

I like... museums

di Jim Richardson

When 81 museums in the North East joined forces to market themselves to the public, the pioneering campaign *I like Museums* was born.

I like Museums was an innovative promotional drive that brought together the museum sector of the North East in probably what was the biggest collaborative effort of its kind in the UK.

The initiative marked a unique partnership between MLA North East, the North East Regional Museums Hub, Audiences North East and museums across the region. Its ambitious aims were to change public perceptions of museums and galleries, raise awareness of the number of museums in the region, and encourage people to visit more than one museum.

The original idea came from a series of training sessions, led by MLA North East, which aimed to develop the marketing skills of museum professionals. Staff from eleven museums in the region worked with Tyne & Wear Museums (leader of the North East Regional Museums Hub) to learn about each element of putting together a successful campaign and the end result was to be an actual live campaign that promoted all the museums of the region.

During the sessions, the group came up with the idea of using themed museum trails to link together venues across the region and help to cross promote what each of them had on offer. The group was unanimous in the fact that they wanted to focus on experiences rather than collections to hopefully appeal to a wider audience.

In January 2007 after a competitive tender process, SUMO was commissioned to develop the themed trails idea into a summer marketing campaign encompassing design, print, digital media and media buying services, to be rolled out across the whole of the North East.

Target audiences were broadly divided into families, interested adults (those interested in culture but who tend not to broaden their visiting experience) and what have been coined 'lazy socials' – people aged 25-34 who like the idea of culture but rarely visit a museum.

SUMO held brainstorming sessions to throw up potential themes and that in itself was a great opportunity for museums to share information about their venues and what they had on offer. Amongst the ideas put forward came trails such as 'I like yukky things', 'I like a place to think' and 'I like dressing up'. Each trail was then market tested along with the visual style of the campaign, on each of the target groups by surveying over 350 people spread across each age group.

The most popular nine trails were produced in leaflet format and distributed throughout all the museums involved plus a wide distribution network across the region. The additional trails found a home online.

At the heart of the campaign was the website www.ilikemuseums.com and all elements of the campaign set out to drive traffic to the site. On a very basic level, the website was the first time such a comprehensive directory of North East museums had existed and was a gateway for the venues' own sites. However, key to the success of the campaign was cross promoting the 81 venues so people were not only encouraged to go online to view the series of over 80 pre-set trails depending on what their interests were but they could also add their own. The aim was to seamlessly link trails to museums to other trails so visitors could move around the museum landscape easily.

Sheryl McGregor, Communications Manager at Tyne & Wear Museums said: "The most important part of the campaign for us was to actually get people engaged with 'I like Museums' and we wanted them to tell us what it was they actually did like about museums. We therefore wanted the website to be as interactive as it possibly could be.

"There were so many trail ideas that came out of the training sessions that we were always going to use the website to highlight them all. However we also decided to give people the option of creating their own user-generated trails. As well as asking them to create trails, people were able to add comments about the places they visited which made for some great reading.

"One thing's for sure – people do have totally different reasons to visit museums and the website gave us an insight into some of those motivations. I mean if people are visiting because there's a great pub next door where they can contemplate about our collections afterwards – who are we to argue?"

The other benefit of allowing visitors to create their own trails was that people created trail titles that museums may not have wanted to come up with themselves. Museums may feel uncomfortable about wanting to promote themselves as a great place to go with a hangover but it works well when somebody else does it. Jack, the creator of that particular trail, highlighted the fantastic Victorian pub at Beamish for 'a hair of the dog', Lindisfarne Castle for some 'big blasts of sea air' and a contemporary art gallery to 'take your mind off how you're feeling'. It makes perfect sense when put like that.

The website is the largest site dedicated to museums which allows people to comment and recommend museums to each other. Visitors to the site were also encouraged to rate the trails by their usefulness which means they can be ranked by popularity on the site. There was also a simple print option so that people could take the trails with them on their days out.

