

# The Art of Marketing Art:

INSIGHTS FOR THE APPLICATION OF  
DIGITAL STRATEGY IN MUSEUMS  
AND GALLERIES.

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# Preface

Without question, digital platforms have revolutionized marketing as we know it. I've had a front-row seat in the advertising and digital space from the very beginning of the Internet age. In the early nineties advertising agencies were not concerned about shifts in ad spending from print to online. But now the entire industry has been turned on its head. Digital marketing has changed everything.

All forms of marketing have been affected, including how we “market art.” But when it comes to marketing art, typical digital strategies don't apply themselves very well. There's something unique about what we mean

when we speak about “marketing art.” Much goes into this effort, and it is rarely purely transactional.

That’s why this ebook is titled “The Art of Marketing Art.” Despite their different marketing goal, when it comes to the essence of marketing art, gallerists and museum professionals know that the task is complex. It takes time, experience, knowledge, and conversation. It’s nothing like influencing consumers to add products to a shopping cart, or to signup for an online service.

Unlike the commercial world, where the results of a digital strategy can be viewed in real time with charts and stats, the results of digital strategy in marketing art can’t be easily displayed on a graph.

Additionally, unlike consumer markets, using digital platforms to market art isn’t just about online ad buys, targeted email blasts, or aggressive SEO campaigns—though each of these might have some use.

Rather, as we’ll see, art professionals can use their websites to expand their ability to nurture their constituents and clientele, to maximize their efforts to

educate and inform their customers (whether a weekend exhibition goer, or an informed collector and potential patron/donor), to establish greater trust as an art advisor, and to draw them deeper into the appreciation of art and the artists that create it.

Art professionals know that the process of helping people understand and appreciate art does not involve pie charts, market trends, sales history, or any such metrics. Helping a visitor or collector come to an informed yet also subjective evaluation of what they see is truly an art—not a science.

*Helping a visitor or collector come to an informed yet also subjective evaluation of what they see is truly an art.*

Likewise, to help you appreciate the value of your digital platform, and better understand how it can help you, I can't use charts or graphs in this ebook.

Instead, just as you approach your constituents

and clientele, we'll need to have a conversation. We'll need to look and think more deeply about what it means to market art. We'll need to consider barriers that get in

the way. And we'll need to perhaps come to see things from a different perspective.

Just because the value of art can't be plotted on a graph doesn't make its value less real. And even though you may not be able to quantify exactly how a digital platform can help you on a given day, its impact is nevertheless, very real.

# Introduction

The art market is extremely complex. In fact, even calling it “a market” is complicated. Traditionally a market is a place where money is exchanged for goods and services that we value more than the money we have, and in most markets this valuation is objective. But valuing art is trickier. Art is largely evaluated subjectively. When it comes to marketing art, we mix deeply personal and subjective responses with real-world transactions between artists and dealers, dealers and collectors, collectors and museums, and bidders and auction houses. The act of selling and buying art, oriented around deeply personal connections and elite buying dynamics, makes the task of marketing both technically and ethically encumbered. Therefore marketing art really becomes an art in itself.

While there is a wide divide between marketing the value of art to a collector in negotiating a sale, and the promotion of a new museum exhibition, marketing art involves *promoting its value*. Marketing art requires explaining, persuading, and justifying a six-figure price tag or the price of a ticket—and that it's worth our time and attention to attend an exhibition.

And so the essence of marketing art requires that museum professionals and gallery directors function as trusted **art professionals** who provide **sage advice** and necessary information that **informs the monetary and cultural value of art** to their constituents and clientele.

This book is about how galleries and museums can leverage digital platforms and strategies to aid in their efforts to market art. In my experience as a digital strategist working in the art market, I've observed that my clients—museum professionals and gallery directors—not only face the inherent complications of marketing art but, when it comes to using a digital platform, they face other barriers as well. We'll discuss these barriers and ways to overcome them.

But first, before we can consider specific goals and strategies, we need to dive deeper into what we're even talking about when we discuss "marketing art."

# 1. What is the Value of Art?

A love of art is baked into the human soul. Whether that experience is highly refined and accompanied by the means of acquiring a private collection, or just the basic sense of connection and fascination we feel when perusing the halls of a local museum, art resonates with individuals in unique ways.

