

'It's all about those moments where people see something and say wow.'

Why museums should use emotional branding to grow their support



Image caption: Family on Mail Rail at The Postal Museum. © The Postal Museum

Art Fund exists to help museums and people share in great art and culture.

The UK's museums are already a huge success story. In 2019/20, around 50% of adults in England visited a museum – an impressive number.

But there's still a big opportunity to do more – to get more museums and more people sharing in more great art and culture. Could we grow that 50% to 80% nationally? And see people not just visiting museums, but using them – tapping into their resources, volunteering, donating, advocating for them?

To explore this opportunity, Art Fund commissioned two pieces of research, in 2020 and 2022, and this report presents their findings.

The two studies

The first study was carried out by [Robert Jones](#) for Art Fund in summer 2020. The project explored the idea of an umbrella brand for museums to help them all increase public support. Robert Jones interviewed 19 of the UK's most experienced voices on the cultural scene. He ran interviews and focus groups with 22 museum leaders, and a public survey through CitizenMe, checking against other surveys by YouGov and DJS. The findings were then refined through follow-up discussions with museum leaders and students.

The research showed huge enthusiasm for the idea of a brand for museums – but also a gap between museums and the public, and the need for a change of mindset in the sector to close that gap.

The second study was run by [MEL Research](#) for the [Association of Independent Museums \(AIM\)](#) and Art Fund in summer 2022. This project aimed to help museums gain sustained support, as they respond to the challenges of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. The study focused on seven museums, and involved interviews with museum leaders and community leaders, an online discussion with 24 members of the public and a survey of AIM members and the wider sector.

The research showed that museums should appeal to three levels of emotion in audiences: pleasure, connection and (to gain the deepest kind of support) purpose.

[Read the full report here.](#)

Though the two studies used different methods,
at different times, with different people,
they came to similar conclusions.

Combining them, we can draw out
five main findings...

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.

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.

The sector leaders we spoke to in 2020 were clear about the opportunity: to 'reach the 50% who don't go to museums'. And that means 'not an intellectual justification, more visceral'.

Almost all spoke about the emotional impact of museums at their best: 'It's all about those moments where people see something and say "wow"'.

At one level this is obvious. As a 2023 McKinsey report, *The arts in the UK: Seeing the big picture*, says: people 'are drawn by art's intrinsic aesthetic value – its ability to entertain, stimulate the senses, and trigger a wide range of emotional responses'.

MEL's research confirms this: 'Our research uncovered dozens of different emotional responses to museums – from joy to fascination to love'. MEL found that 'Nine key emotions stood out as powerful emotional drivers that rallied people to support a museum that mattered to them'. MEL concludes: 'To mount successful public campaigns, arguments in support of the museum need to resonate on an emotional level in the public consciousness ... This core emotional message acts as the "catch" – it's been proven that it is emotion that moves us to act, rather than rational argument.'

'Not intellectual...
more visceral'

'It is emotion
that moves us
to act'

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.

Case study: The Story Museum, Oxford

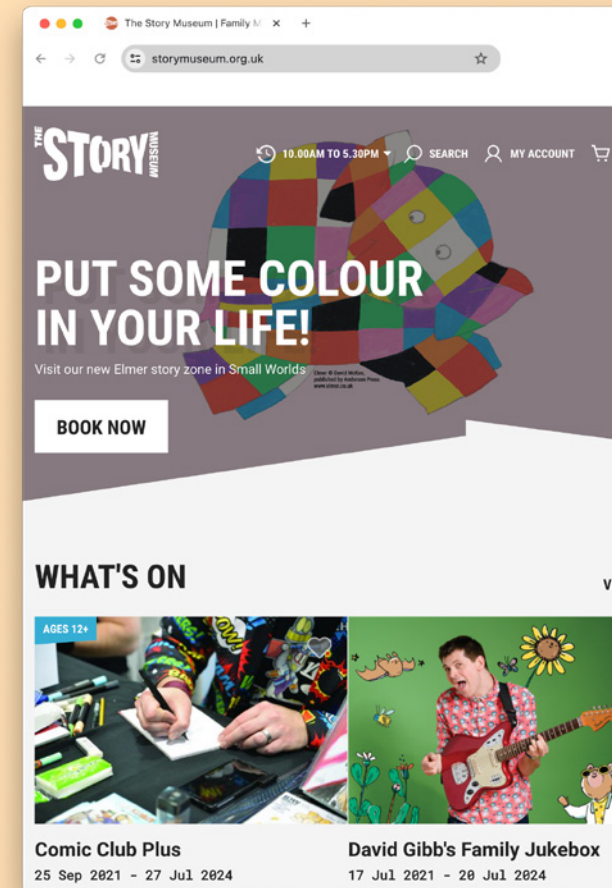
The Story Museum, which first opened as a public venue in 2014, is an extraordinary mix of museum, art gallery and immersive theatre, designed to help both children and adults find an emotional connection with stories. Emotion has therefore always been its secret sauce. The museum's core belief is that stories provide an emotional engagement that enriches lives. Children can 'push through the fur coats into Narnia'; adults can rediscover what it feels like to be a child.

