

The  
**WOW**  
toolkit

How museums can use emotional branding to grow their support  
June 2024

Art Fund\_

# Museums, emotion and brand

Art Fund commissioned two big pieces of research, in 2020 and 2022. We found that:

1. Museums should make more use of emotion to grow support – to give people an emotional reason to visit, use, give to and speak up for them.
2. The techniques of branding can help turn positive emotions into long-term commitment.
3. There are three levels of emotion that museums should try to appeal to.
4. There's sometimes a gap between the emotions that motivate the public, and those that motivate people in the sector: this means that museums may need to think and act differently.
5. For many members of the public, the barriers to making more use of museums are practical, rather than cultural – but museums do need to break down three big barriers.

We made four recommendations...

# 1.

## Burst the bubble

Get outside usual museum thinking, and challenge the museum stereotypes

Talk to some of the people you don't already reach

Find what excites them, what troubles them, what you could do with them

# 2.

## Find your emotional big idea

Start with what makes you distinctive and relevant – why you matter, your wow

This is your brand

Commit to a long-term plan to build it: not necessarily an expensive campaign, but rather a lot of small but consistent actions

# 3.

## Communicate the emotional benefits

Use ordinary language

Work up the pyramid: communicate pleasure first, purpose later

Counter the barriers by showing that you're nearby, affordable and always changing

# 4.

## Evolve what you offer, and how you work

Create programming that maximises the sense of pleasure, connection and purpose

Shift the power balance, so that you're doing things *with* people, not for them

Develop an outward-looking culture, working with partners from outside the sector

Develop a producer mindset, aim to create shows quickly, experimenting and learning

This document is the start of a practical toolkit

## Burst the bubble

Less of...

The museum's  
perspective



More of...

The community's  
perspective

## Find your emotional big idea

Less of...

Short-term  
campaigns



More of...

Long-term  
brand

## Communicate the emotional benefits

Less of...

Head



More of...

Heart

## Evolve what you offer, and how you work

Less of...

Doing  
things for  
the audience



More of...

Doing  
things with  
the audience

# Burst the bubble

Less of...  
The museum's  
perspective



More of...  
The community's  
perspective

The opportunity: attract support from new audiences by breaking away from museum stereotypes and language

## Be more than a museum

Find multiple functions for your spaces, all of value to your community.

Example: Tŷ Pawb is also an indoor market and food court.

## With your colleagues, play 'assumption reversal'

Brainstorm people's assumptions about what museums are like, and try reversing them. What new ideas does this suggest?

Example: What if our museum didn't have a collection? Or never closed? Or never opened? Or was a place where the audience were the experts?

See also: [The power of assumption flipping](#).

## Go beyond the sector

When you next hire a communications agency or freelancers, bring in voices from outside the museums sector – they'll break out of the museum conventions.

Example: Food Museum hiring a video producer from outside the sector.



# Burst the bubble

The opportunity: attract support from new audiences by breaking away from museum stereotypes and language

## Extend your network into the unknown

Who do you already know in communities you don't normally reach? Ask to meet up, in their space, not yours. Ask them what they'd like to get from your museum – and ask them who else they know. Gradually extend this network into an ideas team.

Example: Manchester Museum's south Asia collective; Black Country Living Museum out at a shopping centre; Tŷ Pawb co-producing with the local Portuguese community.

See also: [Inclusivity: How to make your brand inclusive of trans and non-binary folks.](#)

## Talk differently

Find a style or a medium that we don't associate with museums.

Example: Black Country Living Museum using local dialect.

See also: [Voicebox.](#)

Less of...  
The museum's  
perspective



More of...  
The community's  
perspective



# Finding your emotional big idea

The opportunity: build long-term support through a warm, exciting brand

## Create a brand team

Pick a cross-section of employees and volunteers. Free them up to think long-term: how would you like people to feel about your museum ten years from now?

## Go on an adventure

As a team, visit other places near you that people visit (not just museums). Keep a diary of your emotions as you go round. What can you learn from them?

See also: [Service safari](#).

Less of...  
Short-term  
campaigns



More of...  
Long-term  
brand



# Finding your emotional big idea

The opportunity: build long-term support through a warm, exciting brand

## Use the brand butterfly

### 1 Start with an outside view

Who would you most like to attract? What's going on in their world? How are they feeling? What do they worry about? What do they really care about? What do they watch, play, listen to? What's new? What do they desire?

### 2 Then look inside

Involve all your colleagues in this. What's really special about your museum? What are you doing that's new and emerging? What do you all love? As a team, what excites you, what drives you?