But what goes into our connections with art? How do we process these experiences? What draws us to certain works, or certain sections of a museum, and what makes us lose interest and skim through or pass by others altogether? What makes an art buyer willing to spend thousands or even millions of dollars on one piece and have no interest at all in another?

Is an “art experience” entirely subjective? Is it merely personal taste and preference? Is it only how our past experiences cause us to react positively or negatively when looking at one piece of art over another?

If art appreciation is meant to be purely subjective, then we might ask whether it’s even appropriate to seek to influence or improve someone’s appreciation of a piece of art. After all, marketing always aims at some form of selling—whether that’s a literal sale of an object, or selling a rationale for why one painting is permanently on view, deserving its spot on a museum’s wall, over many others that are hidden from view in storage.

Following that logic, wouldn’t any attempt to market, to sell, or to influence, improve, or change a person’s sensibilities be something of an invasion that interrupts a personal and private subjective experience?

While subjective value judgments will always be a major part of art appreciation, I do not believe that isolated subjective experience is the only, or in many cases, even the most important part of art appreciation.

Working with previous clients in the art and museum sphere I have often had the privilege of a curator-led tour through a museum. Without exception, those tours with a curator providing insights and background about the works are far richer, and bring deeper connections with the art, than when I wander the galleries on my own.

But claiming that historical context and the knowledge of specialists is just as important as subjective feelings does not stand without objection. Some art experts might chide that outside information can actually spoil the essence of a raw and personal response.

In Michael Findlay's excellent book "The Value of Art" he begins chapter three "The Essential Value of Art" with a quote from Barnett Newman, "The meaning must come from the seeing, not the talking."

In support of Newman's position, Findlay responds:

***"By identifying the most elusive value of art as 'essential,' I am suggesting a range of responses that, depending upon our culture, education, and***

*life experience we might file under ‘emotional,’ ‘spiritual,’ ‘psychological,’ or even perhaps ‘religious.’ Language is not a great help—at least not the English language, which favors the description of things over feelings.”<sup>1</sup>*

Findlay wants to establish individual feelings as the essence of the valuation of art. Descriptions, language, and words, he fears, can get in the way.

For Findlay, he would prefer contemplating a painting alone for an hour than listening to a lecture from a curator. Or perhaps, a back and forth conversation with a few friends, each sharing their own subjective experiences, augmenting and provoking one another, than a catalogue article describing the work.

He finds the typical museum visit liturgy of scanning painting after painting—ten seconds reading an object label, ten seconds glimpsing the work, move and

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<sup>1</sup> Findlay, M. (2012). *The Value of Art* [Kindle Android version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com

repeat—to be utterly insufficient to cultivate a real look at the work so that it can generate a personal response.

And this pattern is not helped by the sterile, Baconian cataloging of dates, genres, and categories—along with minimal encyclopedic text—found on those labels. There is a dry academic approach to art education that, while helpful for the professional, quickly loses sight of the basic connections artists try to make with their audiences.

Thomas P. Campbell, currently the director and CEO of The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, described this scholarly tendency in his 2012 TED talk on weaving narratives in museum galleries<sup>2</sup>. He recounts his days as an art student when a teacher projected an image of “The Bacchanal of the Andrians” by Titian and asked, “what is this?” Thomas raised his hand and answered, “It’s a Bacchanal, by Titian.” “It’s a what?” came the exasperated reply. He repeated his answer a couple of times to the same response. Finally, the teacher blurted, “You boneless bookworm! It’s a f\*\*\*ing orgy!”

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas\\_p\\_campbell\\_weaving\\_narratives\\_in\\_museum\\_galleries?language=en#t-56847](https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_p_campbell_weaving_narratives_in_museum_galleries?language=en#t-56847)

To the more passionate dissenters, the world of art scholarship and art education can tend to flatten out the visceral realities of art with technical categories and bookish descriptions. Michael Findlay is right that a pure long look at any piece of art may be of greater value than art viewed through the lens of modern empiricist rationality and emphasis on cataloging and categorizing.

And so for those professionals in the art market, whether museum directors and curators who present art to the public, or dealers who advise their wealthy clientele on what to collect and how much to spend, there is a lot of clutter and confusion to break through in order to restore the enthusiast or collector back to a place from which they can make those personal judgments and valuations of the actual work they are viewing. Art intermediaries need to enable them to interact with an object that was designed by an artist to produce some kind of effect in the viewer. They need to help them find some base level of value, grounded in their personal appreciation of an object, before considering any of the complicated and convoluted issues of provenance, the personal history of the artist, the effects of secondary markets, or the symbolism and artistic conventions that may provide

clues to intended effects and meanings that go into appreciating the full value of an object.

