

Case study

How to start a conversation with a mass audience:

“I went to MoMA and...”

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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The Museum of Modern Art in New York City is one of the world's most iconic art museums, a destination for some three million art lovers from around the world each year. Since its founding in 1929, MoMA has been one of the top cultural attractions in New York, and it is the second most visited art museum in the city. New York City has been on a roll as the top U.S. destination in recent years, attracting record levels of visitors. In 2012, 52 million people came to New York City (up from 44 million in 2006), with some 41 million coming from the domestic United States.

Given this strong and growing pool of potential cultural visitors, MoMA needed to reinforce and clarify its position as a place where people engage in a deep way with the best of modern and contemporary art, and, in keeping with our mission, to “fuel creativity, ignite minds, and provide inspiration.”

Initially our objective was to create an “evergreen” brand campaign, one that would focus on the year-round experience of visiting MoMA rather than on any particular exhibition, and to target domestic visitors to New York City, particularly those from the tri-state area around Manhattan: New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut.

It started in April 2011 with the simplest of tools: pencils and notecards, printed with the words: “I Went to MoMA and...” with a blank space to fill in, and a line for visitors to record where they were from, first names, and date of visit. Although it was tempting, we deliberately avoided asking for e-mail addresses or any identifiable information, in order to reinforce that this was not simply a marketing campaign. We passed out cards and pencils to our visitors, suggested they tape their cards up on our lobby wall, and waited and watched. We wondered: Would people use the space to write inappropriate comments or complain?



We needn't have worried. MoMA's creative audience revealed itself in a wide array of emotions: expressions of enthusiasm, humor, love, and inspiration; drawings, portraits, sketches of artworks and food, elaborate typography; questions about what they didn't understand, and in some cases, pointed criticism.

One little girl, Annabelle, took MoMA to task for not having a dinosaur. “And you call yourself a museum!” she chided. When this exchange lit up social media channels (it was far too delightful to keep to ourselves), the Smithsonian published a blog post offering to loan us a dinosaur for the Sculpture Garden!

The responses were so personal, authentic, funny, and observant that we built a campaign around them—in print, digital, billboards, even a 60-foot fence banner on 53 Street outside the Museum. But we discovered that enthusiastic public participation, the core concept of the campaign, propelled it beyond a marketing tactic, and led to its creation as a digital feature of the visitor experience in the Museum lobby over the last several years.



Once the campaign flight ended, we had literally tens of thousands of cards stacked up in our offices. With the help of the New York-based agency POKE, we devised a digital system where visitors could fill out a card, scan it, and see it projected on the lobby wall. The scans were then uploaded to a dynamic website, ultimately creating a 21-century digital version of the museum guest book. Some 32,000 cards from 83 countries were uploaded (see them all at MoMA.org/iwent) with popular tags including “inspiration,” “love,” “parents + kids,” “food + art,” and my personal favorite, “I can be an artist.”

Social media channels helped drive nearly 100,000 site views, with 15% coming directly from Facebook and 4.5% from Twitter. The project was recognized with a Webby “People’s Voice” Award for mobile and experience marketing, was written about on blogs, and became a topic for case studies in books and magazines on brand and graphic identity.



This fall the lobby installation will give way to a new display of art, but the cards submitted will remain online. After engaging tens of thousands of MoMA visitors for more than two years, the project is our longest-running campaign to date and a potent reminder that the best kind of marketing lets the public in to play. Judith Dobrzynski, author of the arts blog Real Clear Arts, captured both the visitor impact and our organizational goal so precisely in her headline:

“I went to MoMA and...made a lasting memory!”