### 3 Find the overlap

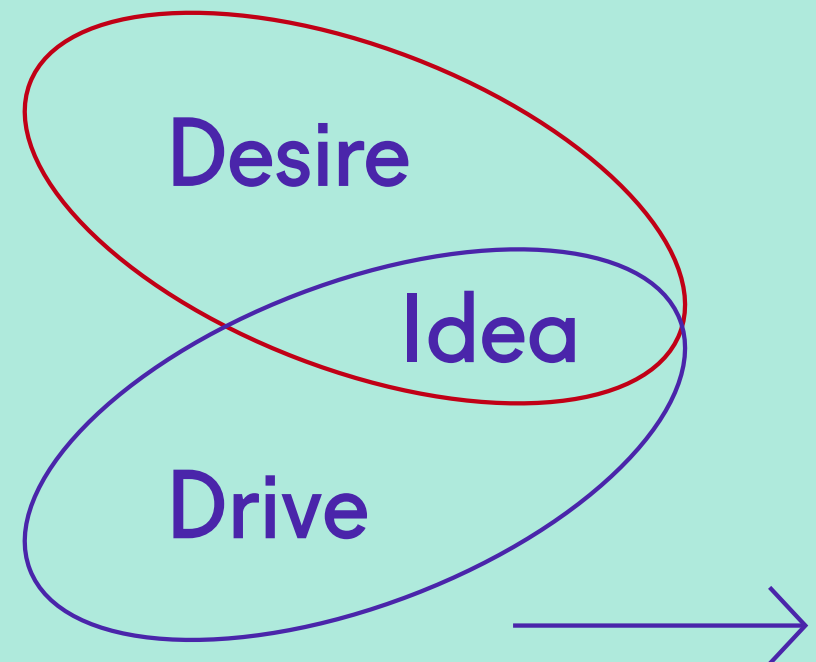
What do you have that meets people's needs? Where does your drive coincide with their desire? What's your wow? Write it in the plainest language, using big, emotional ideas. Don't over-think it, but feel it.

Examples: Food Museum 'connecting people with where their food comes from'; Manchester Museum 'building understanding between cultures'; Tŷ Pawb as 'a cultural home for all'.

Less of...  
Short-term  
campaigns



More of...  
Long-term  
brand





# Finding your emotional big idea

The opportunity: build long-term support through a warm, exciting brand

## Let this idea drive everything

Not just your marketing and communication, but your collection, interpretation, programming, shop, internal working culture... everything. This will play out over the long term. Think about lots of small actions – it doesn't need an expensive advertising campaign.

Example: The Story Museum.

See also: [What's the big idea?](#)

[More ideas here](#)

Image caption: The Story Museum, Oxford, Museum of the Year finalist 2022. © Emli Bendixen / Art Fund

Less of...  
Short-term  
campaigns



More of...  
Long-term  
brand



# Communicating the emotional benefits

The opportunity: capture people's loyalty by appealing to their emotions

## Start in your audience's hearts

As you plan your communication, step into your audience's worlds: write about what excites them, not what you want to say.

Example: The Story Museum: 'start with how visitors experience you'.

See also: [Pleasure, connection and purpose](#).

## Play the benefits game

As you craft your messages, translate the features of your museum/exhibition/show into emotional benefits for your audience. Then talk about benefits first, features second.

## Welcome all emotions

The sad, painful, difficult ones too.

Example: Black Country Living Museum welcomes exploration of unhappy memories and stories from the past.

Less of...  
Head



More of...  
Heart

## Be yourself

Don't over-think things.

Example: Tŷ Pawb's 'honesty over strategy'.

See also: [Putting your brand voice into action](#).

## Appoint a people's editor

Pick someone in your team to make sure your museum's communications are in the language of ordinary people, not unemotional museum-speak.

## Use picture power

Images evoke emotion more easily than words. Invest in great emotional photography, or in characterful illustrations.

Example: Food Museum uses free-form illustrations to convey its brand personality.

# Communicating the emotional benefits

The opportunity: capture people's loyalty by appealing to their emotions

## Work the pyramid

As you map out your messages, work up the pyramid: communicate pleasure first, then connection. Purpose matters, but more to people who are already insiders or fans.