Yet, those other factors are real. And they really do contribute to the appreciation of any particular piece of art. Some of these factors are quite objective—that the three women in a painting are the Greek mythological three Graces: Aglaia, Euphrosyne, and Thalya associated with nature, creativity, fertility, and joy. Or that the use of renaissance orthogonal composition is meant to draw attention to key subjects in a painting. Such information and explanation from trained professional really do open up observations and insights that the average viewer does not have at the ready.

But even when looking at contemporary abstract expressionism where objective elements or representational figures are intentionally excluded there is still information that can lead to a deeper grasp of an artist's vision and intent.

Michael Findlay notes, regarding this aspect of modern art,

***“While at the time they often appeared to be making clean breaks with the art of the past, the giants of the twentieth century were in fact in perpetual dialogue with the history of art, endlessly studying their aesthetic ancestors to borrow and steal, parody and pay homage. They respected the weight of the history that they were following but were not confined or intimidated by it. The new was perpetually informed by the old even as it sought to replace it.”***

He also acknowledges that “An ability to make comparisons between works of art is a vital component of connoisseurship.”

Professional gallerists like Findlay and museum curators have ready access to these conversations. They’ve listened in and studied the conversation. They have a grasp on the technical information and a wealth of experience from which to draw comparisons. Resources that the average viewer lacks. And it’s their role, as trusted art intermediaries, to impart these insights, hopefully in ways that elevate appreciation rather than

disrupt or displace the personal and subjective process. A skilled intermediary can provide insights that cut through the transactional and rigidly formal aspects of art appreciation to help the average art enthusiast gain deeper connection, increase appreciation, and more fully grasp the full value of the art they are drawn to.

This is the trusted role of the art adviser, the professional curator, the museum educator, the gallerist, and the scholar. They are the art professionals who sagely educate us so that our individual and subjective sense of the value of art can be elevated further toward an appreciation of its fullest value.

So, at a most basic and fundamental level, marketing art is the effort of art intermediaries to increase our understanding of why an artwork is worthy of closer study or investment. And this effort faces some heavy

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challenges. But unfortunately, navigating the objective/subjective value proposition is not the only challenge

facing art intermediaries. Marketing art has even more challenges. And as we'll see, a well-utilized digital platform can help to overcome many of these difficulties.

But before we get to solutions, we need to discuss a particular barrier common to art marketers when it comes to building their digital platforms, namely, fear of digital platforms.

## 2. Digital Technophobia

In order for a digital platform to aid in the effort to market art, it has to be built, maintained, and integrated with a few different digital marketing tools and platforms. A website is the main point of contact but, for maximum effectiveness, the website should be integrated with a CRM (Customer Relationship Management system), and also an automated email marketing platform. Unfortunately, both galleries and museums require specialized systems for administrative management that often come with limited options for integration. Additionally, art professionals tend to lean away from technical matters and, as a result, minimize their use of modern digital platforms.

### LIMITED SYSTEMS

Both art museums and art galleries require specialized systems to help with the administrative aspects of

managing their collections, and their customers (whether those are buyers, visitors, or donors). There are numerous specialized platforms for collection management, digital asset management, and donor or customer relationship management available for both museums and galleries. Museum systems like TMS, Axiell, Blackbaud, and Tessitura focus provide collection management, event and ticketing platforms, and donor management systems. Art galleries have other systems such as ArtBase, Artsystems, and ArtLogic (among others) that contain features more suited to the transactional model of the art gallery.

Many of these older specialized platforms tend to lag behind the more cloud-driven, API-enabled<sup>3</sup> and integratable marketing platforms of today's digital media landscape. Between institutional inertia, cost prohibitions, and dependence on specialized features, most museums and galleries maintain the status quo of legacy systems rather than investing in newer and more robust platforms.

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<sup>3</sup> For more information on how APIs (Application Programming Interface) enable digital marketing platforms see <https://cuberis.com/the-future-of-museum-software/>.

And sadly, when it comes to implementing a digital strategy, an entire digital platform may be limited by the weakest (oldest) link of all the systems involved.

