

Museums and Blogs: Blogs and their Efficacy

by  
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A Project

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of  
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts

Approved by the Project Chairperson

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## Part One: Analysis

### Introduction

Museums have been increasingly turning to social media to connect with new audiences, maintain open lines of communication with returning audiences, and to post updates on museum events. Blogs allow museums to make a deeper connection with readers by giving them space to write longer posts about objects and events, focusing in on museum-specific topics, allowing behind-the-scenes access to collections and programs, and impacting the profession by being a forum for other professionals to read and comment on new practices and ideas. But how can a museum start, and more importantly, maintain a blog? That is the question this project set out to answer.

### Methodology

The main goal of this project is to discover how blogs are created, maintained, organized, and what subject content is chosen by their creators. In order to find these answers, a rigorous and time-intensive research model was applied to this project. This model would involve researching and reading blogs, journal articles, newspaper articles, and monographs to understand the literature supporting the act of blogging. In addition to this, an analysis of several well-known blogs was conducted to study their content over the past three years to determine the most popular subjects, trends, and series each blog had posted.

Over the course of several months, more than 220 hours were spend reading and analyzing the literature about blogging. An additional 125 hours were spend analyzing blogs to examine their content choice, stylistic choices, organization, and posting schedules. Another twenty-five hours were used to condense notes, write, and edit. Finally, twenty-five hours were dedicated to creating a presentation to relay the findings of this project in a professional setting.

## Key Takeaways

While conducting research for this project, there were six key takeaways found in nearly every article, book, or blog. They are as follows:

1. Consistency
2. Behind-the-scenes access
3. Quality image and videos
4. Branding
5. Audience
6. Topic-specific

In this case, consistency applies to several aspects of blogging. For example, not only must a blog maintain a consistent posting schedule, it must also use consistent word choices. When blogging, the higher amount of times a word is used makes it more likely that a search engine will be able to locate it.<sup>1</sup> This increases the amount of people that are able to see a blog post within the first two pages of a search engine search. As for the consistency of a posting schedule, the recommended number of postings in a month is once per week to twice per month.<sup>2</sup> If there is no new content generated, readers will lose interest in the blog.

For museums, blogs also offer readers behind-the-scenes access to collections, exhibits, objects, and staff. This allows readers a more intimate connection and knowledge of the museum. To replicate this, museums can interview staff about their day-to-day work lives to provide a glimpse at the inner workings of a museum. Blogs can also focus on a specific object that are either on display or in collections storage to give more context and information. An

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<sup>1</sup> Margot Wallace, *Writing for Museums* (New York, NY: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014): 17.

<sup>2</sup> ConvertKit, "State of the Blogging Industry," accessed March 11, 2019, <https://convertkit.com/reports/blogging/>

alternative is to also showcase a particular component of an exhibit that may be underutilized to drive curiosity and use within the exhibit. Museums blogs may be as creative as they wish when it comes to behind-the-scenes access.

There is the saying that a “picture is worth a thousand words.” For a blog, this is not true. Blogs should be including quality images and videos, as well as captions to explain what is happening. 50% of readers are more likely to continue reading a post if there is an image or video embedded in it.

Blogs also allow museums to carry their brand into the digital world. This means the blog must echo the stylistic choices of their institution. This means the technical aspects, such as font, color choice, and style guides. However, branding also carries into word choice, the subject matter, the tone of blog posts, and the message the post is meant to convey.

If the museum does not know who they are writing for, it will be nearly impossible to connect with readers in a meaningful way. Museums must determine who they are writing for, why they are writing, and what they want to say to their audience. Without these decisions, the blog runs the risk of being meaningless and a waste of resources. Similar to how museums must determine their main audience(s), blogs must go through the same thing.

Finally, there is the idea of being topic-specific. For museums especially, this is an important idea. Blogs connected to museums must be in alignment with that museum’s mission statement. These statements guide everything from collections scope to programming. If the blog loses sight of the mission statement, it had lost sight of what their topics should be.

### Statistics

To determine how many blogs were posted every day, the amount of people reading and interacting with blog posts, and other statistics related to blogs, this project examined the

statistics tracked by wordpress.com and Google Trends. These websites provided information such as the ratio of male to female bloggers, the percentage of people using different blogging platforms, average post length, and even the number of blogs engaged in guest posting. The below paragraphs represent a sampling of these findings.

