

# Merging hospitality into a visit experience

Interview with Dirk Yzewyn and Ingrid Van Wateghem from Visit Flanders

By Xinghan Lou



The interviewer did an internship in FARO and worked on the topic of hospitality. She interviewed Dirk Yzewyn and Ingrid Van Wateghem from Visit Flanders in the field of tourism hospitality and An Teyssen, the hospitality manager in MoMu, Antwerp. The interviews took place in April 2021.

Xinghan Lou is a MA student of Cultural Studies program in KU Leuven. Before coming to Belgium, she had some academic experiences on museum, design, history of architecture in China and UK. She is now conducting the research on digital cultural heritage and digital museums.

## Introduction

As it is written in Webster Dictionary, hospitality is the “entertainment of guests or strangers without reward or with kind and generous liberality”. The nature of the hospitality is the host-guest relationship. “However, in Anglo Saxon literature, hospitality is often used in a narrower sense, closely related to hotel industry”, Dirk Yzewyn said. In the context of hotel industry, hospitality isn't the same thing as service since service is transactional as it refers to the tasks of running a hotel while hospitality is genuine as it relates to the human element of running a hotel (Hotel Tech Report 2020). In general, hospitality is about touchpoints and experiences that make visitors “feel at home”.

The notion of hospitality surely is not limited to hotel industry. Today, a tourist destination is composed of not only accommodations, attractions, infrastructure, and transportation, also the aspect of hospitality is important due to the interaction with visitors. In order to know about the most cutting-edge observation in the cultural heritage tourism, we interviewed Dirk Yzewyn and Ingrid Van Wateghem from Visit Flanders (tourism sector). With a rich experience in evaluating and improving the relationship between tourist attractions and visitors, Yzewyn and Van Wateghem shared their understanding of hospitality. Currently, hospitality is recognised as one of the major key success factors in cultural heritage/museum level. For Visit Flanders, when research has been conducted to develop what makes a destination more competitive than another one, hospitality is marked as a significant factor. In the result it is defined as welcoming people, helping people, accommodating people's needs.

The following journey would give you a clue about how Visit Flanders deals with the quality a tourist experience in cultural heritage sites and museums.

## Besides the front desk people

Museums have to secure the whole chain of service providers for the visitor to have a good experience in the end. As the visitor experience depends on all the aspects of a journey, hospitality theoretically has to be implemented in every single angle. All staff from the museum, including people from the museum restaurant, security team and sanitary department, are all determinant since they are all contact points for the visitors.

How can an individual staff (or a service group) link with the concept of hospitality and join in the whole hospitable chain? We may find some inspiration in the example shared by Yzewyn. The question "how should the attendants behave with customers in a friendly way" confused some people working in museums when the Covid-19 pandemic started. Hospitality requires the security personnel should make visitors aware of rules in a friendly way, not a police way. In this situation, small tools are useful mediums and serve as a complement for training. Visit Flanders and the Association for Attractions and Museums vzw (Riebedebie) have developed a pen with rollout banner (See the pictures below) with communication tips (inside the pen) for museum staff and attendants. This should keep them aware of safety measures and how to react in a positive way when visitors are reluctant to follow the instructions.



The bannerpennen

**Als de bezoeker(s) de regels niet volgen**

- ① **Luister**  
"Zijn jullie samen?"
- ② **Begrijp**  
"Ik begrijp dat dit allemaal ongewoon is. Mag ik een woordje uitleg geven?"
- ③ **Verklaar**  
"Om het voor iedereen aangenaam te houden is het belangrijk dat je <<richtlijn>>."
- ④ **Vraag**  
"Het is voor iedereen wat aanpassen. Het is voor ieders gemak."
- ⑤ **Bedank**  
"Bedankt. Geniet van je bezoek!"

**Als kinderen de regels niet volgen**

- ① **Luister**  
naar kinderen en (groot)ouders.  
"Zijn jullie samen?"
- ② **Begrijp**  
"Ik begrijp dat dit voor jullie niet altijd gemakkelijk is."
- ③ **Verklaar**  
"Ook voor jullie is het belangrijk dat <<richtlijn>>."
- ④ **Vraag**  
"Mag ik jullie vragen om te helpen bij <<richtlijn>>?"
- ⑤ **Bedank**  
"Bedankt. Geniet van jullie bezoek!"

**SamenGezond De zomer rond**



The communication tips (inside the bannerpen) for museum staff and attendants.

## Gap between expectation and reality

Van Wateghem notes that surveys have shown that employees of organisations assess their own efforts on regard to hospitality differently from their colleagues and visitors. They award themselves the best score. Their colleagues give them a lower score. The visitors give them an even lower score than the colleagues. It is therefore important to systematically sound out their assessment and ask them for suggestions on how to improve hospitality.

