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From Social Media to a Social Museum

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One of the most interesting and influential consequences of the digital revolutions has nothing to do with apps or social networks or touch screens. It is not the democratisation of knowledge or the inversion of power relations within organisations, although it is influenced by these developments. It is not even the rise of popular culture and that we finally found a way to deal with the cognitive surplus of everyone. The most interesting and influential consequence of the digital revolution, if you ask me, is the rediscovery of the age-old and yet entirely new concept of 'social business'. And although it is hard to find a fully social business, let alone a 'social museum', I believe this trend and its impact might well be life changing for museums and other cultural and heritage institutions.

A social business, as defined by the Social Business Forum is "an organisation that has put in place the strategies, technologies and processes to systematically engage all the individuals of its ecosystem (employees, customers, partners, suppliers) to maximise the co-created value." De Clerck has summarised many approaches to and ideas about the evolution of social business in a blogpost¹, but to me the key take aways from this definition are 1) a social business is a combination of strategy *and* technology, and 2) any value generated in a social business is always co-created. A social business is not about 'we' (the employees) generate value for 'them' (the customers), but about 'we' (all involved) generate value for each other.

Social business is seen as an evolution of social media. First an organisation does Facebook and then it starts to co-create value. Unfortunately for social media gurus, the idea of social business is much older than Facebook, although at the time it went by different names.

Already in 1994 James L. Heskett *et al.* wrote a paper and a subsequent book (in 1997) about organisations that generate value for everyone involved by combining a focus on employees with a focus on customers and the chain that connects them². In its simplest and most summarised form an organisation that implements the service profit chain involves its employees as much as its customers in creating a great and valuable service.

¹ <http://www.conversionation.net/2012/06/defining-social-business-a-call-for-clarity-and-collaboration/>

² Heskett, J. L., T. O. Jones, G. W. Loveman, W. Earl Sasser, and L. A. Schlesinger. "Putting the Service-Profit Chain to Work." Harvard Business Review 72, no. 2 (March–April 1994): 164–174.

Heskett, J. L., W. Earl Sasser, Leonard A. Schlesinger (1997). The Service Profit Chain. Free Press.

Hence, it engages all individuals of its ecosystem to maximise the co-created value. In figure 1 the service profit chain is shown in its most succinct version.

Of course Heskett and his co-authors did not invent the service profit chain; they just put a label on something they saw happening in successful service organisations. I personally believe such a participatory and all-engaging system to generate value goes back to the beginnings of human cooperation, only to have been disrupted in the past century first by the Taylorisation of organisations and then by the *MadMenisation* of the relationship between organisations and customers. Social business, therefore, is a return to old ways of working together rather than a radically new concept. Emerging technologies and especially the digital revolution have created new opportunities and indeed a renewed importance to the ideas behind social business.



Figure 1: The Service Profit Chain, simplified.

In the online realm there are countless examples of businesses that can be considered 'social' and - in the words of Heskett - treat customers like employees and employees like customers. T-shirt shop Threadless³ is one of my favourite examples. Threadless sells T-shirts (and other clothing) designed by their customers and selected by their community. A designer that gets his or her shirt in the store is rewarded both financially and with feedback and encouragement by the community. Employees of Threadless at the same time make sure that all their customers are treated extremely well. Their customer service is personal and fast, their communication friendly and engaging. Threadless uses the mechanics of social media (community building, interaction, engagement) but applies this to their entire business, from customer service to shipping

³ <http://www.threadless.com/>

and handling. All individuals involved have their part in creating the value of the company⁴.

The social museum

In her 2010 book *The Participatory Museum* former museum consultant and current director of the Santa-Cruz Museum of Art and History Nina Simon outlines a cultural institution where the audience is not merely a consumer, but a participant. She defines such an institution as “a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content”.⁵ Such an organisation, ideally, turns ‘me’ into ‘we’: individuals are not just consumers of content, but engage with each other socially. Top-down presentation from the museum to the visitor is turned into collaboration between museum and visitor and finally co-creation. A true participatory museum, in this sense, is the cultural equivalent of a social business. The social museum is a place where all individuals involved work together to maximise the value of the institutions and that has the strategies, technologies and processes in place to facilitate this.

In recent years many museums have experimented with cocreation and discussion with their audience. Often these experiments were focused around specific exhibitions (as many examples in Simon’s book show) or isolated in the digital world. It’s not uncommon to get to know an institution online on their Twitter and Facebook as responsive, chatty and interactive and upon visiting them feel alienated by their remoteness and passivity. Even cutting-edge institutions often make social only part of their business, instead of their business, or, as a manager of one of the world’s foremost museums in the field of ‘social’ recently told me,

I’m always a bit ashamed when people visit our museum and expect an amazing, social and interactive experience. Most of our galleries are still very traditional and I fear visitors will leave feeling disappointed.

