Case study
Dickens: Dark London app
Museum of London
Vicky Lee, Marketing Manager

Supported by

Created and managed by

In partnership with

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the audience agency

**Background**

To coincide with the Dickens and London exhibition, the Museum of London launched an iPhone and iPad app which takes users on a journey through the darker side of Charles Dickens's London.

Beautifully imagined by illustrator David Foldvari, this graphic novel follows Dickens on his night walks of London. Accompanying audio by actor Mark Strong (Tinker Tailor Solder Spy, Sherlock Holmes), gives voice to Dickens as passages from his works provide vivid descriptions of the Victorian capital. Bonus material featuring illustrated excerpts of some of Dickens' most famous novels also brings to life the 19th century city that Dickens used as the backdrop for many of his greatest works, and 'hotspots' within the novel provides factual insight into the London which the author knew so well.
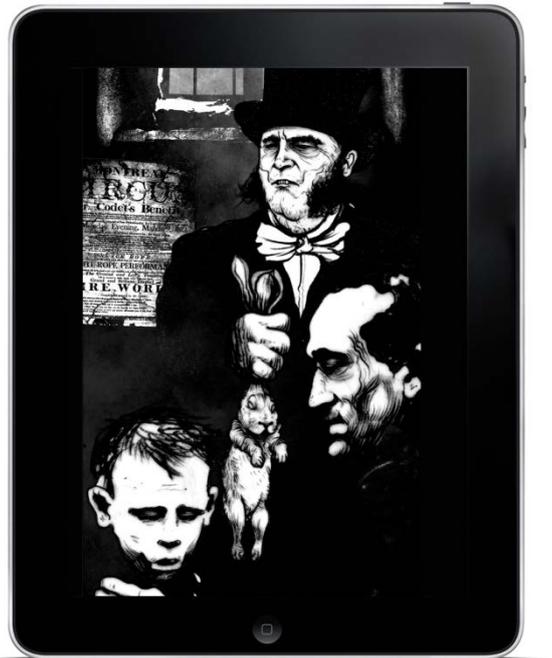
Drawn from a selection of his short stories featured in Sketches By Boz, Dickens: Dark London was published monthly throughout the run of the exhibition to echo how Dickens himself released his writings. All editions of the app were brought together on an 1862 map of London, overlaid on a modern satellite map of the capital, allowing users to compare the city that Dickens knew with the London of today.

The first edition was made available free of charge, while each subsequent edition could be downloaded for £1.49.

Objectives

- To continue repositioning the Museum of London as a modern, connected destination, building on our reputation for developing innovative apps including Streetmuseum and Streetmuseum Londinium
- To achieve at least 50,000 downloads of the app
- To generate substantial national and international media coverage
- To raise awareness of and drive footfall to the Dickens and London exhibition, contributing to our target of 75,250 visitors
- Increased footfall to the Museum of London, contributing to our target of 463,000 visitors in 2012/13.

Target audience

Primarily adult Londoners, particularly those with an interest in literature, Charles Dickens, graphic novels and London history, as well as overseas and domestic tourists with smartphones.

Process

To coincide with the opening of Dickens and London, the first charging exhibition since the museum's relaunch in 2010, we teamed up with creative agency Brothers and Sisters (who created our Streetmuseum and Streetmuseum Londinium apps), to develop an app which would generate coverage for and visitors to our exhibition.

The agency was briefed in June 2011, six months before the exhibition opened. In August they pitched a unique concept – an interactive graphic novel app for iPad and iPhone, Dickens: Dark London, which would launch on the same day as the exhibition in December.

To make our modest budget go further, we experimented with a new way of working, introducing a download charge and agreeing on a commercial venture with the agency in return for reduced fees.

Between us we agreed on an illustrator, David Foldvari, who would deliver each of the five editions. Working closely with the exhibition curator, the illustrations were made as historically accurate as possible, using images from the museum's archive. Additional content was also put together by the museum to provide interesting facts connected to each of the short stories.

We then searched for a well-known name to narrate the stories, striking gold when British actor Mark Strong agreed to the job.

At every step of the way, the museum had a chance to feed into the process and make amends and comments, even attending the recording of the audio to ensure the interpretation was as Dickens intended.

To encourage footfall to the exhibition the agency included an option so that users could download charged editions for free when they visited the Museum of London. They could also download editions from their location on the map.

Outcomes

- Helped us to continue repositioning the Museum of London as a modern, connected destination
- Over 60,000 downloads of the app to date
- Substantial national and international media coverage including a spread in The Times
- 95,000 visitors to the Dickens and London exhibition, against a target of 75,250 visitors
- 478,706 visitors to the Museum of London in 2012/13, against a target of 463,000

Key points for effective practice

Be bold – stand out by being the first to do something. With digital you have to take a few risks to see what works and what doesn't.

From this project we learnt that our apps aren't realistic revenue streams. A surprisingly high number of users decided to visit the museum or the editions' locations on the map in order to download them for free. This was positive in terms of driving footfall but didn't help us recover costs. If you're developing an app to raise your profile then think of it as a piece of advertising or PR. As long as the campaign has met its objectives, any income generated is just a bonus. In the museum sector you generally don't develop apps with the sole intention of making money.

Conclusion

The Dickens: Dark London app was undisputedly niche – graphic novels aren't for everyone. But it worked far more successfully then we could have imagined because we produced something unique and innovative, which captured the imagination of press and public alike. Dickens: Dark London helped consolidate our reputation as a leader in the field of cultural apps, and it supported our ongoing efforts to reposition the Museum of London as a modern and dynamic destination.

The Dickens and London exhibition was a great success, and, as with Streetmuseum and the launch of the Galleries of Modern London before it, this was in part due to the word of mouth and media coverage generated by the app. Apps can be cost effective tools for reaching your target audience. It doesn't matter how big or small your venue is, a good app can get everyone talking about you and really put you on the map.

www.museumoflondon.org.uk/apps