The Story Museum expresses this emotional ethos through all its communication, particularly in its tone of voice. Its visual style is powerful and contemporary – not at all soft or childlike.

Branding partner: [David Carroll & Co](#)

The museum's logo is based on the visitor's emotional experience, suggesting there's a surprise round every corner, and the split in the O at the centre represents the opening of the museum's front gates. This exemplifies the Story Museum's approach to emotional communication: 'start with how visitors experience you, not what you want to say'. And success comes from constant experimentation: 'We see what really engages people, and learn from that'. Through the power of emotion, the museum's support has grown, with visitor numbers up 126% from 2017/18 to 2023/24.

Interestingly, the museum was founded by a former brand consultant, Kim Pickin, so ethos has always been the central driver.



2.

The techniques of branding can help turn positive emotions into long-term commitment.

The people we spoke to in 2020 saw an even bigger opportunity: to encourage a lifetime engagement with museums. 'Ideally there's an arc of engagement that goes right through an individual's life'. MEL recommends that museums 'see campaigns for support as the beginning of a longer-term relationship'.

And the key to lifetime commitment is to create a lasting emotional attachment, by standing for something that matters to people, something they identify with. This is branding in its deepest sense: as one sector leader said, 'We must be clear that brand equals ethos not logo'.

Good branding changes how people think, feel and act. One expert pointed out the need for change: 'There's a problem with the word [museum] – it's associated with the past'. Branding can change that perception, partly by tapping into deep emotional responses. As one sector expert suggested, 'Museums must shed [a] sense of the ancient, be about the future, a place where we can feel like a child again'.

The branding task, of course, never ends: 'Branding is a journey not a full stop'. And 'The brand has got to be real – action not just words'

'Brand equals ethos not logo'

2.

The techniques of branding can help turn positive emotions into long-term commitment.

Case study: Food Museum, Stowmarket, Suffolk

Back in the 2010s, the Museum of East Anglian Life saw its audiences dipping, as popular interest in its collection of farm buildings and machinery waned. Through a three-year consultation process with local people, it decided to reframe itself as the Food Museum – focusing on a topic with an emotional appeal to everyone. Visitor numbers increased by 40%. And in the year after the rebrand, the museum gained almost five times as many new members as in the year before.

The Food Museum has a clear ethos: 'to connect people with where their food comes from'. The museum created a brand that's all about the processes around food – growing, making and eating. The aim is to be reciprocal

Branding partner: [Spring](#)

– 'come and experiment with us' – and fluid, not to be a fixed centre of knowledge. The look and feel of the branding were designed to reflect the reality of the place: not slick and polished, but reflecting old buildings, mud, animals. The museum aims to come across as relatable, sometimes nostalgic, but balanced with relevant messaging about food today and environmental issues. They've found that illustrations really help evoke emotion – witty, with a slightly rustic edge.

Alongside a new name and communication style, the museum is evolving the way it presents its collection, in order to make the link with food, and has brought in a food anthropologist to curate an imaginative public programme.



3.

