

Is coping with COVID-19 enough?

Robert Ferguson / John Nightingale / Jean-Pierre Veilleux

For the better part of two months, 95% of the world's cultural institutions and attractions have been closed. The consequence is that American museums have been losing \$33 million per day due to closures, affecting over 700,000 jobs. These numbers may not be Apple or Exxon-big, but when you add it all up, it's still big money: it's a little-known fact that more people visit botanical gardens annually than visit Las Vegas or Orlando. What that means is that they, as much as any for-profit business, are itching to reopen. But restarting these places is no simple matter.



No one knows what's going to happen when those doors reopen. There is great uncertainty about how people will actually respond: 55% of Americans may say it is reckless for events to resume in the absence of a vaccine – and only 27% say they would go to the movies, concerts, or theatre when venues reopen – yet many of these people have found the last 8 weeks of isolation long and frustrating. In practice, people are in a rush to get back to something that seems normal. So it wasn't surprising that once Florida and California opened beaches they were quickly packed by tens of thousands of people, reigniting fears that large crowds in public spaces could reverse the progress on containing COVID-19.

German museums are blazing a trail for the rest of us. The German Association of Museums has announced that, "with a gradual and carefully organized re-opening of the museum, we can set an important sign for a slow but safe return to normality." At the tactical level we're going to see more of what we've come to expect from the businesses that have sustained us through the first part of the crisis: frequent cleaning, Plexiglas shields separating cashiers from patrons, facemasks, limiting the number of people admitted at any one time, and limiting the length of time allowed per visit; coloured arrows on the floor will indicate the one-way directional flow people must follow; staff will be instructed to discourage lingering and ensure proper social distancing; thermal scanning cameras are being purchased by some to allow guests to confirm their health status before entering. Directors are also responsible for their institution's financial health, so they are thinking about how to build revenues at gift shops and food services and not having staffing costs outweigh the net receipts. Most are conscious they could reopen and actually lose money against normal cash flow and budget.

We've talked to several directors of cultural institutions across North America about the challenge in front of them, and they are asking three questions:

1. How to reopen safely, and how to cultivate public confidence that it is safe to visit. This is clearly top of mind, and a baseline requirement. Naturally, this question is consuming almost all the time and "bandwidth" leaders have.
2. Leaders are evaluating how this crisis has changed us? Are we now asking different questions? Will things go back to "the way they were" – or will some conditions be permanently altered?
3. Is this the time to make purposeful changes aimed at improving in the future?

The overriding issue, of course, is safety, and it should be possible to have a totally safe experience for everyone. But the the quality of the visitor experience remains a key issue. For those such as science centres, exploratoriums, and aquariums, the question is how to engage people while ensuring safe spacing, and keeping family groups separated from each other. And what to do about scheduled shows that are a big part of the experience? And, ultimately, how do you do that with adequate "throughput" to engage enough people and generate needed revenues?

There is innovative thinking going on: the San Antonio Zoo is moving to a drive-through experience. Leaders such as Dolf DeJong at the Toronto Zoo are considering this option, but pushing it to the next level: would they maintain that mode of public engagement after life returns to normal?

That reveals the next question directors are struggling with: how has this experience changed us? Will we remain cautious or will we simply rush back to the beach? The media muses regularly about “the new normal.” How might having more people work from home change our organizations in the future – staffing requirements, organizational structures, and productivity? Will our responses over the last two months result in permanent changes in the way we think and act?

Many cultural institutions have been thinking about how to engage their community despite being closed, in order to maintain their relevance. Many expanded their reach with social media by offering virtual tours. The Yorkshire Museum challenged the museum community to share the creepiest items in their collections; the result was a wide range of weird, wonderful, and scary objects – all in the name of having some fun and engaging people.

Surely, what each has learned from this experience will carry on into their future, but how? This is leading some organizations and institutions to reflect on their core mission. Some are now thinking “maybe its time to re-think who and what we are.” If this isn’t on the minds of museum leaders, it should be: what other innovation or change is it time for? Use the changes to come to innovate as we re-open. What does “new thinking” really mean? Will there be 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?

It’s hard to balance these three questions all at once – but that’s why leaders are leaders. Focusing on the tactical challenges of reopening, all the while thinking about longer-term strategic questions, will yield positive results. Circumstances outside our control have imposed unusual and unprecedented conditions on us – and a second wave may be on its way. No one had a contingency plan for this, and nobody knows the answers. You won’t restart without lurching; we’ll learn to cope in a gradual and erratic way, but we will learn. It’s okay to innovate and experiment. We must use this uncertainty to rethink and reset with an eye to future success. There’s no “new normal,” not yet. But now is the time to ask how we can emerge stronger and more resilient. It’s time to rethink not just what we do, but also how we do it.

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 or at www.retoollab.com