

The Experience Economy – Trends Impacting Interpretation

Chuck Lennox, Principal, Lennox Insites

Introduction

The Experience Economy, a concept developed by B. Joseph Pine II and Joseph Gilmore in 1998 describes the experience economy as the next economy following the agrarian economy, the industrial economy, and the most recent service economy, is alive today!

Polling data and trends research shows people (especially Millennials – defined as ages 18 – 35) prioritize spending money on experiences instead of material goods. What do these shifts have to do with interpretive sites and settings? Could we take advantage of these trends to expand our audiences and members? After all, we ARE in the experience business! Let's capture this momentum and attract visitors to our sites by doing something different with the familiar.

Retail is in a major state of flux due to changes in technology but also in consumption patterns. Shopping malls are closing at an increasing rate – up to 25% of existing malls are expected to close by 2020.¹ Shifts in driving, car ownership and home size have also been documented in urban areas. What do these shifts have to do with interpretive sites and settings? Could we take advantage of these trends to expand our audiences and members?

Implications for the Visitor Experience

Various industries have concentrated on understanding the needs of their customers. The technology industry uses the symbol of the UX (or User) Experience. Medicine has been assessing the patient experience and focusing on how to improve it led by the Cleveland Clinic.² Retailers such as Apple and REI, Inc. have built loyalty to their respective companies by focusing on the retail experience. Starbucks is a master with the customer experience most notably with their development of [The Roastery](#) in Seattle, WA and other locations.

interpretation has expanded to be part of the *visitor experience* – a broader overall concept that takes into account the total experience – a decision to visit, the means to travel, ability to find your way, visitor comfort (food and restroom), engagement with the setting, site and/or employees and, if we are lucky, a continued connection using social media to encourage a return, become a member or to volunteer.

Interpretation is in the experience business – our sites and settings have the REAL things – historical objects, original paintings and sculpture, a house where history was made, live animals that move in wild settings, plants that can be touched and tasted, food that can be smelled and eaten. Today our culture is often information rich but experience poor.

How do we harness the trends to enhance interpretation and make a stronger connection to our visitors? Current trends research available on the web has implications for interpretive settings if we approach the process with an open mind. How does the trend for co-creation impact what

LENNOXINSITES

EXTRAORDINARY VISITOR EXPERIENCES

we do? How can we involve visitors in program and exhibit development? How do other sites or settings develop innovative practices that enhance the visitor experience?

If we look to the business world – especially the hospitality industry – we find examples that could provide interpretive sites and settings ideas for engaging their visitors. Hotel brands such as Kimpton Hotels empower local managers to develop unique programming that helps their guests to feel more at home and become part of the hotel's community for the night – a wine tasting reception in the lobby with local wines or a watercolor painting gathering in mid-afternoon.

The [Hopservatory](#) recently opened by Worthy Brewing in Bend OR provides a venue for drinking beer at a brewery while also gazing at the heavens through their new observatory. *“Imagine being able to enjoy a cold beer and then traveling back millions of light years in time!”*

To build new audiences when the Museum of History and Industry in Seattle, WA moved into a new neighborhood, [pub trivia nights](#) were developed in local pubs focused on Seattle's history to engage new audiences. Once the move was made, trivia nights were moved into the museum along with the beer!

A botanical garden in the U.S. Midwest added a twist to a book reading by Amy Stewart, author of *The Drunken Botanist* (a book that makes the fascinating connection between plants and alcohol), by adding a hosted cocktail hour following her reading. Imagine learning the source and history of your cocktail while you imbibe!

The [Seward Park Audubon Center](#) in southeast Seattle, consistently scheduled a traditional bird walk on Saturdays at 8 AM – because that's when the birds are active, right? Attendance was mediocre. What family can get kids and adults out the door on a Saturday to go bird watching at that early hour? With some risk, staff changed the starting time to 10 AM, added donuts and rebranded the program offerings as “Tweets and Treats”. Attendance doubled. Watching birds was not about tracking a life list, it was about a social experience – an opportunity for a family to do something together in nature without the pressures of a schedule.

Let's challenge ourselves to address the public's interest in experiences by changing an existing program or visitor activity to make it more experiential and unique. Engaging visitors using experiences will be memorable, help us develop new audiences and could bring in new revenue.

Conclusion

Interpretive sites and settings can take advantage of the public's increased interest in experiences by modifying existing programs and developing new programming that provides something unique, hands-on and memorable. We are in the experience business and can leverage that position in the marketplace to grow new audiences. We should OWN this concept! Let's be creative, innovative and deliver programming that visitors cannot stop talking about!

507 27th Avenue, Seattle, WA 98122

Tel: 206-720-4928 Fax: 206-328-6038 chuck@lennoxinsites.com www.lennoxinsites.com

LENNOXINSITES

EXTRAORDINARY VISITOR EXPERIENCES

1 - Up to 25 % of Shopping Malls are Expected to Close by 2020 <http://fortune.com/2017/05/31/malls-retail-stores-closing/>
2 – Office of Patient Experience <https://my.clevelandclinic.org/departments/clinical-transformation/depts/patient-experience>

References

Books

Pine II, Joseph B. and James H. Gilmore. *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press. 2011.

Pine II, Joseph B. and James H. Gilmore. *Field Guide for the Experience Economy* (booklet). Aurora, OH: Strategic Horizons LLP. 2005.

On-Line

Just Do It: The Experience Economy and How We Turned Our Backs on Stuff, The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/may/13/just-do-it-the-experience-economy-and-how-we-turned-our-backs-on-stuff> Retrieved 8/6/17

Millennials – Fueling the Experience Economy. Eventbrite https://eventbrite-s3.s3.amazonaws.com/marketing/Millennials_Research/Gen_PR_Final.pdf Retrieved 8/6/17

Welcome to the Experience Economy, original Harvard Business Review article by Pine & Gilmore published in the July-August 1998 issue of the Harvard Business Review. <https://hbr.org/1998/07/welcome-to-the-experience-economy> Retrieved 11/25/17

What Consumers Want. Joseph Pine. TED Talk https://www.ted.com/talks/joseph_pine_on_what_consumers_want Retrieved 8/6/17

About the Author

Chuck Lennox is a former NAI Board Member, Northwest Regional Director and Interpretation & Tourism Section Co-Director. His consulting firm, Lennox Insites specializes in supporting clients to create extraordinary Visitor Experiences using heritage interpretation, informal education and program evaluation. He can be reached via email at Chuck@LennoxInsites.com or through his website www.LennoxInsites.com