTIVATIONS OF ONLINE MUSEUM AUDIENCES

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What are visitors looking for when they visit museum websites?



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SPECIALIZED IN DEVELOPING
DIGITAL STRATEGIES FOR
CULTURAL ORGANIZATIONS



Museum professionals have access to a myriad of tools that can reveal interesting information about online audiences. Softwares like Google Analytics provide detailed information about website visitors and their behaviour during their visit. Although this information can be useful to understand online audience behaviour, it often does not answer fundamental questions such as: "What is the motivation behind a museum website visit?"

In 2012 the Indianapolis Museum of Art[1] (United States) conducted a series of studies to answer that exact question. The results of their studies are published online[2]. In short, the museum team collected feedback from visitors in order to identify online motivational categories. With a list of those categories the team conducted an online survey asking visitors why they were visiting the museum website. They used the following multiple choice question: Today, I am visiting the website to:

- Plan a visit to the museum
- Find specific information for personal interest
- Find specific information for research or professional purposes

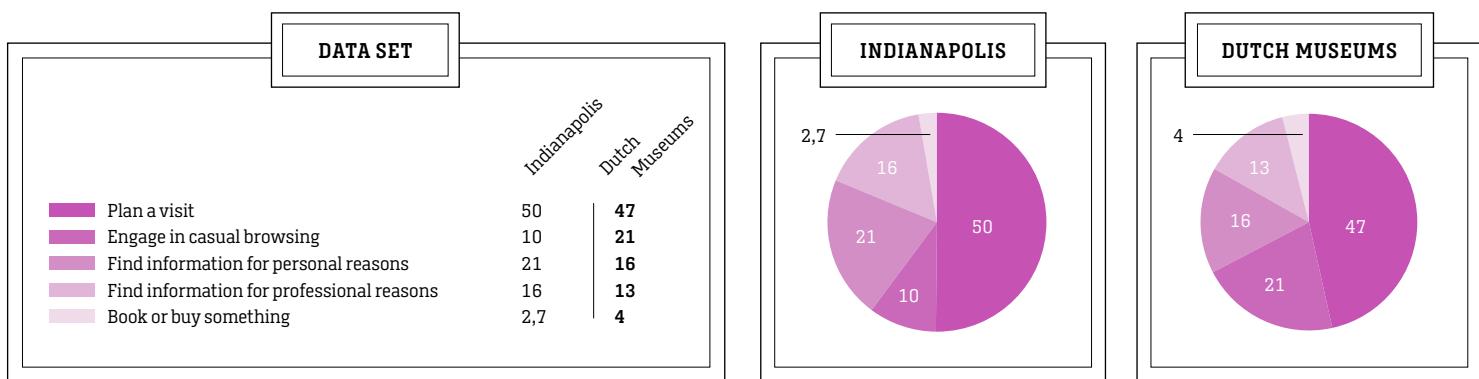
- Engage in casual browsing without looking for something specific
- Make a transaction on the website.

4,074 responses were collected. The Indianapolis Museum of Art published their research with the hope that the results would provide a reference dataset, and a replicable model for other museums interested in conducting similar studies to inform their own web activities.

That is exactly what 15 Dutch museums did in 2013, in the context of a research project dedicated to evaluating and understanding online success [3]. The museums used a bilingual survey in Dutch and in English. The survey was live for 30 days and was viewed by 1,300,000 online users. It got a 3.1% response rate, with 41,000 collected responses. I was involved in assisting participating museums in the collection and analysis of data. Three Ecsite members participated in the survey: Museon, Naturalis and NEMO.

The results were similar to those of the Indianapolis Museum of Art. A noteworthy exception was that in the Dutch research the proportion of casual browsing was significantly higher. A possible reason for that discrepancy is the fact that in the Dutch survey the option "Engage in casual browsing without looking for something specific" was presented as the first option.

Let me discuss the key findings. While participating institutions were museums, I think that interesting lessons can be learnt for all organizations combining a physical venue open to the public and an online website accessible to all, like science centres, zoos, botanical gardens, cultural centres...



Approximately half of online museum visitors are planning a museum visit

It should be no surprise that people browse through museum websites while preparing a visit to the museum's physical campus. From our research, 47% of online museum visitors are planning a visit to the museum. Across the 15 participating Dutch museums, figures ranged from 35% to 57%.

Most museum websites include practical information for those planning a visit although often that information is spread across several pages. Nowadays, Google also supplies most necessary pieces of practical information, such as address, telephone, opening hours and even a rating based on visitor reviews.

Since planning a visit is the main motivation to browse through museum websites, how can museums take a step further in facilitating that process?

A possible approach could be to send potential visitors an automated email including all necessary information: opening hours, admission fee, direction from visitors' locations to the museum based on preferred transportation modes and an overview of the programme available for the chosen day.

