

E-Content: Help The Past to Face the Future



More historical documentaries have been commissioned in the last six months than in the previous 40 years as museums find broadcasters muscling in on their audiences.

Meanwhile, with Britain's cultural heritage facing an ongoing decline in visitor numbers, curators and archivists are asking if a new approach is needed to lure the public back through their doors.

This was the drive behind a conference on June 10th hosted by the East of England Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (EEMLAC).

"In general, museum visitor numbers are falling," said Terry Turner, CEO of EEMLAC.

"Contemporary society has much-higher expectations thanks to the quality of the interactive experience offered by computer games and PCs. We need to harness graphic excellence and immediacy to make collections more exciting and more accessible."

The real challenge lies in capturing the imagination of a mouse-clicking generation used to perfect graphics of computer games and the excitement of Internet interactivity. And as delegates at the evaluate conference heard, new advances in presentational technology are available to help organisations display a wealth of digitised content

Innovative technology included the University of East Anglia's CHARISMATIC project, which provides virtual replicas of historical towns and cities, populating them with computer-generated characters; touch-screen technology from Cambridge firm Visual Planet, which allows the museum visitor to interact with the displays on a large scale; and microchips from start-up company Hypertag, also from Cambridge, which enable visitors to download information on displays at the city's Fitzwilliam Museum.

But the issue is deeper than adding excitement. Museums and libraries are tasked with making information more accessible to the individual while extending their reach to wider audiences.

Martin Russ, of conference co-sponsor BT Exact, agreed that content management is at least as important as selecting the right infrastructure for engaging and retaining audiences.

"Digitalisation offers a way to extend your organisation beyond the confines of a building, web sites have a role in encouraging people to visit" he said. "You need to make much more of it than just a website with a few pictures."

"With the right presentation and the right sort of interaction, people are going to be far more interested in return visits to a museum, each of which becomes an event in its own right. Special exhibitions are expensive to stage, but digital content can be easily changed and can contain an element of user choice tailored to what people actually want to see."

Museum displays could potentially be shown in any public place – imagine waiting for a bus and reviewing the latest additions to the Saatchi Gallery via a screen set into the street furniture.

This could be soon a reality, according to Mike Cole commercial director of Visual Planet, a visual communications company with specialist expertise of delivering content through large interactive screens.

'Take museums to the people, don't wait for them to come to you!' he says. "One of the benefits of broadscreen interaction for museums and libraries is that instead of one-to-one terminals, it attracts

people from a distance," said commercial director Mike Cole. "They touch it and stop to watch the response and this starts to draw an audience...and this could be anywhere."

Visual Planet's screens can be operated directly by touch or remotely using a keyboard, and the information that is presented driven by the user's own needs and interests.

"Correct management of content is crucial if you want people to come back to you. It needs to be interactive, but in an entertaining and personalised way. Touch screen technology allows museums to rethink how they present information"

While museums can utilise such advances to showcase content tailor-made to specific audiences, libraries can harness it to cater to people still without a PC at home.

"Libraries are now having to look at new ways of providing information and ICT is a significant tool", said Adrienne Cameron, strategic development officer for EEMLAC.

"The touch screen technology is interesting as it could be incorporated into the window of the library or other public place creating a 'virtual library' to make information easily accessible to the public out of opening hours."

Some museums are using technology to reach new audiences.

Professor Valerie Fraser, director of University of Essex Collection of Latin American Art (UECLAA) said: "We have a unique collection, started 10 years ago, but had no university funding to build a museum.

"We are now working on the delivery of the collection as an on-line research resource, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Board. Without digitisation, it wouldn't be accessible at all.

"We have done most of the digitisation, but the challenge now is to develop the content to include information about the artists and even develop the site as a resource linked to language teaching (Spanish and Portuguese). The key is definitely correct content management and the right medium to deliver this to our audience"

Alison Coles, public services manager for St Albans Museums, utilised content potential to introduce History Hunt, an interactive web game designed to enthuse young people - a key audience target - in the history of their community.

"There is a huge push under way to make everything accessible," she said. "It is no longer good enough for museums to have stores and collections not available to the public.

"Nowadays, if we show an illustration of a pot as part of our display, we need to be able to offer information about how it was made. Those are people's expectations and we must respond.

"What surprised me was how interested teens are in historical information - as long as you give it to them in the right way and engage with the audience on their terms."

- ENDS - Visual Planet develops designs and implements dynamic interactive visual solutions. It is based at St John's Innovation Centre, Cambridge.

Its technology – called 'Broad Screen Interaction' - extends the scope of proven techniques such as touch screens, streaming media, projection and holography, thus enabling large screen dynamic displays to be created in shop windows and reception areas.

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