Although few museums might be considered truly social museums at the moment, there is no reason to be discouraged. Very few other organisations are truly social as well and at least many museums have flirted with social ideas in exhibitions or online.

The to-be-opened 9/11 Museum in New York is such a museum and although it is bogged down at the moment by political debate, if the projects done so far say anything about the actual museum experience this is a big step towards a social museum. For years

⁴ Sipress, Alan (2007). ["T-Shirt Maker's Style, Drawn From Web Users"](#). The Washington Post. Accessed 12 April 2013.

⁵ Simon, N. (2010) *The Participatory Museum*. Museum 2.0.

the organisation has been doing projects where the audience and the museum work together in collecting, cataloguing and describing the collection. The project Make History⁶ used crowdsourcing and Google Maps technology to gather photography and stories. Different projects, including a StoryCorps project, collected oral histories of survivors, family members and first responders. A preview of the museum's first exhibit by Jennifer Maloney of the Wall Street Journal suggests a gallery where everyone has a voice and is part of the experience⁷. The story is told by all individuals involved which - hopefully - makes the story stronger than the traditional top-down institutional story.

Collections and exhibitions are an obvious starting point for an aspiring social museum. Curators, researchers, designers and the audience can work together and each contributes their part to the final value of the project.

A truly social museum, however, goes further. Its employees look for a powerful symbiosis with all individuals involved in the organisation and especially the target audience. A project like Brooklyn Museum's Go!⁸ involved the local community in virtually every aspect of its design and development, only taking charge as an institution at the moment where it was uniquely qualified to do so and taking a step back when others were. Even fundraising should be social in a true social museum, using proven concepts from websites such as Kickstarter and Indiegogo as best practice.

All this does not necessarily mean a social museum is a slave to the volatile wishes and demands of the general public. The employees, directors and board are also involved 'individuals' and play their key roles in the organisation. A good museum employs professionals (e.g. curators, researchers and project managers) who with their unique skills and experience make a significant contribution to the co-created value of the institution.

Social media and the social museum

As one of the enabling technologies, social media is a good place to start with a social museum. Making social media part of the institution, for instance by encouraging all employees to engage in relevant discussions on LinkedIn, prepares the ground for the more complex implications of social business on the museum practice.

In my time at the Museum of National History of the Netherlands I've seen how social media can function as a case study or pilot for more complex social business projects. Late 2010 we used the social media platform Foursquare to enrich physical

⁶ <http://makehistory.national911memorial.org/>

⁷ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323550604578411010076004602.html>

⁸ <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/go/>

locations with our collection of historical stories⁹. We added some 20 stories to popular locations such as train stations to experiment with this kind of locative storytelling. The feedback we received from people interacting with the stories helped us shape both a future website and a larger platform to tell the stories around physical locations. In other experiments we tried to find questions people responded well to, the right time between an event and the follow-up communication of the museum and even the preferred length of text. Such experiments did not only give insight in the technological (im)possibilities in museums, but also taught us a lot about the impact of the digital revolution on the organisation and content creation processes.

Because social media allows the rapid prototyping of ideas, it can act like a sandbox for organisational development.

Social media also provides a shared language to talk about more complex social processes in museums. Concepts like 'crowdsourcing' and '2.0' might originate online and on social media but are being applied with ease by people of all ages and technological ability to projects far out of the digital realm. Hashtags - originally a Twitter tool - have started to appear everywhere, even on print magazines such as the cover of Newsweek's iconic last print issue (see figure 2). Such a shared language is a powerful tool for organisational change and the development of social practices elsewhere in the organisation.

Lonneke Verbiezen, manager social business at the Royal Dutch Airlines KLM in an interview with the Dutch blog Marketingfacts¹⁰ describes how social media has helped them become a social business:



Figure 2: Newsweek's last cover, with hashtag to clarify why they went all digital.

⁹ <http://themuseumofthefuture.com/2011/01/13/using-foursquare-to-make-historical-contents-locally-available-and-reach-new-audiences/>

¹⁰ <http://www.marketingfacts.nl/berichten/thecase12-klm-van-social-media-naar-social-business1>

The importance of social media for us was made especially clear by the ash cloud [in 2010]. At that time we managed to help many people through social media. This has eased the internal acceptance of social media. The entire company started to believe even more in the potential of social media.