But there is another shared obstacle between museums and art galleries that compound their systems problems—their uneasy relationship with technology.

## THE TECHNOLOGICALLY DISINCLINED

When I was in art school in the late 1980s, computers were just beginning to show up on the scene. I enjoyed spending time in RISD's type shop and gravitated to the hot metal type and Vandercook proof presses. I had a bit

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of disdain for the Mac lab on the other side of the shop. Eventually, I had to concede and learn QuarkXPress and Adobe Photoshop. A few years later, after graduating and starting my own letterpress studio, I also began offering services

for this newfangled upstart called the World Wide Web. From 1994-1996 my practice was called Old Fashioned and Newfangled Graphics because on any given day I might be coding HTML or inking up my Vandercook SP-15. While I was intrigued by the web, my heart was in printing and wood engraving. Shockingly, the demand for web design overtook the demand for fine-press broadsides and the Old Fashioned part fell away.

I don't think I was unusual as an artist leaning away from technology. And for those engaged in the fine arts, this tendency is generally even more pronounced. So when it comes to the highly technical and analytical world of data-driven marketing strategies and digital platforms, art enthusiasts are not exactly in their own wheelhouses.

Given this disinclination, there is a greater willingness to let systems inertia prevail, choosing to stick with older, simpler, "all-in-one" platforms that offer one-stop convenience over best-of-breed custom solutions that can be implemented across many platforms. But the reality is these newer, modern systems are needed in

order to engage in the advanced digital marketing campaigns of our modern day.

And even when older platforms do offer the capabilities for advanced strategies, the skills and experience needed to dive into these technically complex strategies are often lacking.

But if professional art intermediaries can overcome this barrier, and lean into the possibilities of a more robust solution—perhaps by upgrading or replacing a legacy system with one that allows for integration—then they will have a platform ready to maximize the value of art marketing opportunities.

And prime opportunities to market art may be even more valuable than you think.

# 3. The Value of Art Marketing Opportunities

If marketing art is essentially the effort of professional art intermediaries to help art enthusiasts realize the full value of the works they enjoy, then primary “marketing opportunities” are those rare moments when the art intermediary can connect with an enthusiast as they view *original works*.

In the opening chapter, we considered the complexities of establishing the “value” of art—and the role of the trusted art intermediary for realizing the full value of art. In this chapter, we want to change perspectives and focus on the value of the *marketing opportunity itself* from the point-of-view of the museum or gallery professional.

## THE RARITY OF ART MARKETING OPPORTUNITIES

Museums and galleries provide the rare and valuable opportunity for collectors and enthusiasts to access *original works of art*—a truly one-of-a-kind experience.

As much as the world has benefited from print reproduction and digital publishing, there is no substituting real life, face-to-face encounters with original art. Going to a museum is a valuable experience because the objects you see are one-of-a-kinds. There is only one *Starry Night* and you can only see it at the MoMA. There are many posters of *The Starry Night* but they cannot compare with seeing the original.

Any original piece of art can only exist in one place at a time. If it's on permanent view in a museum it can only be accessed at that one museum. If it's in storage you'll need very special access to see it at all. If it's on traveling exhibition you may be able to see it close to home, but

only for a limited time. If it's owned by a private collector, access is all the more restricted.

Galleries and museums provide a clear and unique benefit of granting access to original works of art. When we consider the limited access for any given collector or enthusiast—for them to see the original works of art they are interested in—prime marketing opportunities are few and far between.

But that's not the only aspect to the rarity of art marketing opportunities. As stated in the introduction, “the essence of marketing art requires that museum professionals and gallery directors function as trusted **art professionals** who provide **sage advice** that informs **the monetary and cultural value of art** to their constituents and clientele.” So for a prime opportunity for an art intermediary to provide this service, both a rare encounter with original art has to intersect with the rare opportunity to interact with sage art intermediaries.

And access to such intermediaries, who can provide clarifying insights, is likewise in limited supply. And so

the rarity of those marketing opportunities grows even more.

From a client's perspective access to these occasions are rare, but from your perspective, from a business perspective—if you think of your time as part of your product—then you have a limited number of “units” of inventory in your week, just as you have limited inventory of art on view. Now, if you had a constant line out the door of interested parties who wanted to discuss specific works of art with you, a.k.a. an unending supply of opportunities, your capacity to meet that demand would be limited by your personal availability. But of course there is not always a line out the door, and so some of your available “units” of time for prime marketing engagement go unutilized. And unlike art that lasts for generations, a unit of time expires in real time—it has no shelf life at all.

