

Let's be Brooklyn

Brooklyn Museum (March 5, 2015)

Meeting with Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development.

The Brooklyn Museum has an extensive and comprehensive permanent collection that includes ancient Egyptian masterpieces, African art, European painting, decorative arts, period rooms, and contemporary art. The mission of the Brooklyn Museum is to act as a bridge between the rich artistic heritage of world cultures, as embodied in its collections, and the unique experience of each visitor. Dedicated to the primacy of the visitor experience, committed to excellence in every aspect of its collections and programs, and drawing on both new and traditional tools of communication, interpretation, and presentation, the Museum aims to serve its diverse public as a dynamic, innovative, and welcoming center for learning through the visual arts.

(<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/about/mission.php>)

Five most striking elements:

1. Target First Saturdays

The main focus of the Brooklyn museum is to attract Brooklyn locals, not to compete with the big museums of Manhattan. To lower the thresholds and to attract potential new visitors, every first Saturday of the month is a 'target' first Saturday, and the museum is open from 5 to 11 pm, free of charge. The whole building is then thriving with artistic activity, for both younger and older people: concerts, performances, workshops,... Most of the time the museum co-operates with local artists from the neighborhood. These parties – because that's always what they turn out to be- are a great success, reaching thousands of people from Brooklyn who come for a free night out, to see the gallery exhibits, hear speakers and live music, watch free films and participate in hands-on art activities. As said before, the organizers feel that this way they lower the "museum threshold " for young and old, which makes people want to come back.

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/youth-and-families/meet_museum.php

2. Meet the Museum

This is a program for toddlers ages two and three and their caretakers. They experiment with and explore art using song, gallery activities and art-making. This program focuses on the interaction between the adults and the children. Together they experience art. Each month they feature a different theme, such as "A-B-C Art", which introduces pre-literacy concepts; "clearly colorful", an exploration of colors; and "Art around the world", focusing on cultures represented in the collections. Herewith the museum involves the neighborhood and the surroundings of the museum, an environment where a lot of people come for a walk with a stroller. Thanks to this program a lot of locals – with their strollers– also enter the museum. It takes place every week on Thursday, both in the morning and the afternoon.

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/youth-and-families/meet_museum.php

3. Lowering the threshold.

Brooklyn museum literary lowered its threshold. The high steps, leading to the entrance hall have been replaced by a transparent reception area. People can meet there and they can also relax and or eat there sandwiches, while listening to music. They also laid out a square of more than 80,000 square

feet, much of it reclaimed from what was once a large, unused fenced-in area, which is now entirely open to the public. This new plaza area is the museum's "front-stoop" providing multiple options for programming as well as areas for informal gatherings. The plaza area also features permanent benches along with numerous cherry trees and other plantings.

4. Simply Ask

With the ASK app visitors will be empowered to ask questions using their mobile devices as they explore the museum and the experts will answer incoming questions in real time. The iBeacons (location aware technology) will pinpoint where in the museum a question is being asked so that the staff can know the works of art a visitor is seeing and better answer their query. It gives them also a window into visitors experience and how well or not things are working throughout the galleries. So they can make changes accordingly to better serve all visitors, including those who never use a mobile device during their visit.

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/2014/10/06/simply-ask/>

5. The Teen Night Committee

One of the most important groups for the museum are the youngsters. Besides tours and workshops for schools and children, the museum also provides extensive, professional initiatives for young people. Teen nights are free events for teens where they see art, make art, hear music, dance and meet new people. Each time they highlight a special exhibition with new things to see and do. The Teen Night Committee plans this event. Teens can become a member of this committee where they can learn more about the ins and outs of event planning. Their core business is to design, coordinate and promote Teen nights. It is a paid internship.

http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/education/teens/teen_night.php

6. Museum-guides

Brooklyn museum has several guide-teams. The important difference between the teams is their position: whether they are volunteers or paid. The paid educators do tours for schools and children, the volunteers for adults. One of the biggest advantages of a team of voluntary guides is their sense of devotion and enthusiasm. They mainly do it because of their passion for art and heritage. On the other hand, with the paid guides, a higher professional standard can be met.

<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/.../museum-guides>

Takeaways:

Mediation is the core task of the working of the museum.

From our conversations and browsing the many programs on the website it appears that mediation really is the core task of the Brooklyn museum. Attention for the public is the basic part for all aspects of the working of the museum, it should notice involve the whole team and not only the educative service. For instance in case of the organization of an exhibition route the curator, scene-designer and mediator should work together from the start. This starting point is essential in order to accomplish a positive mediation.

Focusing on the neighborhood.

The Brooklyn museum aims at a far reaching and systematic co-operation with the neighborhood and the inhabitants of Brooklyn. In order to involve the local population, it organizes "low-threshold" activities such as

first Saturdays and the Teen Nights. To achieve this they work together with artists from Brooklyn and local organizations. These initiatives are essential in order to involve the neighborhood. It is also important that these are not one-off events but that active participation becomes an essential part of the way the museum works. This is clearly illustrated by the co-operation with the youngsters for the organization of the Teen Nights.

Extensive participating mediation offer.

The Brooklyn Museum offers qualitative mediation that meets with the specific needs and expectations of each visitor. These expectations may vary considerably, even in the case of one and the same person - who may visit. Whether you visit the museum for professional reasons or in his leisure time on his own, with his family or with friends. Based on these varying attitudes, the public can chose from a wide range of participatory programs such as: *ASK app*, *the visitor's choice tour* and *the pop-up gallery talks*

ASKapp

For the Brooklyn Museum, It is important to know what is on the visitors mind when looking at the works of art, and there are several ways in which they tried to find this out. They hired people to talk to the visitors and provide answers to their questions. While this worked well, it was too expensive, because too many people were needed for the whole museum. Also, flyers with recommendations were passed out, but these didn't seem to interest the public. The ASK app offered the museum a great research tool to gage their audiences. At the same time it worked well as a participatory tool. People tend to really think through the questions before they ask, making them observe more focused. Because the information is relevant to the individuals asking the questions, in the end they reach more people. In this way the Brooklyn museum has found a unique way to communicate with its visitors, allowing them to really reach out and educate to a larger audience. This would be a great tool for Flanders, provided that there are enough experts available to answer the visitor's questions.

Currently, the app is still in its testing phase at the Brooklyn Museum.