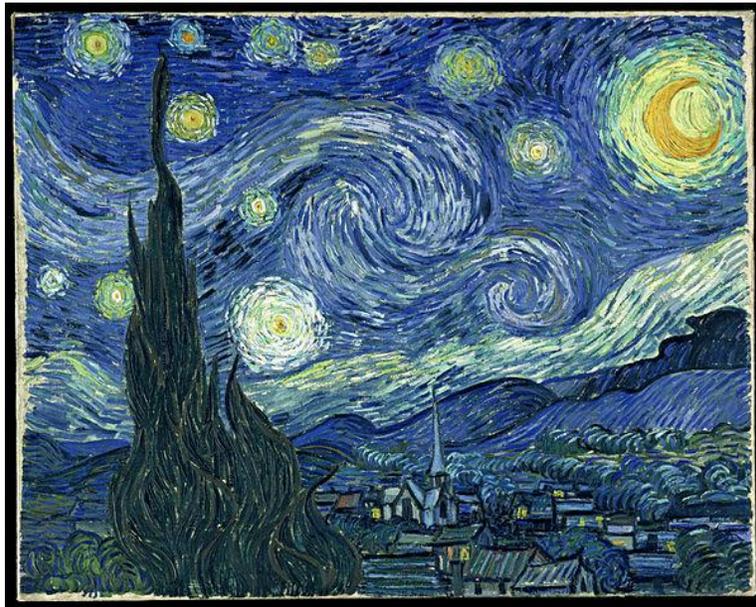


# Emotion and Inspiration at the Van Gogh Museum

*This article was originally published on Research Access - [www.researchaccess.com](http://www.researchaccess.com)*

*By Jeffrey Henning, President, Researchscape International*



At the 2013 ESOMAR Annual Congress in Istanbul, Laurine van de Wiel of the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam and Saskia Brocx of TNS NIPO in the Netherlands discussed “how emotion-based visitor research can create engaging brand experiences.”

“As researchers we help with everything from mortgages to beans packages but it was hard to look at this one and not feel stirred. Art is emotion. It touches us, and moves us,” said Saskia. The irony of art museum research is that in the past it has been more about still life than sunflowers. “Art bypasses rational response and goes to the heart of what moves us. Yet most art museum research is cold and quite boring data, about visitor numbers, easy to find locations, and clean toilets.”

The Van Gogh Museum contains the largest collection of Van Gogh paintings in the world, with 1.5 million visitors a year, placing it in the top 25 museums worldwide.

Visitors come from all corners of the world, and only 10-15% are from the Netherlands. The museum is “not a product or service but an experience, a destination, global but local.” And unlike most items subjected to research, there will be “no change in the product—there will never be a Sunflowers 2.0.” With an unchanging product, the museum faces “more competition from outside the category, as there is a lot more to Amsterdam.”



The mission of the museum is “Make the life and work of Vincent Van Gogh and the art of his time accessible to as many people as possible in order to enrich and inspire them.” The challenge was how to merge emotion into the brand. As Van Gogh himself said, “Let’s not forget that the little emotions are the great captains of our lives and we obey them without realizing it.”

TNS NIPO has done audience research for 80 other museums in Netherlands through the TNS Museum Monitor, a multi-client audience monitor. According to this research,

each aspect of a visit builds to produce greater loyalty, from making a visitor think, to teaching them, surprising them, touching them, and inspiring them. Too often inspiration was what was missing from the art museum experience itself.

TNS used its **NeedScope** model to understand emotive needs, segment visitors, and evaluate current and competitive brand delivery. The methodology went “beyond functional needs to the deep-seated emotive level to quantify them and identify strengths and weaknesses.” It includes a consumer brand relationship model, a psychological model, and a projective approach. “Instead of asking questions directly,” said Saskia, “we used projective techniques so that people can talk about someone else, to get to the core of what they really want to express about the museum experience.”

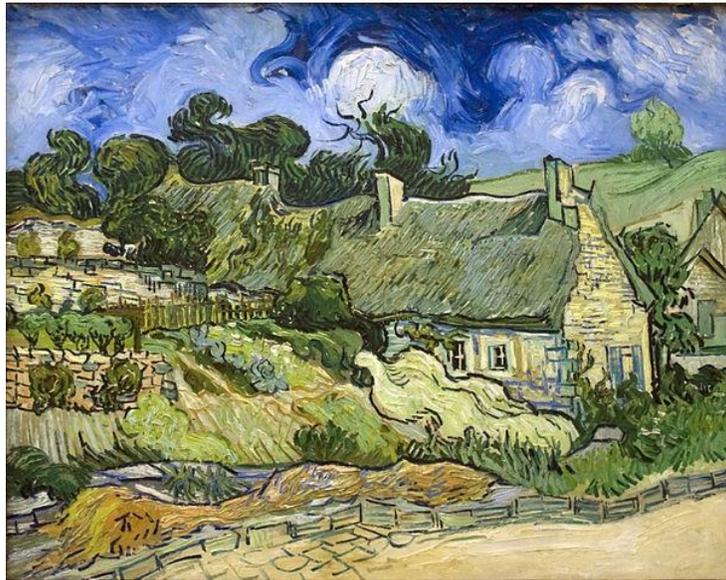


The research identified six different segments of visitors:

1. Trendy Hedonist
2. Willful Discoverer
3. Classic Connoisseur
4. Intellectual Specialist

5. Docile Admirer
6. Easy-going Connector

“Should the Van Gogh museum try to offer something for everyone? Or should we create a unique brand experience?” asked Laurine. “We want to reach as many people as possible, and it feels counterintuitive to exclude audiences.”



After much debate, the museum decided to refocus from being all things to all people to excel at serving the Easy-Going Connector. “We were convinced that it was very important to set ourselves apart. If we were anything to anyone, it would be hard to deliver on expectations. We will create a unique brand that sets expectations and delivers to those.” The Easy-Going Connector wants “a shared experience with someone; something open, low key, accessible, that delivers a fun day out.”

The museum is integrating this new positioning throughout its strategy. “We must ensure that we convey a spark, move people, guide them, get them to think about things they might not initially have given much thought.” Changes have ranged from the minor to the major. For instance, plaques have been rewritten to be more intimate:

instead of saying “The Van Gogh Museum shows...” the plagues now say “We show...” While Van Gogh’s insecurities and psychological condition had long been downplayed, they are now featured: “We want to bring Van Gogh closer and to involve the visitor more. We used to shy away from referring to Van Gogh’s mental issue; we feel more confident now to share that.”

Laurine concluded, saying, “As Saskia said earlier, it is quite a paradox that for a museum where your experience is driven by emotion, we had not used emotion as part of the research. We found that this new way of research was the way to discover new things about our customer that we could implement in our strategy. The research has taught us to be accessible and recognizable.”

*Jeffrey Henning, PRC is president of Researchscape International, a market research firm providing [custom surveys](#) to small businesses. He is a Director at Large on the Marketing Research Association's Board of Directors; in 2012, he was the inaugural winner of the MRA's Impact award. You can follow him on Twitter [@jhenning](#).*