A large audience is interested in spending some of their leisure time online

An average of 16% of users visited museum websites for personal reasons whereas only 13% of visits had a professional motivation. This is an interesting finding as museums often struggle with the decision of customising their online information for scholars and museum professionals or for the "general public". Note that 37% of online visitors were either engaging in casual browsing or searching information for personal reasons.

It appears that just like people are interested in visiting physical museums venues, they are also interested in spending some of their leisure time visiting museum websites.

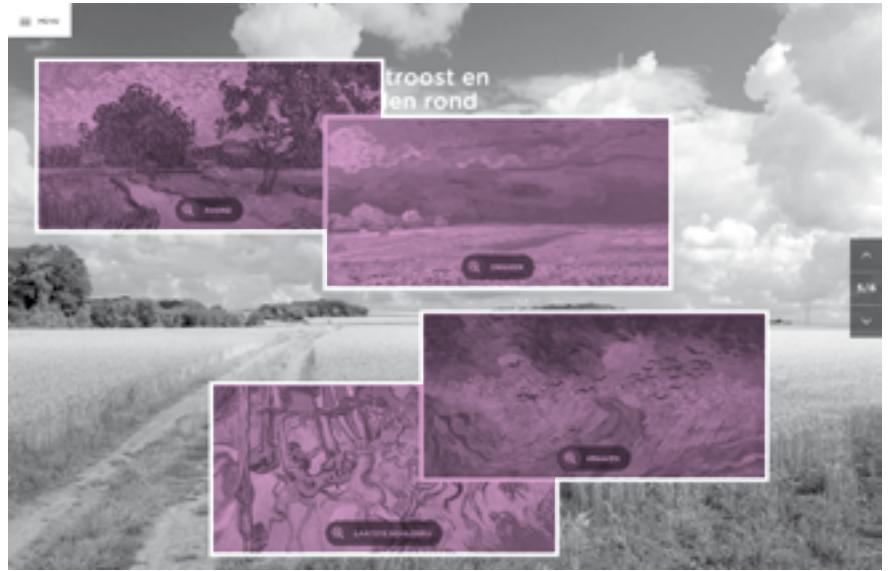
What can online visitors do and learn on museum websites? What do museum websites have to offer to these audiences? The Tate (United Kingdom) for instance prominently display on their front page a large image from their collections, not necessarily related to the programme at their physical branches: it is targeted at online audiences. The Rijksmuseum website (Amsterdam, The Netherlands) offers three clear options to online visitors: "Plan a visit", "Collection" and "About the museum". In the "Collection" section, visitors can explore or search both collection and library catalogues, as well as create and download their own collection using the "Rijksstudio"[4]. More recently the Van Gogh Museum (Amsterdam, The Netherlands) introduced a novel feature on their website. Besides navigating the collection, online visitors can read interactive stories about Vincent's life. These are three examples of interaction scenarios targeted at online audiences who are not necessarily professionals or planning a visit. Many museums produce audiovisual content of interest to online audiences at large, but this content is not always easily accessible on museum websites. This is a missed opportunity as there is a large audience interested in spending some of their leisure time online.

Notes & References

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"Nature and the artist", one of the dynamic online stories available at

www.vangoghmuseum.nl



Online museum visitors are interested in e-shopping

While planning the Dutch version of the online survey, participating museums considered removing the answer "To book for an exhibition or event, or buy something" from the survey. The main reason being that 8 out of the 15 museum websites did not include an e-commerce functionality. The group decided to keep the question in the survey for matters of consistency with the one conducted at the Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Despite the fact that more than half of participating museums did not offer e-commerce on their websites, we were surprised to find out that 4% of online visitors still intended to book an event or buy a product.

Museums have been experimenting with e-commerce for several years. Today museums use e-commerce possibilities to sell tickets for events, generate donations or memberships and to create online shops selling books and other products. There are several examples of museums successfully using e-commerce. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, United States) reported having generated \$4.5 million (approx. € 3.6 million) from online membership sales alone in the fiscal year of 2012[5]. In 2009-2010, the Victoria and Albert Museum (London, United Kingdom) reported an overall online retail net turnover of £614,862 (approx. € 688,000) which represented 9.4% of their overall retail income. Their website had a conversion rate of 1.63% which means that 1.63% of online visitors completed a successful transaction. These are two examples of museums successfully using their websites as an extra source of income. As museum gift shops are established revenue sources for museums, it is logical that online shops will follow a similar path.

Take part

In the spirit of open data, we have made the raw data collected during the online survey[6] accessible to all online. The survey was installed on the several museum websites using Quaraloo. We encourage other museums to conduct similar online surveys and to publish their results online. We are also collecting examples of museums:

- going one step further in terms of helping visitors to plan their visit
- offering experiences specifically developed for online audiences
- successfully using e-commerce.

Please feel free to send examples:
rui@intk.com
[@ruibeeep \(twitter\)](https://twitter.com/ruibeeep)

You can also browse through an online platform that delivers free social media reports for more than 3,000 museums worldwide.
www.museum-analytics.org