There are three levels of emotion that museums should try to appeal to.

In both studies, participants talked about a very wide range of emotions, but these emotions form natural clusters, and the MEL work suggests a three-level framework.

Feelings of PURPOSE

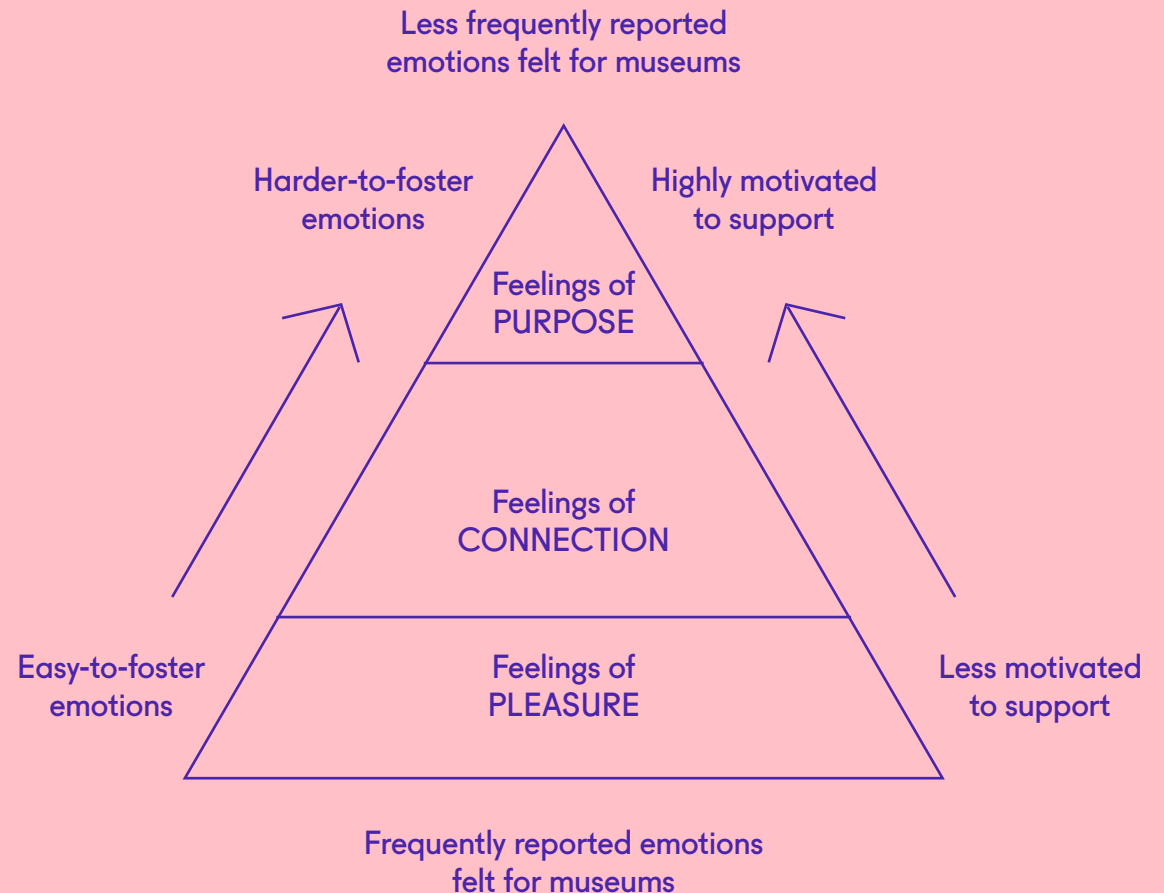
Responsibility, duty, usefulness, empowerment, knowledge, importance, self-awareness, success, influence, reverence, fulfilment, generosity

Feelings of CONNECTION

Connection, being 'seen', appreciation, relevance, understanding, cohesion, recognition, safety, value, attachment, support, ownership

Feelings of PLEASURE

Entertainment, delight, love, awe, wonder, satisfaction, amusement, excitement, confidence, amazement, joy, contentment



3.