Prime, in person, art marketing opportunities are **profoundly rare**. And by the law of supply and demand, art marketing opportunities are therefore **extremely valuable**. And from the perspective of the art intermediary, capturing the full value of those

opportunities is essential—whether that's to fulfill the mission of an institution, or to close a sale.

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You have only so much time to engage with each visitor or collector, you want to make every minute count. You never want to waste these valuable marketing opportunities.

And a well structured digital platform can help maximize your art marketing opportunities.

## 4. Maximizing Art Marketing Opportunities

Since art marketing opportunities are so rare and so valuable, it is in the interest of art intermediaries to maximize these times when they occur. There are many ways to maximize art marketing opportunities through a digital platform.

### MAXIMIZE CAPACITY

One way to maximize marketing opportunities is to maximize your capacity. A digital platform cannot magically add more hours to your day. But if it can help build and maintain interest so that you keep a steady stream of opportunities then you will reduce unutilized time. Time, which once gone, can never be recovered.

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Through basic tactics like SEO, online advertising, and email marketing you can increase interest and demand for more information. Many of these opportunities won't be prime, in

person, in the presence of art, opportunities, but they are still valuable to capture, and many of these may lead to prime opportunities. And the more demand you have, the more you can reduce wasted, unutilized time, in order to maximize your available time.

## MAXIMIZE EFFICIENCY

Another way a digital platform can maximize your opportunities is by making prime encounters more efficient. A robust digital platform can track and flag website visits and specific user activity. It can let you know what an individual has already viewed, read, and learned. To the extent that an in-person encounter has been preceded by digital interactions, and that you have been informed of that activity, you will have insight into

your prospect's interest and level of education in advance of in-person meetings. This is important since a cold face to face opportunity requires just as much time learning about the person as talking about art. Of course, building these relationships is time well spent, but the faster you can get to their interests, core questions, and particular areas of fascination, the better job you can do cultivating a greater estimation of the value of art.

Increased demand, and faster prospect qualification are two ways a digital platform can benefit prime art marketing opportunities. But they can also increase the impact and effectiveness of these encounters.

## MAXIMIZE IMPACT

Museums and galleries offer a rare opportunity—access to original art, and insight, through art professionals, that enable collectors and enthusiasts to further their understanding of the artworks they enjoy.

Not only can a robust digital platform help maximize the volume of opportunities, and make them more efficient, they can increase their effectiveness as well.

When a trip to a museum, or a visit to a gallery is preceded by an educational visit to your website, to learn more about some of the objects they will encounter, a visitor's excitement and enjoyment when seeing the real thing will be increased. If a collector has learned about a new artist or new work from an artist they collect, and then they come to see the original work, the stage has been set for the art intermediary to make an impact.

What's more, if the intermediary follows up after that visit, with additional information, they can extend the value of these prime opportunities as their clients continue to reflect on the value of what they've seen and heard.

## MAXIMIZE DISCOVERABILITY

Unlike the inventory of your time, a digital platform is always on, can "speak" to an unlimited number of

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While a digital platform is a  
virtual intermediary and  
interactions with it are not as

valuable as real-world opportunities, they are not  
without any value. And given the trade-offs, the  
constant availability of a digital platform makes it  
tremendously valuable despite the discount of its virtual  
limitations.

Not only is a digital platform always on, it also is  
*universally discoverable*. If a museum or gallery follows  
the basic blocking and tackling practices of search  
engine optimization, with just a bit of social media  
promotion, it can make art discoverable by anyone in the  
world. In terms of market expansion, that is a huge  
upside.

But there's something else about the always-on,  
universally discoverable aspect of digital platforms that  
makes them even more valuable—that is their ability to

meet a prospect at the very moment when they are most interested in your information.

## MAXIMIZE TIMELINESS

When an art intermediary is present with a collector or visitor as they look at an original work of art the skilled professional can respond to the individual's interests, offer their insights, clarify important elements, and cut through the complex commercial realities to get to the essence of what they are looking at.

At such moments no self-respecting curator or gallerist would interrupt these precious real-world experiences with a digital presentation. Prime art marketing opportunities are no time to pull out an iPad!