See also: [Using segmentation to find an audience for The Postal Museum.](#)

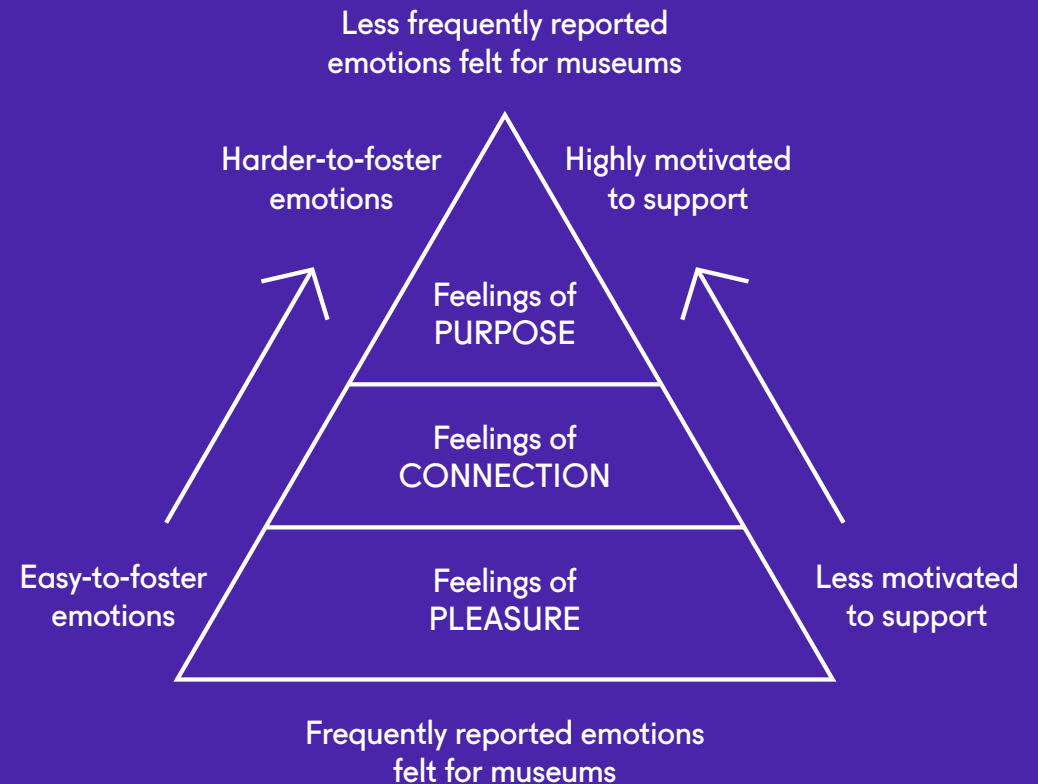
## Talk about the whole

In your socials and advertising, sell the whole museum, not just individual shows and events: that way you constantly build an emotional connection, and every post or poster reinforces the last one.

Less of...  
Head



More of...  
Heart



# Communicating the emotional benefits

The opportunity: capture people's loyalty by appealing to their emotions

## Tear down barriers

Counter the emotional barriers that many audiences feel, by showing that you're nearby, affordable and always changing.

Example: Black Country Living Museum.

## Say, do, repeat

Create a set of standard messages and images and use them over and over again. Assume no prior knowledge in your audiences. When you start to get bored with your messages... that's when the world has just started to notice.

Example: Manchester Museum is happy to repeat a set of straightforward messages about who it is and what it does.

See also: [Weaponise brand recognition!](#)

Less of...  
Head



More of...  
Heart



# Evolving what you offer, and how you work

The opportunity: deepen support by making your audience your partners

## Make the case

Define what needs to change, and show how this will help your museum achieve its objectives and strategy. Get buy-in from every level.

### Create a beacon of change

Don't try and change everything – work on one space or event or exhibition to get people excited.

Example: Manchester Museum's South Asia Gallery.

## Use backwards design

When you create programming, start with the emotions you want to evoke – pleasure, connection, purpose and more – and work backwards.

Less of...  
Doing things for  
the audience



More of...  
Doing things with  
the audience

## Follow your true north

Keep reminding colleagues about your emotional 'big idea', and use it to help decide what to do, and how to do it.

See also: [The brand gap](#).

## Hire from outside

When you can, hire people who know your topic, but who don't have a museum background. Wherever you can, work with your audience, current and future.

Example: Food Museum's food anthropologist.

## Look out

Create a permanent system that brings in outsider views. Survey the people who don't already visit. Set up a youth board.

# Evolving what you offer, and how you work

The opportunity: deepen support by making  
your audience your partners

## Think of your audience as collaborators

They're fellow participants, not just consumers. Ask not 'What can we do for you?' but rather 'What can we all do together?'

Example: Tŷ Pawb's 'with people, not for people.'

See also: [Jon Alexander on being Citizens, not Consumers.](#)

## Experiment and learn

Constantly watch to see what you're doing that's working best – what's really engaging people emotionally – and make time to reflect and learn.

Example: The Story Museum.

Image caption: Visitors in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year exhibition at Natural History Museum, 2024  
© The Trustees of the Natural History Museum, London

Less of...  
Doing things for  
the audience



More of...  
Doing things with  
the audience



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