

## THE CHALLENGE: HOW TO MAKE CHANGING PARADIGMS ACCEPTABLE

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‘The Exhibition Is Served’ is one of the recent projects developed by the National Network of Romanian Museums in partnership with the Romanian Peasant Museum and funded by the Romanian National Cultural Fund. It is part of a programme the network has initiated to develop the professional skills of its members’ staff while promoting topical issues at the heart of current international museum practice.

The project is rooted in an increased awareness of the paradigm shifts characteristic of contemporary museums and their core mission, the definition of the museum as a 21<sup>st</sup> century institution, and in the need to focus the attention of the museum constituency towards the public and its engagement.

The project aimed to sow the seeds of a new approach to museum audience using professional development skills as a subset. A core group of museum professionals representative of the network’s varied membership and of the wide range of Romanian museums was invited to join along with a number of representatives of independent organizations.

The project format included an intensive three-day workshop held in September, to be followed by dissemination meetings in the network’s six development areas.

Trainers included two experienced Romanian professionals (Raluca Bem Neamu and Codruta Cruceanu) and a guest lecturer from the United States (Rosanna Flouty, former Associate Director of Education, ICA Boston) who presented the approach of a contemporary art museum. The ICA Boston used new (web) technologies to increase the involvement and exposure of socially disadvantaged teens to contemporary art.

Teens were defined as the target audience category based on the prevailing view they are one of, if not *the most* difficult audience group to engage with and persuade to visit museums. Loosely defined as 13-to-18-year-olds, the four teens (three girls and one boy, 16- to 18-year-olds)



participated on a voluntary basis. They were asked to voice their opinion about a particular exhibition, give feedback to museum professionals (curators, public relations and education specialists) through an open dialogue. Their views were used to generate a profile of the target group and their needs, and to inform museums' future work.

The workshop programme included an introductory session consisting of the teens' exhibition visit and feed-back discussion; a suite of interactive presentations and warm-up playful exercises aimed at developing an exploratory attitude and a more flexible mind-set among participants, shifting their curator-oriented perspective and perceptions towards new avenues of involving teens in museum projects at different levels; a presentation and questions and answers session; and a final simulation exercise in which each group of museum professionals submitted an exhibition proposal based on the idea of a teen.

Although the teens involved may not necessarily qualify as typical of their generation /age group, they represent a segment of the young generation which is often lost through gross generalizations: they were *generous* and willing to part with their time in order to help others, one feature that speaks clearly about the window of opportunity for museums which are willing to embrace the 'place of social harmony' phrase (or some similar definition) in their mission statement. They were well-educated, technology savvy, highly creative, and had a catching sense of humour.

Some of the features captured through direct discussions and observation show that teens like to be involved in *discovery journeys that involve new technologies*, want displays *to be more interactive* – on their terms! – and also *greater fun*. They long for substantive, quality performance human interaction and need *multi-sensorial experiences*. They also need *contemporary clues* and *personal hints*. Interestingly they stated very clearly they like 'to meet and greet the past', in other words they do not want a dry presentation but rather one that is *moving, alive, comprehensible and made relevant to them*. **Such clearly stated needs speak highly in favour of a substantial shift in the local museum paradigm.**

Teens were particularly articulate about the type of messaging they favour: it should be cleverly recurrent, meaning the same message should be repeated in different contexts, using different techniques, information should be selective, succinct, and adequate (less is more). Admittedly

their attention is short-spanned, they dislike 'academic' presentations, are highly sensitive to and accept the influence of their peers and their environment, and need acceptance, encouragement, visible results, time to generate links (intellectual as well as emotional).

It is particularly interesting to note that the wii generation is seeking real-life, F2F communication. Whoever wants to reach them needs to gain their attention and trust, preferably through one of their acknowledged opinion leaders. Such social engineering work, previously not envisaged to fall into the realm of museums, emerges as a key element in insuring the institution's future relevance.

Having profiled the teens through *a joint journey of discovery*, participants enthusiastically embraced the opportunity to engage with them throughout the entire exhibition development process.

Exhibitions suggested by teens and developed by participants tackled: dinosaurs and mobile phones in a single high-tech display that played on the idea of contrasting the evolution of the two (small-to-big and the reverse) and of a contrived 'mobilesaurus' to act as mascot and PR icon (*Hi! Dinosaurs Age?*); and the uniqueness of different cultures and individuals translated in costumes, dances, music (*Imagine all the people*).

The final remarks participants made in their evaluation forms reflect a changed attitude:

*'I think we can work together with teens and it's up to us to engage them! It is also very helpful to see what other colleagues think – this way one knows with whom one can collaborate or not...'*

*'It was very useful to see what problems other colleagues think they face when dealing with teens, what [educational] programmes they have in mind,...if they are open to change...'*

*'The greatest benefit is that suggestions and ideas framed by teens can be incorporated and developed in the design of any type of exhibition'*

*'The idea that exhibitions can be made for and with them is to be taken seriously'*

Perhaps the greatest achievement is that participants came to the conclusion that the museum paradigm is /should be shifting from the 'temple museum' **to the museum as an open public social space through wider audience participation and deeper engagement.**



To put it differently – trust your audience and the audience will trust you!

More about the teen exhibition ideas and some of the preparatory discussions between trainers and participants can be accessed at <http://theexhibitionisserved.spruz.com/>

Project (core team) team:

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Codruta Cruceanu - Trainer

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