However, in the moments before and after these rare prime opportunities, digital platforms can set the stage and follow up with information so that these real-world opportunities can be focused—maximizing and extending a client's appreciation of the value of art. This is the flip side of the prospect qualification advantages of a digital platform, while you learn about them, they can learn about you, your artists, and the art they are

interested in. It provides some important preliminary prospect education functions.

And one of the best aspects of a digital platform in this regard is that it responds to their interests at the very moment they are most interested. When a prospect is searching Google or browsing and searching your website, their activity reflects their present active

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interest and intention to discover—the very best time to meet them with relevant and helpful content. This kind of well-timed engagement happens automatically, on-demand, in response to a prospect’s active interest.

The timing of delivering this information is absolutely critical to its effectiveness. Information provided too early will be quickly forgotten, or ignored as irrelevant. Information that comes too late misses the opportunity

to make connections and comparisons, or to provoke further ideas or reactions.

There are so many ways that a digital platform can maximize the effectiveness of marketing art. But one core element, one core aspect of any digital strategy revolves around your content creation strategy. When it comes to digital marketing, content is king.

## 5. A Sample Digital Content Strategy

A well-oiled digital platform can draw in new prospects that might otherwise never come in contact with your museum or gallery. It can deepen a prospect's engagement and move them toward a real-world visit. It can aid in the education process that is critical to fully appreciate the value of art. And it can provide a basis for continuing the relationship with your prospects.

But for it to succeed in these areas, you will need integrated tools and a well-crafted and sustainable strategy for its use.

## CONTENT STRATEGIES BUILD REACH

By simply having a website, each and every page becomes an object that can be discovered through search and social media. By its mere existence, therefore, it helps expand your market.

But building up qualified traffic to your website requires effort. This effort includes basic SEO practices such as making sure you use effective page titles and headlines. But one of the most important things you can do to increase search results and search traffic is to *continually add new content to your website*. When search engines index your site, if they regularly find new content, this adds to your site's relevance score which impacts where you show up in search results, which has a direct impact on traffic.

Additionally, when you add new content, it will need to contain *thoughtful words*. Since adding new art and upcoming exhibitions to a website is something museums and galleries regularly do “adding new content” is not a problem. However, insufficient text on those pages can be a problem. Especially since the content for most art-oriented sites consists mainly of

images of art. For effective search engine optimization, you should also include between 500-750 words per page or post.

Another factor impacting search results and traffic are external links that point to your pages. And that's one reason why simply posting new content to social media is worth that minimal effort.

When it comes to digital strategy, content creation is always going to be a critical and necessary part of your

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strategy. In fact, most of the other elements of a digital strategy revolve around your content strategy. And so a commitment to ongoing content creation is going to have to become a habit.

If you are going to engage in a habitual content strategy, it has to be sustainable. And if it's going to be sustainable and effective it will need a clear strategy.

## MAXIMIZING YOUR CONTENT CREATION EFFORTS

Content takes significant effort to create, and so determining *what to create and when to create it* has to be strategically considered. Unlike most businesses who struggle to find ideas for ongoing content creation, art-oriented organizations suffer from the opposite problem—a never-ending set of possibilities for content creation. Every artist and every artwork has a story. The relationships between artists, how they influence and inspire one another, make for a wide open set of possibilities. If anything, museums and galleries can suffer from choice paralysis in the face of so many content options.

And so one way to find a focus for a sustainable content strategy is to structure it around major events and exhibitions. Since museums and galleries also often develop other art publications such as artist retrospectives, exhibition books, catalogue raisonnés, and other scholarly publications, these efforts can often provide ample material for online digital content productions around exhibitions.

Using upcoming events and exhibitions as a content creation anchor also takes advantage of the importance of *timeliness* when matching interest with information. With sufficient lead time you can establish a content production schedule that will meet interested visitors with helpful information at the right time—while they are considering a visit—to maximize the impact of a visit, and their appreciation of the true value of the art they will experience. And with a little planning that content can be repurposed for other marketing campaigns leading up to major events and exhibition openings.

