

Workshop report

DATA WITHIN MUSEUMS

*Natural History Museum of Los Angeles
County Communicating the Museum
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01 *Overview*

02 *Session breakdown*

03 *Discussions and outcomes*

“What do we want?” “Data!” “Why do we want it?” “...”

Communicating data

Digital engagement

Complementing data

The non-data and the invisible

Beyond the dashboard: limitations and opportunities

01 *Overview*



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This Wezitcamp workshop on data within museums was led by Alexia Jacques-Casanova and took place during the second day of the [Communicating the Museum](#) conference in Los Angeles. The goal of this session was for participants to exchange ideas about what the perfect museum data dashboard would look like/include and to visualize/communicate those ideas on a cardboard. This ultra-quick workshop – only 45 minutes – was preceded by an online survey on museum’s relationships with data. The [results of this survey](#) are also available on Wezitcamp.



The session started by a quick presentation of the online survey results and used the final question of this survey as a prompt and starting point for this workshop. In the survey, 71% of respondents said they used four or more dashboard and sources to get a sense of all their data.

02 *Session breakdown*



Let's build the perfect dashboard



71% of respondents said they use 4 or more different dashboards (or sources) to get a sense of all their data



Excerpt from Wezitcamp survey results

As a result, we offered to imagine what a perfect and comprehensive museum data dashboard would look like: what type of data it would include and what indicators it would display.

After this five minute presentation, participants were broken into three groups and given two tasks.

First, to try and identify what they wished to measure. Examples for two types of indicators were given to them: quantifiable data and (less quantifiable) concepts.





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After identifying what mattered to their institution in terms of data collection, all three groups had to organize their ideas visually on a cardboard. This could be a visual representation of a wire-frame, a mind-map, a hierarchical chart, etc.

After 30 minutes of brainstorming, writing and taping, participants got to present what their team had talked about and to discuss some of the observations that emerged from this exercise.

03 *Discussions and outcomes*



Most participants agreed that their institution was collecting data (or interested in doing so) in order to fine-tune strategic planning (internal management) and to improve their exhibitions, public programming and general activities (outward impact).

Tracking return on investments, such as those made on web marketing, seemed to be a widespread concern. As participants explained, this is because many museums have to manage scarce resources carefully and often need to report to stakeholders and funders on how such financial (and human) resources are being used.

Participants also mentioned that collecting data about members and donors is essential as it helps fine-tuning the offers dedicated to them but also enables the museum to figure out who is their typical donor so they reach out to similar people, or on the contrary, choose to diversify their donors by contacting new profiles.

"What do we want?" "Data!"

"Why do we want it?" "..."

What kind of data do museum workers need? The first exercise of the workshop started a few conversations about the reasons why a museum would want to look at data, and more specifically, what kind of people and skills are required to do so purposefully.

It can be hard for museums to know precisely what type(s) of data will be useful to them, then how to implement the tools needed to track and collect that data. Also, how can museum workers insure that they are cross-referencing and interpreting data in the right way? New positions for data analysts and experts in museums have started to emerge and should continue to do so. Knowing how to deal with data, from deciding what to track to interpreting what comes in, requires thorough training and a skill set of its own. Data mining is an investment.

Participants also mentioned that not everyone in the museum needs to access the same type of data. The ideal museum data dashboard would therefore be one that adapts automatically to whoever is looking at it, from the deputy director to the curator and from the education manager to the communication officer.



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Communicating data

Museum workers need to access different type of data based on their role within the institution. They also need to access different type of data *visualization* according to their own personal cognitive profiles.

We all have different ways of absorbing and retaining information. How the data visualization tools we use convey information is crucial to our capacity to understand and make use of that data. Are they charts and images, written words, spoken reports?

Participants argued that an ideal museum data dashboard should also be able to adapt to multi-communicative communities and individuals, and (why not!) offer creative ways to display data.

The granularity of data is also crucial to some museums. For instance, participants have mentioned the interest of being able to separate different kinds of attendance: paid, members, school groups, free, first timers, etc.



Digital engagement

Digital engagement indicators, such as web traffic or social media interactions, were mentioned in all three groups as crucial to have on a data dashboard. The good news is that digital engagement is also one of the easiest things to track today.

During their group discussions, participants raised two questions on this topic: how can digital engagement data be cross-referenced with other on-site (within the museum) data such as visitors' flows? And, can correlations be drawn between which pages people view on the institution's website and how they move through the museum's collections?

Some of them also discussed whether digital engagement counted as "real" engagement when it comes to analyzing data. For instance, if my museum has an online collection, is someone visiting those online pages included in the attendance count?



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Complementing data

Is data alone enough to make informed decisions? In one of the groups, participants argued that data should always be complemented with qualitative research when it comes to evaluating curatorial and educational content. One person mentioned the evaluation of interactive kiosks and touchscreens within museums: how can we know whether the visitor is using the digital device because they enjoy the format, the content, or both? Or whether they are just randomly skipping through the content without actually paying attention while waiting for a friend, a parent, etc. Data is able to tell us how much people spend on those devices and what content they look at, but not *why* they look at it and *how they feel* after using it.



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The non-data and the invisible

Data is a great way to know what is happening within and around your institution. But what about what is not happening? What about non-visitors and audiences the museum doesn't reach? If people don't visit your website and don't set foot in your institution, they won't show up on your data dashboard.

Participants mentioned that tracking demographics often helped them find out which neighborhoods and geographical communities were underrepresented within their institution. Although data can help you find out who is not visiting the museum it hardly shows you why they are not visiting and rarely tells you how to bring those people in. As mentioned in the previous point, data sometimes needs to be supplemented with qualitative evaluation in order to help museum workers make informed decisions.

Beyond the dashboard: limitations and opportunities

During the final group discussion, several participants pointed out the limitations of a data dashboard. How can a dashboard help us measure impact, loyalty, reputation or accessibility? Could cheat sheets be created to help us do so? For instance, "if you wish to measure your impact compare A and B+C"? Is this possible, or even advisable?

Participants also discussed how other tools beyond dashboards – Artificial Intelligence, for instance – they could use to make sense of their data. Some talked about chatbots and how useful and timesaving such a technology could be for museum professionals working with data. One could just ask for a specific type of data, an analysis, or even type a strategic question: "how can I increase our membership revenues?"



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Data within museums is an extremely broad and complex topic. With this first ultra-quick workshop, we hope to have unearthed a few ideas that will get you inspired. Feel free to comment on [our Projects pages](#) with your own ideas, resources, opinions. You may also contact us [through our website](#) if you wish to know more about upcoming workshops.



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