

# Futureproof your organization in a cloistered world.

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Stop behaving like a museum. Re-opening may be your first priority – an understandable attempt to get back to some kind of normal state – but if people abandon social-distancing policies and individuals begin behaving irresponsibly, the infection may again spiral out of control. No one can predict the future with COVID-19: a return to lockdowns may not be far away and if people again retreat back into their homes we'll be back where we started.



Universities are preparing for the fact this “thing” is far from over and that restrictions may be required for many months to come. McGill University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria have been among the first to announce fall semester classes would be taught online. And now Cal State has announced its 500,000 students will also be learning online. This extraordinarily large and important system will be a trendsetter for other institutions.

What about museums and other cultural venues? They have proved highly vulnerable to the pandemic's disruptions; with no one visiting it has seemed like the end of their work. Most have been coasting for decades on the coattails of the old museum brand, defining their work as an in situ experience; they have to get back to normal for their model to work. COVID-19 is telling organizations like museums that they need to be something more than a cabinet of wonders.

They should have focused sooner on how to keep in touch with absent visitors; this could have been addressed a long time ago. But, pre-pandemic, maintaining contact with community was not something they had much time for, the community came to the museum: On the whole, most museums have made few meaningful attempts to engage a broader, more diverse, more global audience and to grow their influence much beyond their geographic reach.

## Staying relevant

Whether your doors are open or closed, staying relevant means considering new strategies to help you pursue your mission. Museums weren't prepared for COVID-19 because they haven't adequately addressed “What business are we really in?” and “What is our core purpose?” Leaders may have discussed their organization's purpose amongst staff and peers, but rarely out in the open. Consequently, most still function with a self-defined mission and a traditional view of their core business. Undoubtedly they see their role as helping people reflect; to make them better-informed and more responsible citizens; to be places of ideas where the brand revolves around shaping conversations. And that's fine, but museums do this almost exclusively within their four walls.

To be fair, not all have been coasting: the Canadian Museum for Human Rights has invested in a more robust digital engagement enabling it to place equal value on meaningful online visitation and physical visitation. Someone else who thinks about this is Kaywin Feldman, the director of the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. In normal times the Gallery doesn't have much to worry about: it hosts an astounding 4 million visitors per year. Nevertheless, Feldman is kept up at night worrying about “how to foster greater curiosity about our collection and the work we do?” She knows that despite the Gallery's overwhelming success at drawing-in visitors, as a national museum “the nation becomes your community” and that broader outlook is her focus. That's a discussion more museums need.



## What business are you really in?

Your audience likes to visit but it also wants other kinds of experiences. Museums are about the stories they tell not just about the place where they tell them. Their core purpose is to be a storyteller but the “place” that is a museum can, and must also be, a “place in the mind.” They are a “place” for dialogue, thinking, research, knowledge – not merely a place to visit. People want stories they can access anywhere, at any time, about history, science, and the environment; to know where society has been, and where it is heading. They want a relationship with the organizations providing insight and analysis. They want your new ideas.

A great example came out of the Canadian War Museum last week when, to celebrate the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, it released a short video documentary produced by the museum’s director of research and best-selling author Tim Cook. The video was informative, visually engaging, and with a ten-minute-long running time it was substantive and meaningful enough without being too long; a perfect length for social media. Cook is one of the best nonfiction writers in Canada at the moment – he knows how to package a story and, clearly, he understands that mobilizing content helps position the museum so it is seen, heard, and understood as the place for leading conversations. Museums need more of that. In *The Attention Economy*, Thomas Davenport and John Beck write that “people with something to say, or a unique and creative way of saying it, are your organization’s best hope of getting attention.” That is what Cook has done for the Canadian War Museum.

## What is “the new normal”?

This is the time to make purposeful changes aimed at improving in the future. It’s time to realize there has been a cost to being passive about telling people what you know – you’ve marginalized your organization by not speaking out and failing to engage them in new and compelling ways outside your walls. So it’s time for a real plan for keeping people connected to your work between visits, a real plan for mobilizing new content that deepens peoples’ sense of your relevance.



There are people who really want to hear what you have to say, and to have a conversation with you: it’s time, finally, to refocus on the value to your members. Pre-COVID, members weren’t a main consideration: they received a discount at food concessions, in the gift shop, and in the parking lot, and invitations to special events, but that’s about all. Now museums’ leadership are talking about the value of their members and figuring out how to maintain more meaningful contact with them. Members are truly interested in what you have to say; some might even be called “passionate.” It won’t take much to transform them into evangelists for your ideas, so build better mechanisms allowing you to communicate deep, meaningful information to them: hire writers instead of the event planners you won’t need as much.

## Stop behaving like a museum.

If you help people read more, listen more, see more, and think more, you can help yourselves. Potentially dwindling revenue from memberships and visitor admissions will not cover the cost of developing and sustaining more ambitious digital engagement platforms. So thinking hard about providing unique content experiences – especially ones people will value enough to pay for – must quickly become the main preoccupation for institution leaders. Shaping the conversation will help make your institution top-of-mind. It will also bring more people through the doors once they reopen.

Consider your real purpose: reimagining how you engage, communicate and educate online offers the promise of finding more meaningful ways to persuade the public about your museum's promise and social value. Mobilize content to maintain contact with your community like never before: refocus on the value to your members and your most frequent visitors, and nurture new connections to your aspirational visitors. It's not that hard to do.

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**Retool Lab is a collaborative focused on helping cultural, entertainment and public institutions regroup, reshape, and retool their strategy to recover from the economic impact of the current crisis, and to use these insights as a springboard to thrive far into the future. You can contact us at [info@retoollab.com](mailto:info@retoollab.com) or at [www.retoollab.com](http://www.retoollab.com)**