## AN EDUCATION-ORIENTED CONTENT STRATEGY

The essence of the role of the art intermediary in marketing art is to maximize the perceived value of the art. This is essentially a specialized form of education—specialized and complex. In marketing speak art marketers suffer from a *prospect education* problem. If a product has to explain itself or demonstrate how it solves a problem, its marketing path is going to have a lot more friction than products that solve obvious and simple problems—or that have mass popular appeal like blockbuster movies and video games. And since most

people are more interested in the next Marvel Universe movie than the latest Jeff Koons sculpture, art intermediaries face an uphill battle to explain the value of an experience with art.

So educating prospects is an uphill battle, with lots of competition for their short attention spans. The art intermediary can use all the help he or she can get in educating prospects, and grabbing and holding their attention.

Digital platforms can be extremely effective and engaging tools for education. Used to their fullest they not only serve existing interested audiences, but they can also help draw in new enthusiasts, especially younger audiences, to whom explaining the importance of art is even harder. But it is in the interest of both museums and art galleries to grow their market and cultivate new audiences and clientele.

Educating the art market will always be a high friction activity—utilizing digital platforms to maximize, expand, and preserve these efforts. Let's consider some ways that digital platforms can excel as education-oriented

platforms and review some examples from existing museum and gallery websites.

## RICH MEDIA CONTENT TYPES

One of the benefits of a digital platform is the ability to expand on text and image content by adding rich media to their pages. Both museums and art galleries have begun to experiment with other content and media types, such as video and audio, to augment and extend the information they provide about their work. While the production costs for video and audio content is higher than text and image, they do deliver significantly deeper impact and engagement. Seeing and hearing an artist explain their conceptual framework, their influences, and their processes can deeply connect audiences with the work.

For example, listening to Glenn Brown describe his conceptual framework, inspiration, and approach to line and color in the Gagosian Quarterly<sup>4</sup> greatly increases one's appreciation for his unique artistic language.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://gagosian.com/quarterly/2017/02/06/glenn-brown-rembrandt-after-life/>

Another popular media format is Podcasting. Its lower production costs make it an attractive option for museums and galleries. The MIA has their “The Object Podcast” and David Zwirner has their “Dialogues” podcast.

## ART-ORIENTED VS. ARTIST-ORIENTED CONTENT

When we compare the corresponding strengths and weakness of how museums and galleries approach their education-oriented content strategies, there is an interesting contrast that can inform a more complete and effective content strategy for both.

At first glance, both museum and gallery websites seem very similar. Both feature artists, artworks, events, and exhibitions. They provide background on the works in their collections. When well-executed, both offer robust content relationships—when viewing an artist page you’ll find samples of their work. And other related content is likewise provided when viewing particular artwork or artist pages.

They both include current and upcoming exhibitions and archives of past exhibitions. Both have lists of upcoming events, openings, and other happenings. And both often offer shops for buying books or other related items associated with their artists and collections.

Upon closer examination, however, we begin to see differences. Museums' strategies tend to *focus on their collections*. The artwork itself is front and center. Art gallery websites, in contrast, *place artists first*—featuring more comprehensive background information on the artists they represent.

These basic differing emphases make sense since a museum's collection is its most permanent feature. Cultivating content around artwork represents an investment that will have lasting value. But for an art gallery, any particular piece may be sold and is only integral to its business goals in the short term. As a result, there is less incentive to invest in storytelling and scholarly content around the art itself. Instead, they focus content on artists; since they value long-term

relationships with the artists they represent, artist-centric content has more lasting value.

But when we think about the visitor or prospect and the educational work required to help them engage with the art, we need to understand that if these areas of emphasis are too lopsided they miss an extremely important facet of prospect education. And if they want to upgrade their efforts in marketing to these prospects, achieving a better balance between artist and artwork information is critical.

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So by evaluating how museums handle their artworks, and how galleries handle their artist pages, each can

learn from the other and improve their overall educational platform.

## EXAMPLES FROM MUSEUMS AND GALLERIES

Let's consider some examples. The Minneapolis Institute of Art has augmented some of their key artworks by developing "Art Stories" with deep dives into the backgrounds and insights about chosen works. Take "The Death of Germanicus," 1627 by Nicolas Poussin for example<sup>5</sup>. The page for this artwork offers a deep zoom image and one-minute audio clip. In addition to its basic image text, there is a link to its in-depth "ArtStory" page. Linking over to this page, they provide a map to where to find the image in their galleries, a details feature that highlights four sections of the painting adding curatorial explanations as the image zooms into those key details, and a "more" tab that offers a few links to simple "flip book" sections of related topics. No doubt putting all that content together was a lot of work, but it also highly elevates the viewer's appreciation for this piece.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/1348/the-death-of-germanicus-nicolas-poussin>

This example sets a high bar for artwork presentation, and rarely would just one piece temporarily on display at an art gallery warrant that level of treatment. Yet selecting a few representative pieces from a key artist for deep dive exploration can go a long way toward elevating appreciation for all the other works by that artist, and inform buyers of some of the more subtle aspects behind other works for sale.

