

MEMORANDUM

TO: Golden Isles Historical Society
FROM: DJ
SUBJECT: Virtual Tourism: Historic Sites and the Need for a Web Presence
DATE: 6/30/2015

Introduction

Historic house museums and sites have continued to face declining visitation numbers in recent years. A large part of this is due to the slow adoption of advances in technology to enhance the education of public audiences, better communicate with them, and reach out to them no matter where they live. One major reason for this is the tactile nature of historic sites, which can be difficult to translate to the digital world. The other reason is cost. Simply put, technology can be expensive to implement, and many smaller public history sites like Hofwyl-Broadfield plantation have to prioritize their funds to keep the site running properly. However, there is a real and significant advantage to utilizing online resources; they can help better underline the identity of the site, gain a dedicated following and solicit new visitors, and educate people from all over the world on the site's heritage and importance in history.

My goal is to further research the importance of an online interactive presence for a historic site and explore the concept of virtual tourism. There is a need to better understand how people interact with historic sites online and what their expectations are from an online experience compared to the on-site visit. Then, I will research the websites themselves to understand the difficulties involved in creating an online space and how those difficulties and limitations may affect the experience.

Importance of Technology in Public History

Public historians and public history museums have been pulled into the 21st century and found themselves scrambling to catch up with modern forms of communication and research. One of the important things to come out of this need for historians to catch up with advances in technology is questioning the "goals and methods" that go along with the field; there is also suddenly a need to reexamine who the audience is for historical sites and research (Rosenzweig). In depth information and research is now readily available to an enormous audience of people of different backgrounds and creeds, who may have never had access to historical research until digital archives were created. This breadth of available information also means attention spans run short for most people as there are so many topics to captivate their interest. Modern public history sites, therefore, need to offer content that engages and reaches out to communicate the sites message extending the experience beyond the confines of the physical site.

When the conversation in public history is dominated by talk of "a crisis of low visitor numbers and relevance," there is a need to look at new outlets that have been proven to bring positive change. The tourism industry has benefited significantly from the use of information technology. It opens up channels of communication directly to consumers, and the best part about digital

communication is the expedient nature with which content can be shared back and forth and the relationship that can be created between the user and the site (Poria). This relationship building aspect is a key factor to courting new visitors. There is a correlation between showing people what is offered virtually and enticing them to come visit the actual historic site. Many people who are interested in history become virtual tourists because of the economic or time constraints that travel requires, so they go online to escape and study places they may like to visit someday in the future (Lindsay). This concept of virtual tourism also extends to people who are planning trips; they seek as much information online as they can before deciding where to go, and they “expect a website that not only gives directions and times, but also previews the experience” and “sells the location” (Lindsay). This new type of tourist is selective about where they go, and a strong web presence is often the only way to grab their attention.

There are several issues that are important to consider when building an online presence. There needs to be a clear mission to build the site around, which means understanding what the web communication needs to be for the historic site as well as the audience (Lee). Clear goals are important and should be stated up front to create the initial connection and trust with the online audience; the “central agenda of the project” is in creating an image for the historic site, which should entice people to get involved (Rosenbaum). Another thing that is important to consider is the way the “internet makes it possible to transcend the limitations of access” as this leaves the digital audience with high expectations for content (Rosenbaum). The virtual tourist looks for a tactile experience, which creates a challenge for historical museums and sites as they have to replicate the way people experience real artifacts in a virtual space. This is further an issue because many historic sites view websites and blogs as supplemental only and fail to realize the potential they have in the virtual tourist (Saiki). A visitor on the web could become a visitor the physical site or at least be captivated enough to purchase merchandise or donate funds to the site. This can go the other way as well. Visitors to the physical site can be intrigued enough to continue their education on the website, blog, or social media site. This continual engagement with the historic site in a variety of media is the way to keep patrons returning and involved in the site as well as passing good word of mouth along. They have to keep history relevant to the public by using the “public’s methods of daily life in their effort” (Rosenbaum).

Proposal

Today’s historic sites need to find a way to connect with people and share the heritage that they work so hard to preserve. The best way to do that is by understanding exactly what a web audience needs and wants from online exhibits, digital content and interaction. My research will work to understand the best ways to get “stories and artifacts of historical institutions into the hands of its audience for sharing, commenting, and reframing,” so these sites can maintain continued participation from its patrons (Rosenbaum).

There are several questions that need to be answered over the course of the research regarding virtual tourists and how people experience historic sites online. How do virtual tourists use content online? Where are they when they explore these websites and what kind of technology are they using? How often do virtual tourists transition to physical site visitors, and how many people use the website after their visit? Do virtual tourists feel connected enough to the historic sites through their online experience enough to make donations, and if not, how could the online

experience be improved to gain further involvement? These questions will be asked in a questionnaire in the hopes of better understanding what is needed to create the best online space for both the public history site and the virtual tourist.

I also aim to understand how social media helps historic sites connect with visitors around the world as well as local communities. This kind of integration of various media types creates a strong web presence, but it also requires more technical expertise. This is another area that I will explore by researching the work that goes into the actual creation of a website to understand how that affects content. In the end, my goal is to create a report on the current state of public history sites and their online presence as well as the kinds of content they use. I will suggest places where these sites can implement improvements to better engage and educate their visitors in the hopes of helping raise attendance numbers.

Outline of Work

The first thing I will do to accomplish my research is become a digital tourist myself by creating a list of at least 100 historic sites and study their web presence using a set of criteria, which will give me a clear idea of the general state of the online presence for public history sites:

- I will look at what kinds of media are being used and how many types are being used concurrently.
- My next task will be experiencing the content on these online sites to understand the range and quality of content offered by public history sites of different sizes.

The second thing I will do is craft two separate surveys:

- I will send one survey to several public history sites to gauge how much emphasis is placed on their web presence and what the general opinion is in virtual tourism, including any thoughts on the most effective way to bridge the gap between online visitors and visitors to the physical site.
- I will send another survey to be filled out by visitors to the historic sites both online and off. This is tentative to the approval of the historic sites and whether they would be willing to participate.

The third thing I will do is study the technical aspects of creating a website, keeping in mind the following questions:

- What kind of content is possible and how is usability be enhanced?
- What expenses are involved in website design and paying staff to create or edit content?
- What tools are necessary, and what tasks are involved in building an online presence?
- What kind of maintenance is required, and who does the work - staff or volunteers?

Finally, I will continue scholarly research on the subject using academic databases such as Project MUSE, JSTOR, and industry publications.

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