There are three levels of emotion that museums should try to appeal to

The experts in our 2020 study talked about the emotional benefits of museums in many different ways, covering all three levels.

PURPOSE

We can gain 'an understanding of what we might become'

'The more we know about the world, the better we can make it'

'If you're a mum, museums feel nurturing, nourishing for kids'

CONNECTION

'A place for surprise – my most memorable experience was during A-levels, going into the Walker and stumbling across a work by Anish Kapoor'

'This other thing'

'A portal – a window into another consciousness'

'Theatres of the imagination'

'The exploration in all of us''

PLEASURE

'I look at an early Picasso in Glasgow, think it's survived two world wars, still hanging – comforting – it's enduring, timeless'

'Where I can be alone without being lonely'

'A highly sophisticated form of entertainment'

'Where my lifelong love of art began'

'Active engagement with a museum produces happier, healthier people'

3.

There are three levels of emotion that museums should try to appeal to.

Case study: Tŷ Pawb, Wrexham

In 2017, Wrexham's one-room art gallery needed to expand and modernise. At the same time, the town's indoor market had become unsustainable. So, in a bold move, the market building was redeveloped as a cultural resource for the community, combining both markets and arts. Despite initial scepticism, the place has won the trust and affection of the people of Wrexham. It's the heart of a growing cultural quarter, and has helped many small businesses start and grow as market traders. And gallery visitors have more than doubled – from 7,000 in 2017/18 to 17,000 in 2023/24.

The emotional core idea is 'a cultural home for all', and the name (chosen by a public vote) means 'Everybody's House'. Creative director Jo Marsh's philosophy is '*with* people not for people'. By its very nature, Tŷ Pawb offers all three levels of emotion. There's pleasure (for example, lunch in the food court, sitting in the roof garden, enjoying a show). It's all about connection (a place where community groups meet, where art and commerce meet). And it has a higher purpose, helping regenerate this former coal-mining town.

Tŷ Pawb communicates these emotions through the enthusiasm of its people. With a packed programme and a small team, there's not always time to formulate a strategic narrative for campaigns. Instead communication is natural and organic: as they say, 'not so much a strategy, it's just honesty'.

Branding partner: [Elfen](#)



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.

To understand the emotions the public look for, we ran a survey with CitizenMe, and cross-checked it with two recent surveys by YouGov and DJS. Findings were broadly similar: people in general want to learn something new, but they're also looking for reassurance, familiarity, beauty and wellbeing. MEL confirms this: 'For most visitors, museums generate pleasurable emotions. They act as sanctuaries where we can feel relaxed, venues to socialise and have fun with friends, or places where we can feel mentally stimulated.'

What do you enjoy?

YouGov for Art Fund, May 20

1 Learning	72%
2 Discovering new things	70%
3 The buildings	61%
4 Familiar topics	54%
5 Wellbeing	47%

Why do you go?

DJS for Wellcome, Sep 20

1 Enjoyment/fun	53%
2 To get out	51%
3 To gain knowledge	45%
4 To be challenged	45%
5 Beauty	44%

What did you get?

CitizenMe for Art Fund, Oct 20

1 Learned something new	91%
2 Enjoyed beauty	90%
3 Got out	89%
4 Time with friends or family	89%
5 Access to objects	88%

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.

In 2020, we made a special study of the views of younger people – those most likely to feel museums aren't for them. They told us they want physicality, agency, immersion. Our student focus group talked about a sense of a shared journey that's active: 'something that people do not just [passively] get'. They're looking for feelings of agency and voice: 'radical' and 'transformative' and 'igniting advocacy'. They like to feel that the past is relevant to the present, and can suggest futures too, in a warm, immersive, almost indulgent way: 'a whirlpool of possibilities'.

So the public, including young people, are looking mostly for feelings of pleasure: emotions at the lower levels of the MEL pyramid.

But this may be different from what museum leaders think is important. In our research, many of them talked about emotions at the top of the pyramid. Our 2020 participants talked about the need to 'communicate not just "accessible" but also "challenging" – not just "please come, we'll make it easy for you"'. Museum leaders see museums as 'Increasingly a place of massive discussion' and 'Spaces where we can ... make ourselves vulnerable – like religions'.