In a single month, over 70 million new posts are uploaded. In addition to that, there is also very high reader interaction, with over 77 millions comments made every month.<sup>3</sup> These high numbers mean that for every day in a thirty-day month, there are over 2.3 million blogs posted and over 2.5 million comments.<sup>4</sup> While it is encouraging that blogs have such high content generators and user interactions, there is also a negative aspect to the sheer amount of content uploaded on daily basis. With so many blogs posting new content, that means there is an extremely high level of competition. Blogs must find their niche, the thing that makes them special, in order to stand out. Finally, what is the audience for blogs? Around 409 million people view 20 billion pages each month. That means that in the course of a single year, almost 55 million pages are viewed on a daily basis.

Around six of every ten bloggers are males. The majority of general bloggers on the internet are men. However, there is a gender gap found within the museum community. The museum field tends to lean heavily towards women,<sup>5</sup> so it is possible that the reverse statistic is true for museums. It is likely that there are more women writing blog posts than men within the museum community.

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<sup>3</sup> WordPress, "A live look at activity across WordPress.com," updated daily, accessed March 2, 2019, <https://wordpress.com/activity/>

<sup>4</sup> Susanna Gebauer, "The State of Blogging: Facts, Numbers, Trends," *The Social Ms*, March 3, 2019, accessed March 28, 2019, <https://blog.thesocialms.com/state-of-blogging-facts-numbers-trends/>

<sup>5</sup> Anne Ackerson and Joan Baldwin, *Women in the Museum: Lessons from the Workplace* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2017): 9-15.

Blog posts used to be around 600 words. That number has now gone up to over 1000 words per blog, an increase of 400 words per blog. Linked to that is the amount of time it takes to write a blog post. In 2017, it would take around two hours and twenty-four minutes to write a single post; by 2018, that had changed to three hours and twenty minutes to write a post, an almost 40% increase in time.<sup>6</sup> Even still, there are some bloggers that encourage spending six hours or more on a post. To help with this time cost, around 50% of bloggers engage in guest posting. This is where the blog host asks outside writers to create a blog post to put on their site. This is usually done to keep the blog on a strict timetable so as to avoid lulls in new content.

So, what does this data tell us? Clearly, there is an audience for blogs, as well as a robust community of writers and commenters. However, with the extreme amount of content posted every day, that also means that there is a lot of competition. For museums and cultural institutions this means they must identify their audience and write for them. Secondly, blogging is a time-consuming process. In order to maintain a blog, museums must have a dedicated staff member for the blog. Otherwise, it is likely to be forgotten amidst the chaos. Lastly, museum blogging allows for networking and different perspectives through the use of guest blogging. This practice benefits the museums and allows them to maintain their posting timetable with minimal effort.

### Blogging Platforms

One of the most important decisions a blogger can make is their platform choice. There are four main choices for bloggers to choose from: Blogger, WordPress, Sharepoint, and DruPal. Google Trends tracks platform usage amongst bloggers internationally and publishes their finds

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<sup>6</sup> Gebauer, "The State of Blogging."

on their website. The following paragraphs will analyze the pros and cons of Blogger and WordPress, are they are the two most common platforms.

Blogger is a free blogging service offered by Google that was launched in 1999, making it one of the earliest platforms still in use. It offers a quick and easy way for non-tech-savvy users to start a blog. To begin using Blogger, the only thing needed is a Google account. As Blogger is free, there will be no start-up cost. As it is connected to Google, it also has the added benefit of being secure and reliable (fewer crashes). In addition to that, Blogger is also easy to use and can be managed by someone with few technical skills. However, that easy to use aspect may also become a liability. You only have basic tools at your disposal and cannot add any new features as your blog grows. Design options are also extremely limited, with only a few templates available. Blogger also does not receive regular updates or new features. Finally, the museum will not technically own the account. Google can suspend an account at any moment, or even abandon the Blogger service altogether.

Wordpress.org is the world's most popular blogging software.<sup>7</sup> It currently powers over 30% of all websites across the internet. WordPress also allows you complete control over your blog's future, by giving you control over every single aspect of the blog. New features such as forums, online stores, and even paid memberships can be added on. There are thousands of free themes, so personalization options are nearly unlimited. Bloggers also have access to over 54,000 plugins. Finally, it is also search engine friendly, which can drive up readership and members. However, that full control can also become a problem for those who are not tech-savvy. Managing your own blog comes with a learning curve. Additionally, museums will have to manage their own website backups and security. Unlike Blogger, WordPress is not free. While

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<sup>7</sup> Google, "Google Trends: Compare," updated daily, accessed March 3, 2019, <https://trends.google.com/trends/explore?date=all&q=blogger,drupal,sharepoint,wordpress>.

the software itself is free, there is an almost \$15 per year domain licensing fee as well as an \$8 per month hosting fee.