Including different perspectives in the development of a visitor-centered tour is important. Moreover, not every visitor is the same: for example, a visitor with an autism spectrum disorder has different needs than another visitor and may be upset by a fashionable font in the museum. Different perspectives between the museum and the audience lead to unexpected results, from where the necessity of a third-party perspective. There should be an intelligent, tailor-made 'interpreter' (person, tool or medium) between the collection and the visitor in order to have a satisfactory and enriched experience.

## Approaches to determine the gap

One of the Tourism Sector's mission is offering instruments to institutions to know/learn their public. Through the Mystery Visit, an approach used by Visit Flanders to investigate the real situation of hospitality in museums and heritage sites, it is observed that people overlook the general picture of customer journey at the first contact point.

In the case of museums, a visitor travel cycle or a visitor journey (an elaborate example of a visitor journey involving a tour guide) can be found in the document "Maak van elke rondleiding een fantastische ervaring".

There are several contact points in regarding an arrival. For instance: (1) the first contact point might be a website where the visitor gets basic information; (2) second one can be the telephone, when the visitor has a contact with the reception; (3) third one will be parking the private car at a car park of the museum and experiencing difficulties (e.g. where to enter). Visitors have a sequence of different moments when they are connected with the museum, while these contacts build up their visit experience. What Mystery Visit tries to find is the neglect in this cycle. For example, is it easy to find opening hours and booking procedures on the website? Is all information logical and well-organized?

Apart from Mystery Visit that checks the visitor experience and the hospitality, other approaches are also created to find improvement possibilities. For example, Visitor Enquires, varying from very simple to elaborate, is one of the most familiar approaches. Each time when giving a grant to

organizations to improve the products, Visit Flanders also demand that they have those enquires done with their visitors.

"Before you improve, you should know: how am I doing and what am I doing wrong? What is the public thinking? Then you start to improve." Visit Flanders created a Self Scan, another approach that involves team members in thinking about offering good service and good quality. It is a self-evaluation tool (or a checklist) at the disposition of the sector, which helps users (it's normally a group) to determine where the weak spots are in their service model. This is also a series of detailed questions investigating how a museum/heritage site is coping with different aspects. However, specific checklists/tools are designed and used according to the object. For example some colleagues of Dirk Yzewyn deal with topics such as accessibility and tourism for all, family friendliness (see the website <https://kwaliteit.toerismevlaanderen.be/attracties-en-musea/toolkit/familievriendelijkheid-zelfevaluatietool-voor-musea>) and youth, in these cases they will have their own more specific Self Scan list or self evaluation formula.

Online toolkits are also available in regarding the guest experience improvement (e.g. inspirational tools, practical tools for heritage sites). Besides, trajectories, workshops and topical webinars where they explain certain aspects of hospitality and providing service in the context of heritage services are provided ([see the website](#)).

### **Understanding the gap from complementary angles**

Van Wateghem and Yzewyn consider that it is a good philosophy to look at the experience level, the service level and hospitality from different angles. In the context of museum, the mystery visitor is someone who is familiar with everything that has to do with the visitor experience and hospitality, thus the institute gets an expert view. Then the museum can check by itself, with the Self Scan. Museums can also have gatherings of visitors, inviting them for a workshop or a focus session, and discuss certain topics. For example, Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp (under restoration) have made an appeal to the public and received hundreds or even thousands responds from people who were interested to have sneak previews. On the basis of what people reviewed, the museum will eventually alter some things for fine-tuning the way of handling the experience.

Yzewyn mentioned the concept of learning networks as a different angle. Learning network allows institutions such as FARO, Herita (Flemish Institution for Heritage), Visit Flanders bringing together people in groups, making them to share experiences and facilitating interchange of views, also of problems. Instead of standing in the ivory tower and imagining the gap and the blind spots, learning from each other is a practical and efficient way which can be useful.

### **Interacting with local people and ambassadorship**

The contact with local people has always been an important element of the visitor's journey cycle. It gives an additional positive dimension to the travel experience and influences the satisfaction degree.

Van Wateghem mentions a benchmark between a high number of European cities done by Travelsat. The benchmark examines the visitor's satisfaction based on various criteria at successive visitor's points. This benchmark shows that the Flemish art cities generally do well to very well and

score better than or equal to the other European cities apart from some elements such as contact with the local population. While this is exactly an important factor: visitors increasingly want to become 'locals', even if only for one day, and want to get to know the destination with the help or tips from the local population.

On the other hand, cities want to make their inhabitants more and more ambassadors of the destination. This is only possible if they know the offer and are proud of it. That is why more and more initiatives are being taken in Flanders and abroad to introduce the inhabitants to the city's own offering, which of course also includes its cultural offering and museums. Some museums have their 'friends of the museum', a group that unites the 'passionates and lovers' of the museum. They are probably the best ambassadors of the museum.

