

Marketing the unknown: a case study on the campaign for the BP exhibition *Scythians: warriors of ancient Siberia* at the British Museum

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When I first found out that a major exhibition was being planned on the ancient culture of the Scythians, I can't pretend that I wasn't concerned. The exhibition sounded incredible but being a marketer with the primary objective of selling tickets, it was a worry. I expected 95% of the population (if not more) would never have heard of the Scythians. Compared with our recent popular exhibitions focused on historical cultures including Vikings and Celts, it felt like a tricky proposition.

My suspicions were confirmed when around a year from the opening, we invited focus groups to see what they thought of the idea of the show. Their first task was to write on post-it notes everything that they knew or could guess about the Scythians. Unsurprisingly knowledge was limited. Some wrote 'Americans', 'something to do with scythes', we even had 'the grim reaper'. One person said, 'nomadic people of the steppe', but they were certainly not the norm. Most people had no preconceived ideas about who these people were, no vision (however inaccurate) in their heads about what they might look like or how they lived. And this was a problem, because without some connection or even recognition, it is very difficult to get people to spend their money on an exhibition ticket.

So how do you get people to engage with something that they have no idea about? Our strategy was to do the following:

1) To focus on frequency and repeating creative to make the Scythians more familiar

Focus group feedback indicated it was important that the marketing campaign used a representation of a Scythian (rather than just one of their objects) to help develop a connection with the Scythian people. We therefore decided to use a gold object that showed a Scythian warrior on horseback for our marketing creative.

To make the Scythians familiar we needed to have them everywhere. This is obviously difficult to achieve without a vast marketing budget but we tried to give a sense of repetition as much as possible throughout the campaign.

One way that we did this was to keep the creative consistent. For some exhibitions we will change the creative part way through a campaign. This was too much of a risk with Scythians, as we needed the Scythian horseman to become something recognisable for people. We therefore used him repeatedly and consistently across every aspect of the marketing, from leaflets and underground posters to our digital ads and our exhibition trailer, which brought him to life through animation. This common thread helped to unite the campaign.

We also ditched our more traditional approach of having phased advertising (around opening, the middle of the show and for final weeks) in favour of having a consistent 'always on' approach and sacrificed large formats for smaller ones with greater frequency, getting our creative out to more people.

The evaluation survey of visitors to the exhibition suggested that this strategy worked. In fact, despite the unfamiliar subject matter, a higher proportion of visitors recognised the outdoor advertising than previous exhibitions with larger marketing budgets.

2) To acknowledge people's lack of knowledge

Instead of shying away from people's lack of knowledge we embraced it. We didn't want anyone to see the advertising for the exhibition and to feel that, because they didn't know who the Scythians were, that the show wasn't for them. Copy was written indicating that the Scythian culture had been 'forgotten' and this was the chance to 'rediscover' their lost civilisation. Our introduction blog started by stating 'you probably haven't heard of the Scythians, but that's ok'. We also used a strapline in a lot of the marketing materials: 'Prepare to meet the most fearsome warriors you've never heard of'. In this way we helped to provide reassurance that it was ok not to have heard of the Scythians, and to create excitement in the discovery that you were going to be making by coming to see the exhibition.

3) To unpack the story of the Scythians using content, both organic and paid

We knew it would be essential to tell the story of the Scythians in order to get people to buy a ticket. When we first met with the focus groups they had no knowledge of or interest in the Scythians but when the curator started talking about the subject matter, the group came to life. We knew if we could intrigue people they would want to know more. Content was therefore a crucial element of the campaign.

When we announced the exhibition, we made sure we had a suite of engaging blog content available for people to find out more. Our 'Introducing the Scythians' blog was created as an easily-to read list article and written to try to capture the imagination of our audience. It ran through various attributes of the Scythians – from their reputation as formidable warriors, through to their tattoos and their practice of mummifying their dead. This was an important piece of content for us and was recycled throughout the campaign in email, social and in advertising.

We developed nine other blogs on topics from the preservation of tombs to Scythian horses and used external spokespeople, such as the historian Dan Snow, to write for us to extend the reach of these further. In total the blogs received over 140,000-page views, making them some of our most successful ever pieces of blog content. The 'Introducing the Scythians blog' alone received 54,000 hits.

Social media was important for helping to unpack the story of the Scythians and the campaign was successful in engaging our followers. As part of the campaign we broadcast three Facebook Lives on the exhibition, allowing people to interact and ask questions to the curator and other experts, which had an amazing reach with over 335,000 views and comments coming in from over 70 countries.

We also made content a focus of the paid advertising campaign. We used a content advertising company to programmatically distribute a specially created blog across a variety of sites, looking like editorial content. We invested in the Google lightbox, a content rich ad format on the Google Display Network. When you hover, or click on the ad, it expands to show video, blogs and image galleries. In total over 7,000 people opened and interacted with

the Lightbox and it delivered a good return on investment in terms of driving ticket sales. We also used a variety of content to reach target audiences through paid social activity.

4) Relate the Scythians to people's existing knowledge and interests to help develop connections

As I have discussed, much of the campaign played on people's lack of knowledge of the Scythians, reassuring audiences that it was ok not to know who they were. However, we also used content that could link with people's existing interests and frames of reference to help develop connections and encourage engagement with the exhibition subject matter.

The tattoos of the Scythians were particularly interesting to the focus groups and helped the Scythians to seem more human and less remote. We therefore developed a Q&A blog with a man who had been tattooed with the same designs found on a Scythian mummy. We put this out organically as well as boosting the post on Facebook to reach people interested in tattoos or tattooing and history, enabling us to reach a new audience that we wouldn't be able to get to through our organic content alone.

To time with the launch of series seven of Game of Thrones in July 2017, we created a blog on the similarities between the Scythians and the Dothraki (for those who aren't fans of the show, the Dothraki are a fictional tribe, partly inspired by the Scythians and other steppe cultures). The idea for this came from a conversation with my family at Christmas. I was trying to explain who the Scythians were and the Dothraki seemed like a good and engaging way of describing them. The blog was put out organically using the Game of Thrones hashtag to tie into conversations that people were having around the TV show at that time. We also boosted the post on Facebook to reach people who didn't follow the museum but had both Game of Thrones and ancient or medieval history as interests. The press office pitched the story to the Telegraph and the blog was featured in an article, which extended the reach of this further. Through creating this content, we tapped into a trend and made the Scythians less remote by placing them within people's own frame of reference.

Conclusion

The marketing campaign was a success and the exhibition exceeded its visitor target. We also learnt a lot in the process. I realised that more than ever content isn't just something that it is nice to have, it is essential to marketing campaigns and just as important as advertising. I also realised how crucial it is to listen to our audience and to make sure what we are delivering is meeting their needs, whilst also surprising and intriguing them, which is what the British Museum does so well.

Key takeaways

- Ensure that you are always keeping the audience in mind when developing campaigns. Focus groups are a great opportunity to test ideas and get a sense of what your audience is going to respond to. If you don't have the budget to do something formal like this, speaking to your audience in whatever way you can will provide useful insights.

- Make sure that content is a key part of your exhibition marketing strategy and that you are considering how content can be used across the campaign.
- Try talking to friends and family about your project. It can help you think about how you frame the proposition in an engaging, and less formal, way.
- Unfamiliar subject matter doesn't have to mean that it is going to be a struggle to sell tickets! Think creatively and provide interesting ways in to the subject matter.