

Where's the Story?

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How do we evoke interest around our content across different channels? Perhaps we need to try to create creative communication channels instead of just 'information'?

How can we create more effective communications in the museums and heritage sector? The topics that we work with are rarely hot news for the media. When we get great exposure in traditional media usually this involves news of threatened heritage or cutbacks. But we should be able to create greater social relevance and get broader media exposure.

The local media around Sweden features news on exhibits and activities from time to time - but it usually occurs on radio and in the shadow of national news. Cultural institutions ought to be well placed to create connections between history and the modern world - yet we take so little space in contemporary discussion. Sure, I'm generalising a bit. But I often find that there is something missing.

The reasons for this vary of course - but perhaps something is missing in our communications with the outside world. As much as we talk about the story's power (e.g. the story of an exhibition) it is not often very clear in the marketing of our exhibitions, activities or experiences.

I think the story - the content itself - must play an even bigger part of marketing to create conditions for more strategic and creative communications with the outside world. Efficient and dynamic marketing can consist of an interplay between knowledge,

context and communication. We must therefore make sure we create a more appealing design when it comes to content - and we must work with all layers of context available. By context I mean all touch points with our audiences - context such as the surrounding content when you consider the placement of an ad in the newspaper or the news feed in Facebook.

What I often miss when it comes to museum and heritage industry communication is content that arouses my interest. We are often good at saying that we are open, accessible and the name of the exhibition - but very rarely do we offer any kind of dramatisation of what the content is about. Storytelling has long been a buzzword in the heritage sector - but honestly, how many good examples of it have we seen?

Communication rather than information

Perhaps it is that we need to be both more creative and more careful about how we create our communicative concept. The concept is the idea that dramatises the content - for example, in an exhibition. To create a successful concept needs content that is well thought out in tonality and design and is based on an understanding of the target group's motivations and needs. The concept must not be locked on one or a few media choices - but should be media independent.

Most of us use many different channels for our communication - everything from posters on local notice boards to social media. The concept must therefore be dramatised in many different channels. What I mean is that if, for example, there is a key message for an exhibition - perhaps that message could be varied in different channels. A longer text description of the material works, for example, less well in most social media – here we require more of the visual depiction and a faster, more powerful message. In social media, it is more important to build relationships with followers and create relevance in

the digital ecosystem - with content, engagement and participation. In other words – it's about effective communication rather than simply information.

The necessary conflict

When we are communicating our work, we need to consider how audiences take in and process information. We simply need to create touch points with both our rational and logical side, but also with our more creative side. The interplay between logic and creativity arises what is usually called the conflict - the turnaround in the design that arouses our curiosity and makes us think and rethink. Perhaps it can be said that the conflict is the twist or turning point that creates a talking point or is the basis for the media angle of a communication effort.

When Beyonce came to the museum

An example of a so called conflict is when my colleagues and I worked on communications for an exhibition of parasites on the Gothenburg Natural History Museum. We had arrived at a main message which was: *All that you really do not want to know about parasites*. The idea behind it was that parasites are often perceived as disgusting, unpleasant and dangerous, but also necessary for the ecosystem.

But when we developed the main message we chose to try to find contemporary touch points but also provide an unexpected angle on the content (in this case, parasites). We started to create a story that was based on a number of elements: the parasites are found almost everywhere, they constitute a majority of the biodiversity, they can be dangerous but is also vital, both for humans and biodiversity.

We wanted, in other words both to bid on content that is general knowledge, but also on an unexpected perspective. When we did the research we discovered that some biologists baptise newly discovered parasites (and other animals) after their idols.

So our main story was in this case:

What do Elvis, Bob Marley and Beyoncé have in common?

Besides being musical icons, they have also received various types of parasites named after them - stars in nature's own microcosm. More than half the species on Earth are parasites which means that they make up the majority of biodiversity. On 1 September, the exhibition Parasites - Life Undercover at the Gothenburg Natural History Museum. We will teach you everything you really need to know about ticks, lice, and the interaction between humans and parasites.

Here we can say that the conflict is both already in the headline and in the introduction to the subject - what these celebrities have in common and how the connection to the exhibition's topic parasites is established. The exhibition had an incredible impact in both traditional and social media - both in the number of editorial articles and comments and discussions in digital channels.

Knowledge, context and communication

The key to success was that we had created a main story and several micro-stories of parasites that we could vary in different channels throughout the exhibition period - in press releases and newsletters, in ads and digital channels. And we consistently built on the same basic motto and design. It gave us the opportunity to build and establish relationships with our stakeholders in various media.

According to Aristotle, each story has a beginning, a middle and an end. My belief is that a story can be launched in the marketing and communication of the exhibition content. We can offer interesting inputs to the topic, unexpected perspective (or topics) and create expectations for our audiences.

Quite simply – it's about the interplay between knowledge, context and communication.

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