A good example of this opening up of the museum to the public and the neighbours is the museum of Ixelles. The museum is a hidden gem, with a strong collection and interesting exhibitions, but unfortunately not very well known by the public. The museum decided to break out of the walls and started to interact in an active way with their neighbours.-With the 'Museum at Home'-action (<http://www.museedixellesirisnet.be/museum-in-progress/musee-comme-chez-soi-2/musee-comme-chez-soi>), the museum wanted to create a link between the museum and its neighbourhood and encourage encounters between its neighbours, while nourishing the view of works that - sometimes - have been sleeping for a long time in the storerooms.

Another example from years ago is Jan Hoet's 'Chambres d'amis' ([https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140227\\_013](https://www.standaard.be/cnt/dmf20140227_013)). Instead of creating art and installations in the museum, the artists did it all over Ghent, even to the houses of inhabitants in Ghent. The visitors were invited to see the art works/installations in the people's houses. The Biennale of Art Nouveau/Art Deco in Brussels also gives the opportunity to visit the Art Nouveau houses, where people live.

### Covid-19 related observations

Covid has impacted the heritage sector very much from the fact that they were closed or had to operate within certain limitations. For example, no groups were allowed, and the income decreased. Yzewyn noticed that along with heavy loss of visitors, in a lot of cases, the visitor satisfaction became higher. It relates most likely to the fact that people could be more on their ease, not disturbed as much from other visitors. Thus, they have a better and a more exclusive experience. Reversely, one might expect that visitor satisfaction level will go down again once the crowd starts coming back.

Due to the Covid-19, the government has forced museums only to be accessible with tickets booked in advance in a way to control the crowd and for contact tracing. It is agreed by Yzewyn that the online booking procedures are there to stay after the pandemic. Another impact is that museums will keep disclosing the collections in a more digital way. However, Yzewyn and Van Wateghem don't believe the real experience will be replaced or surpass by the virtual experience. "Digital exhibition is a nice complement." It is better for crowd control and virtual reality can help to give visitors another sort of experience, but it can also help to conserve the artwork and heritage.

Another issue that has been re-considered during the pandemic is the price. In Belgium, most people visit museums during the weekend. Tourism Sector thus re-thinks the price politics, which will try to convince people to visit museums more probably on the low-price day (e.g. weekday). Additionally, before the pandemic, young people normally wouldn't go to museums, however, in this Covid time that young people couldn't do a lot of things anymore, the museum visit subsequently become one of the choices. Hence, even Covid can be positive because museums find finally a way to involve young people.

### **Interesting examples**

Hospitality can take different forms: the welcoming reception upon arrival, the design that also considers specific target groups such as people with physical disabilities. Visitors will feel even more welcome when a route is designed according to their needs: an audioguide with basic information with possible additional information for those who want to find out more; a specific route for children or where adjustments are made for children like in the Museum van Velzeke. Children can touch and try out all the objects, dress up as a prehistoric hunter or according to (Gallo-)Roman fashion, or test out the weapons of a legionnaire. By literally touching the past, they get to know their ancestors better. Hospitality can also have a wider meaning. For example, St. Peter's Abbey offers space for students to study in peace and quiet during exams. In this way, the abbey opens its doors to people who would perhaps be less likely to visit.

Yzewyn made a reference to a museum in Tongeren. Situated in what many consider being the most hospitable province of Flanders, Limburg, this Gallo-Roman Museum is working very hard on interpretation, public/visitor satisfaction and hospitality.

### **Suggestions for museums on developing hospitality**

For Dirk Yzewyn a museum can improve on hospitality through more collaboration with colleagues and participation. The responsible person of a museum could give all the collaborators a museum pass and invite them to visit several museums with their partner or kids in the course of a year. Each time they visit a museum, return back with one good idea to consider doing in his/her own museum. It is a practical way and learning by doing. It gives involvement with your collaborators. Another suggestion for museums is the idea of what a host should do, and that is to make people feel welcome and at home.

### **How does the community perceive hospitality?**

The St. Godelieve Abbey in Bruges is a pilot project of Tourism Flanders in cooperation with various partners. For the first time in almost 400 years, the abbey has opened its doors to the public. From 12 August to 12 September, everyone, from visitors to residents to local entrepreneurs and partners from various disciplines, will have the opportunity to visit this heritage gem for free and give their vision of the future to this place. One of the many aspects that may come up for discussion is hospitality. How do people perceive hospitality, who do they see as the ideal host of this place, .... We would like to invite people to participate in this co-creative process and share their vision of hospitality. For more information, please see:  
<https://www.toerismevlaanderen.be/nieuws/sint-godelieveabdij-brugge-opent-deuren-voor-het-grote-publiek>.