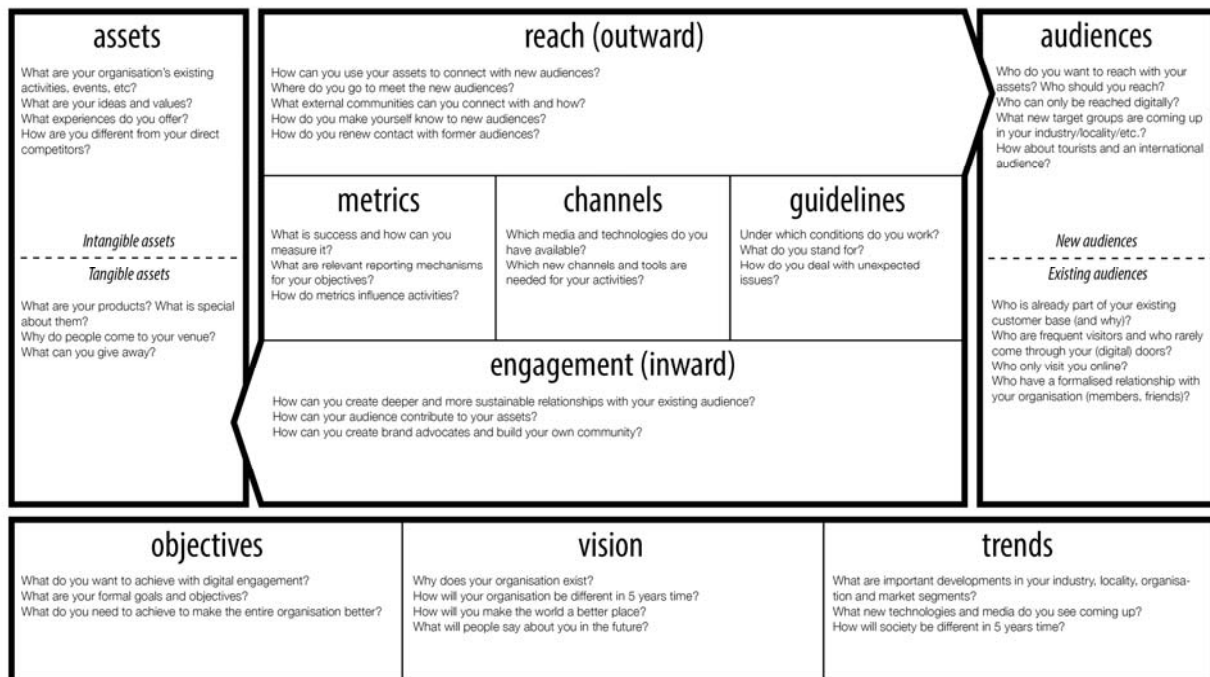
Social media successes are turned into social business by making them part of the strategy and plans of the organisation. “The social media team acts as an advisor and provides project initiators with tools to turn their ideas into reality.”

Towards a more social museum

As the case of KLM exemplifies, social media turns into social business if successful pilots and ideas are turned into larger strategies and processes that leave the confinements of the digital realm. Steps towards a more social museum are taken by applying social media thinking to all aspects of the organisation.

In 2012 Jim Richardson and I developed the Digital Engagement Framework (see figure 3), a tool to help organisations structure their thinking about digital media and its impact on the organisation. While using the framework in workshops and strategy development processes in cultural institutions around the world, we found that

digital engagement framework version 2.0



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Figure 1: The Service Profit Chain, simplified.

organisations are most successful in reaching and engaging their audience and employees when their digital and overall strategies are aligned. Participants regularly considered the Digital Engagement Framework a tool equally powerful for rethinking and redesigning the organisational strategy as for designing and implementing digital media projects and activities.

Another thing we have found is that cultural institutions that involve a wide cross section of their staff in digital strategy development processes generally tend to end up with better strategies and more successful projects and activities than those that limit digital and social media to the marketing or communication team and strategy to the board of directors. It seems that in the development of a more social museum the rules of social business also apply: all involved individuals should be engaged to maximise the co-created value.

When we help museums discover and fulfil their social business potential at Inspired by Coffee, we therefore always start with sharing existing best practices from within the organisation (on social media or elsewhere) in the team. This creates an urge and enthusiasm for the road to a more social museum, which is followed up by strategy co-creation, team and capacity building and projects and campaigns.

So far we have not yet met a museum where there was absolutely nothing in terms of social potential to start from. This, I believe, stems from the fact that museums and most other cultural institutions are inherently social organisations to begin with. They have always thrived on intimate relations with all individuals involved and the joint creation of value. Gallery visits, theatre and exhibitions have always been social events as much as individual experiences. I firmly believe, therefore, that the increased focus on social business offers a tremendous opportunity for museums and others to re-establish their relevance in society and culture and stay relevant far into the 21st century.

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