### Blog Analysis

Another part of this project was analyzing several popular museum blogs for their content choice and posting schedules. Three of the blogs chosen were *Museum 2.0*, *Know Your Own Bone*, and *Beyond Bones*. Run by the former director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Nina Simon, *Museum 2.0* focuses on the themes of participatory museums, relevancy, museum programming, and museum administration.<sup>8</sup> Colleen Dilenschneider, the consultant behind *Know Your Own Bone*, focuses her blog on topics such as museum administration, audience research, business insights, fundraising, and boards.<sup>9</sup> Finally, *Beyond Bones* is a blog run by staff at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. This blog focuses on behind-the-scenes collections access, special feature looks at specific objects, Houston history, and special museum events.<sup>10</sup> This is just a small sampling of the more than twenty blogs examined in the course of this project.

Over the past three years, the majority of the blogs examined covered the following four topics on a regular basis: audience/visitation research, leadership trends, Gen X/Gen Z/Millennials, and behind-the-scenes collections posts. The audience research posts were concerned with how to get new visitors in the doors and how to keep them coming through the doors. Leadership trends posts examined how changed in leadership affected the museum as a whole. Posts about Gen X/Gen Z/Millennials examined how generational differences have

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<sup>8</sup> Nina Simon, *Museum 2.0*, April 11, 2019, accessed April 16, 2019, <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/>.

<sup>9</sup> Colleen Dilenschneider, *Know Your Own Bone*, April 3, 2019, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://www.colleendilen.com/>.

<sup>10</sup> Houston Museum of Natural Science, *Beyond Bones*, April 12, 2019, accessed April 16, 2019, <https://blog.hmns.org/>.



changed the way museums are used and viewed by the general populace. Finally, the behind-the-scenes collections posts took readers beyond the exhibit halls into collections storage to examine never-before-seen objects and artifacts. While these four topics have proven to be the most popular content in the past three years, that does not mean that will not change soon. The best recommendation for staying abreast of the most recent trends is to read other blogs, journal articles, and books.

## Part Two: A How-To Guide

### Step One

Museums interest in creating a blog must first choose their platform. After choosing their platform, it will be time for the museum to decide who their audience for the blog will be. To determine this, there are a few questions to ask. Who is the blog for? Does the museum intend the blog to be for an academic audience studying their collections, or is it for school children who may never get to visit the museum? Narrow down the focus of the blog. What is the blog's mission statement? In the museum world, everything is guided by the museum's mission statement. The objects to collect, the programs that are approved, and the funding for projects is all determined by if it falls into the mission or not. This is no different for museum blogs. Similar to their affiliated institution, museum blogs should have a mission statement that states their goals that will help them in their decision-making process. Who does the museum currently serve, and conversely, who does the museum want to serve? Lastly, what is your niche? Find what your museum is good at and stick to it. By combining the answers to these questions, museum blogs can find their audience.

### Step Two: Choosing Content

There are three rules for choosing content: be specific, be relevant, and be on-mission. The more specific the content is, the more likely it will be found through the use of search engines. Content must also be relevant. As Freeman Tilden says in his principles of interpretation, if the audience does not connect with the presented material, then there will be nothing gained from that interaction. In order for the information shared by the blog to have meaning, it must make a connection to the audience. Finally, content must be on-mission. Museum blogs should not be posting about subjects unrelated to their mission statement or their collections.

### Step Three: Consistency

The last step in creating and maintain a blog is consistency. This consistency is also threefold: maintain a consistent posting schedule, practice consistency in terminology, and think about consistency in series. Maintaining a consistent posting schedule keeps readers coming back and expecting more. By remaining inconsistent, readers will grow bored with waiting and lost interest in the blog. Practicing consistency in terminology not only unifies the blog, it also allows for search engine optimization. The more times a word is used in a post, the more likely the post will be to show up on page one or two of a search engine search. Lastly, think about maintaining a series. Several blogs have special series of stories that they post on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis. This consistency in content and posting schedule also encourages readers and reader interaction with posts.

### Conclusion

Creating and maintaining a blog is no easy task. It will require at least one dedicated staff member to create content, network with other bloggers, keep a steady posting schedule, and

maintain the organization and style of the blog. Having a blog can increase the digital “membership” of a museum by allowing off-site visitors access to collections and staff. In addition to this, blogs allow cultural institutions to dive deep into their subject matter and make a lasting connection with visitors that would never be possible through social media. Even though it will be difficult, blogs are well worth the time and effort.

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