Many sector leaders recognised that this may not be what the public is looking for (at least initially). One leader said: 'The danger is we're too confident of our own idea of what we want to be. The sector is full of liberal people, good people – but we can lose focus on what people outside it really want'.

'A 'whirlpool of possibilities'

'We can lose focus on what people outside [the sector] really want'

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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.

And museum leaders know the sector has to change.

Museum practitioners recognise that there's often a sector bubble. 'Too often, the sector is inward-looking', said one of our 2020 experts. Another said: 'We don't know enough as a sector about what presses people's buttons, we do "community consultation" only with those groups we already know'.

Despite a great deal of change over the last 20 years, museum leaders recognise that often museums come across to people as 'exclusive, not generous, unnecessarily austere'.

To tackle this, our experts wanted to see change in power structures. One said: 'Cultural organisations are profoundly undemocratic'

and another suggested adopting a 'producer mindset': 'get on with it, learn from mistakes ... focus on the audience'.

Fascinatingly, one of our 2020 leaders prefigured the 2022 research by suggesting that museums should 'see themselves as a purpose not a place: a purpose which could be delivered in lots of ways'.

'Museums should be a purpose not a place'

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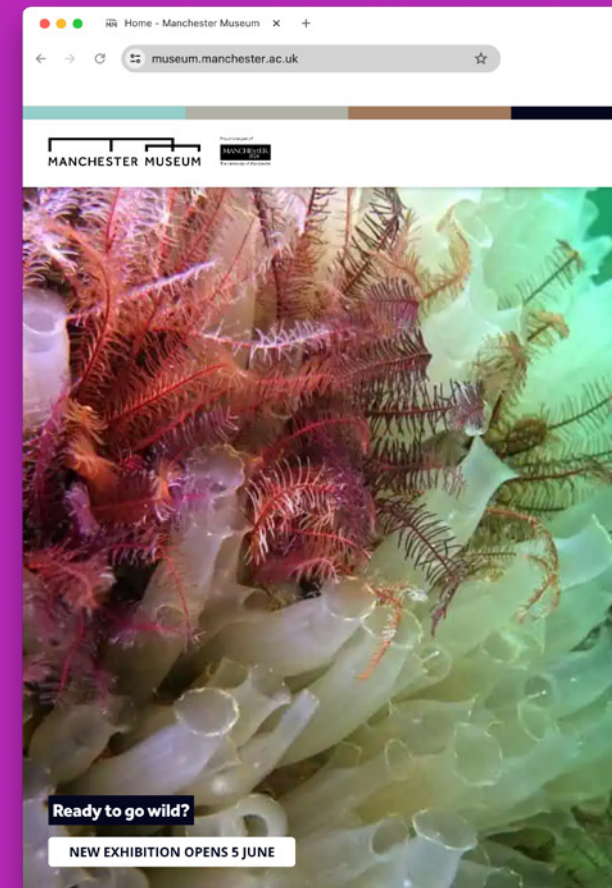
Case study: Manchester Museum

Manchester Museum has for many years aimed to think and act differently, and in 2018 a capital project created the opportunity to take the next leap. The museum focused on one space – its South Asia Gallery – as a case study, so that people could see, feel inspired by and learn from this beacon of change. Five years in the making, the new gallery grew out of the emotional needs and interests of Manchester's south Asian communities. It was developed by a collective of 30 people from those communities, who helped shape the gallery and decide what objects to include; some also donated objects. The collective influenced the gallery's design, tone and programming. As a result of these changes,

visitor numbers rose by 340,000 to 880,000 in the year to February 2024, and global majority visitors from 25% to 34%. One in seven visitors have never been to a museum before.

Supporting this change in the museum's offer and working culture is a deliberate change in communication style. The aim is to humanise the museum, with less academic and more conversational language, and to assume no prior knowledge. The museum's team aims to start communication by thinking 'how will the audience feel?'

Branding partner: in-house



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 these three big barriers.