Or consider an art gallery example from one of the artist pages on the David Zwirner website. William Eggleston's page offers an expansive representational sample image with multiple upcoming and past events and other content related to the photographer. Additionally, this section includes a survey of his work, past exhibitions held in the David Zwirner galleries, a full biography and CV, selected press, books about the artist, and a link to the artist's website. Each artist page on the David Zwirner site also offers a "Follow the Artist" option allowing a visitor to sign up for email alerts to news, events, fairs, available works, and books about each artist. This is high touch customer service, but it

also creates a highly segmented data list for future gallery marketing.

Both sites are stellar examples of an artwork page and an artist page respectively. Comparing the two, it's evident that where each excels, the other lags behind. On the Zwirner site, when you do view a particular sample of art, you will get a nice image view, but little else other than basic image data. The MIA does a little better in offering some artist background in its highly worked up ArtStory section but, even so, the “flip book” section where the artist’s background is found is just one of three additional topics, linked on the third tab of “more” content, which is found on the second level detail page for this augmented content. And their general catalog merely lists an artist’s name with virtually no other background information available.

If galleries can learn from museums how to elevate their artwork content types, and if art museums can learn from galleries how to better promote artist information, their content will become much more effective educational platforms for their constituents and clientele.

While each does a good job with the content that is most directly valuable to them, it's important to remember that from their audience's perspective, the relationship between the artist and artwork is mutually reinforcing and illuminating. If galleries and museums

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## THE IMPORTANT CALL-TO-ACTION

The last component of this sample content strategy we'll consider is the use of calls-to-action (CTAs). In the vast number of cases, a museum or gallery website has but one main call-to-action, namely, "sign up for our newsletter."

But with a bit more strategic planning, museums and galleries can implement relevant CTAs based on the nature of the content being viewed. And with some automated marketing platforms, they can even target the best CTA for a user based on other information that may be available about a visitor in their CRM. More targeted and dynamic CTAs not only augment digital interactions, but they can also serve to improve data on visitors and customers which can then be further utilized for refinements and follow-up actions. (This potential benefit is one of those features often missed due to the lack of integration options in legacy gallery and museum CRM systems.)

One notable example of a museum that has better CTAs than most is the Wellcome Collection. The Wellcome invests heavily in their long-form stories and essays, and also produce even longer serialized stories from their collection. These encourage repeat visits and subscriptions to their email newsletter for story updates, in order to follow each installment in the series. And at the conclusion of these long-form story pages, they offer

the reader additional actions such as “further research,” “more stories,” “plan a visit,” and “subscribe.”

In the gallery space, as already noted, the David Zwirner site offers a “Follow this artist” CTA that builds their email marketing list, all the while providing helpful segmentation of their contacts by their update interests.

# Conclusion

While the surface goals of art galleries and art museums are quite different, their ultimate goal as art intermediaries is to elevate the value of art for their constituents and clientele. For the museum, this leads to greater engagement with hopes that visitors will become members, and members will become donors who join them and support them in their mission. For the gallery, deepening appreciation for art elevates the perceived value of their art, which has an obvious benefit to sales. Therefore investing in content strategies that educate and raise appreciation is in the mutual interests of both.

And by connecting those content investments to meaningful follow-up actions, galleries and museums

can deepen their marketing database, and improve their digital interactions with their audiences.

# About the Author

Eric Holter is the CEO of Cuberis, a specialized web strategy and web services firm focusing on museums and galleries as they use their digital platforms to enhance the appreciation of art and history through collecting, exhibiting, studying, and selling.

Eric graduated from Rhode Island School of Design in 1991 with a BA in illustration. He worked as an illustrator, and fine-press printer before his winding path led to the world wide web in 1995. Today he combines his roots in the art world with his professional skills as a digital strategist helping museums and galleries build platforms and strategies to enrich their important work as art intermediaries.