Supporting the website and helping to drive traffic to the site was a large scale advertising campaign which included competitions and promotions in newspapers

and on regional radio stations. On two of these, listeners were asked to call in and tell the DJ what they liked about museums in order to win a VIP day out at a museum, while two local newspapers carried a competition to look for the next star of the 'I like ... museums' adverts. Beer mats in a selection of hand-picked pubs also encouraged people to go to the site with a competition to win an Ipod as an incentive. Each museum played an individual role in cross-promoting other venues, with 'I like ... museums' branded point of sale stands full of trail leaflets, posters and giveaways such as stickers and balloons, all designed to encourage people to visit another museum, or follow an entire museum trail.

One of the more interesting audience groups that the campaign aimed to reach was that 'Lazy Socials' market. These are people who were in some way engaged in culture but didn't visit museums or galleries very often, if at all. As a group who are not as open to traditional marketing methods, specific strands were developed to reach that target group. The most targeted of the Lazy Social part of the campaign was the Facebook advertising running throughout the summer.

As most marketers know, social networking sites allow us to know so much more about our audience and Facebook allows advertising to be focused on people in particular towns and cities, of a certain age or sex and even with particular interests. In placing the www.ilikemuseums.com adverts, SUMO targeted the five biggest towns and cities within the area as well as specifying particular interests that matched the Lazy Social market. It was also easy to monitor the impact and see how much traffic was driven to the site through the banner ad.

Over the eight weeks of the campaign, timed to coincide with school holidays, the website received over 48,000 unique visitors and over 160,000 trail views and it was clear that people were much more interested in engaging with the trails than using the A-Z approach. Rather than searching by name, location or their own self-defined genre, people looked for museums that related to their own interests or how they were feeling on that day.

After the summer months Tyne & Wear Museums, who led on the campaign, wanted to ensure that the website had a longer life span and decided to use it for future collaborative projects in the sector. In the Winter of 2007, the website gained a second life to market an exhibition named North Face which brought a number of portraits from the National Portrait Gallery to ten venues in the area. The exhibition itself featured a number of famous faces with links to the North East so the 'I like famous faces' became a very popular trail during the life of the exhibition. Besides the trail itself, the exhibition was given its own dedicated sub-site which was totally integrated within www.ilikemuseums.com and offered money off vouchers for venues as a further incentive to visit more than one museum.

The site therefore could be kept alive as a neutral space that unified many of the

collections in the region and was a great place to promote joint-projects. Sheryl McGregor, continued: "Thanks to the North East Regional Museums Hub, more and more joint initiatives are happening across the North East and this site seemed like the perfect place to promote them. Not only that but it keeps www.ilikemuseums.com fresh and gives us yet another chance to market it."

During Summer 2008, it was again given another push. This time the focus was very much on the family market – the audience that research had shown responded best to the campaign in its first year. An events section was added to the site to promote Summer family-focused events and exhibitions and all 81 museums were encouraged to supply information for the site. Because an approvals system is also built into SUMO's Content Management System, some of the larger venues were also given their own passwords to the site and encouraged to upload their own information.

Sheryl McGregor, Communications Manager of Tyne & Wear Museums, explains why the partnership with SUMO worked so well: "We had worked with SUMO in the past so were confident of their creative abilities. At the pitch we were very impressed by their strategic and detailed approach, and the way they not only answered the brief but took it a step further.

"The team had obviously done lots of research, which showed through in their creativity, methodology and general approach to a challenging brief that called for a fun, quirky and unusual campaign.

"We were particularly pleased that both ourselves, and all the museums that took part in the training as part of the campaign, were able to get involved with Web 2.0 in a way that was low-risk for all of us. SUMO have a really good grasp of how best to build interactivity into their websites and it definitely also gave us all some ideas for the future."

I like Museums was a collaborative project, delivered by Tyne & Wear Museums in their role as the Leader of the North East Regional Museums Hub, but with the input of museums in the region. The whole project was funded by the Hub and through MLA North East's Broadening Horizons project.