Our three surveys also investigated the barriers to visiting museums. They turned out to be surprisingly practical – not so much that museums felt intimidating or alien. And these findings are reflected in DCMS research.

The big three barriers

'It's always the same'

'It's too far'

'It's too expensive'

What stops you? YouGov for Art Fund, May 20	1 It's too far	32%
	2 I don't have enough time	17%
	3 It's too expensive	16%
	4 I'm not interested	13%
	5 The food is too expensive	13%

Barriers? DJS for Wellcome, Sep 20	1 It's too expensive	28%
	2 It's not interesting	26%
	3 The need to queue	24%
	4 Stress caused by crowds	23%
	5 It's hard to get to	22%
	6 There's no-one to go with	22%

Why didn't you go? CitizenMe for Art Fund, Oct 20	1 It never occurred to me	57%
	2 It's too far	57%
	3 It's not exciting	53%
	4 There are better things to do	48%
	5 I have to queue	47%

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 these three big barriers.

Case study: Black Country Living Museum, Dudley

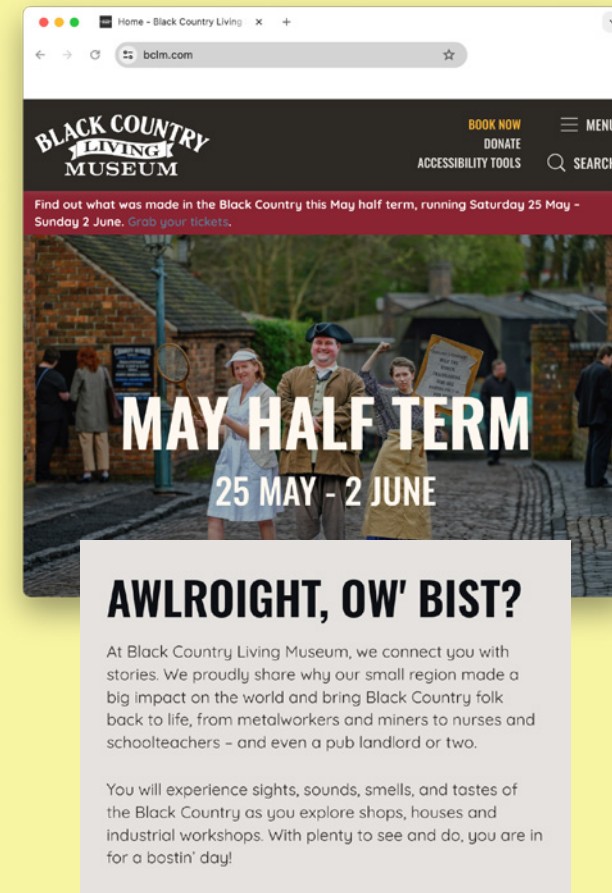
Founded in the 1970s, the Black Country Living Museum celebrates and protects the region's history by bringing it to life, through reconstructed buildings and streets – and a cast of historic characters.

It's an immersive experience – no glass cases, no video screens, the minimum of signage – designed from the start to break down barriers. The characters are encouraged to chat with visitors (there's no time limit to a conversation), and to ask visitors about their own stories.

The museum aims to minimise barriers of distance, making the most of its location in Dudley town centre. It's a pay-to-enter museum, but it tries to reduce the cost barrier by making its tickets work as annual passes – and by offering lower-cost evening visits in the summer. Even so, it recognises that for many a visit is a luxury item, and that visitors should never be taken for granted. As a result, the museum attracts a larger proportion of 'Frontline Families' than many other museums.

Most interestingly of all, the museum makes prominent use of Black Country dialect in its communication, to avoid museum-speak, and to project a brand personality that's 'passionate, proud of the Black Country, salt of the earth, chatty'.

Branding partner: in-house



So how can museums
act on these findings?

The basic idea

Use **emotion** to
build your **brand** to
grow your **support**

Brands give people
an emotional logic for
doing something

Four actions

1.

Burst the bubble

2.

Find your emotional
big idea

3.

Communicate the
emotional benefits

4.

Evolve what you offer,
and how you work

= More people visiting, using and supporting

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

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

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