



The very serious business of having fun in museums

This paper is prepared by  saturn

1. Introduction

Saturn Visual Solutions is a digital signage consultancy that works primarily in the leisure sectors. It has undertaken a large piece of research to understand the business case for making leisure venues and visitor attractions more fun, and the potential role for digital signage in achieving that.

Key findings

- People will spend more time and money in leisure spaces when they're having fun
- People are more likely to return to 'fun' places multiple times a year.
- People's attention spans are shortening
- Nearly half of people consider an experience without engaging activities to be 'boring'
- One in five people (21%) perceive museums as being dull and avoid spending time in them



2. The Perfect Storm

There are four key factors that are creating a 'perfect storm' for UK museums.

Problem 1. Local authority funding for museums is harder to come by. [According to the Arts Council's research report](#) released in January 2024, local authorities in England invested 23% less per capita in museums and galleries in 2022-23 than they did in 2009-10. This amounts to a real-terms decrease of 42.1% when inflation is taken into account.

Problem 2. Visitor numbers are still down. On average, [museum visits in 2023](#) were 13% lower than in 2019 – prior to the pandemic. According to research by Saturn, **one in five people (21%) think museums are boring and avoid spending time in them.**

The reducing volume of visitors is affecting the number of potential donors, and sales of merchandise.

Problem 3. The cost of living has increased. [Inflation rates and energy prices](#) have increased. As a result, the potential donors that do visit museums have less disposable cash to donate.

Problem 4. Technology is advancing fast and people's expectations are changing. Through streaming platforms like Netflix, entertainment is more accessible, plentiful and sophisticated than ever before. Computer graphics and capabilities are becoming more advanced. Virtual reality environments are becoming more commonplace, either via headsets bought for home use or at VR arcade experiences.

The more advanced technology becomes, the greater the divide between it and the experience of looking at artefacts in glass cases. People increasingly expect information to be better presented and to have engaging multi-media experiences within museums.

Problem 5. People get bored faster. As people are now used to being stimulated with information via mobile phones multiple times a day, their perception of boredom has changed.

According to research by Saturn, a quarter of people (25%) feel bored after less than one minute if they aren't stimulated, and will subsequently pick up their mobile phone to amuse themselves. As such, people are more likely to lose interest faster in a museum experience without some sort of stimulation – and to leave negative reviews about a museum being boring if it can't sufficiently engage its visitors.

3. The Solutions

A change in mindset

Museums must think more commercially than ever before, and focus more on their visitors' experience and how much fun they have, rather than focussing primarily on curating and storytelling.

Why?

Reason 1. People are more pre-disposed to spend more on having fun than on learning. According to [2023 research by VISA](#), there has been a steady rise in leisure spending, especially on gaming and socialising, despite the increased cost of living.

Research by Saturn found that more than a third of people (37%) would be willing to spend an additional £15-£40 more than they'd planned to at a leisure venue/visitor attraction, if they were having fun.

Saturn's research found that more than a quarter of people would spend an additional 45 minutes to two hours at a leisure venue/visitor attraction if they felt like they were having fun. Visitors spending additional time at a museum are substantially more likely to result in café purchases, buy merchandise, and to write more detailed/positive reviews on online sites.

The research asked respondents about how often they would be likely to return a leisure venue if they thought it was a fun place to be and more than two thirds (67%) of respondents said they would return at least three times a year, if not more.



Reason 2. Reviews matter. People decide where they're going to go and how they're going to spend the little leisure time and money they have available using online review sites. Tripadvisor, for example, continues to [increase in popularity](#) with the site getting roughly 192 million visits in June 2024 - a 1.9% increase from the same period in the previous year.

What people write in their reviews matters, and can drive visitors to your museum in droves without you having to spend a penny. Or it can drive them away. If your museum doesn't have a 'highpoint' that visitors are likely to talk about, your reviews will inevitably use generic and unenticing language like 'an interesting way to spend a day' 'good', as opposed to describing what the highlight of their visit was.



Reason 3. How you ask people to donate, matters. A museum that Saturn has worked with to make donation requests more prominent, substantially increased the volume of people donating, and the average donation value.

Using digital signage technology cleverly to make museums more fun and financially secure.

There's no doubting that creating a multi-media experience akin to something out of DisneyWorld would be expensive. But thankfully that isn't necessarily what's required to make a visitor's experience more engaging and interactive. A small, well-thought out display can go a long way.

Here are some examples of how museums can use digital signage more effectively.

Large displays – Whilst these are at the more expensive end of the scale, they can be used to solicit donations from visitors by explaining how they're spent, and raise awareness of cafes and shops selling merchandise. They can also promote forthcoming temporary exhibitions.

They can also be used to 'rebrand' the venue, making it more suitable for use for corporate events, weddings etc. if appropriate.



Small displays – Small displays tend to be the most cost-effective digital signage hardware and can be used to give more context to a historical museum's most interesting exhibits. For example, showing 3D visualisations/CGIs of what an artefact would have looked like in action or how it evolved, making the actual artefact more interesting and relevant. It also creates variety so users don't constantly having to rely on reading to get information, which can be tiring after an hour or two. It can also allow multiple visitors to view the same information at once.

Touchscreen – Giving a museum international appeal is crucial for increasing footfall, but for most museums it isn't feasible to have all information written in all languages. Audio tours can assist with giving international visitors access to information in their native language, but not every museum is able to provide this facility. Furthermore, audio-guides are clunky, not very user-friendly and generally considered by users to be outmoded.

Touchscreen displays can be dual-purposed and used to show animated information to bring displays to life. They can also be used to present key information in multiple languages, enabling museums to broaden their appeal to international visitors.

Window displays/outdoor displays – From the outside, many museums always look the same. Outstanding temporary exhibitions can come and go without the local population being any the wiser. Window displays and outdoor displays can be used to make the most of any passing footfall, and draw attention to events, family days etc. and give people a reason to return.

Motion sensors – Motion sensors, when used in conjunction with digital signage, can be used to create unique and fun interactive experiences that give visitors something to tell their friends about. This can be through using gesture control to play games or navigate through information on displays. They can also be used to solicit donations from people when leaving the premises.



4. Summary

Museums are facing an increasing number of challenges - reduced funding, declining visitor numbers, higher operational costs, changing visitor expectation and shorter attention spans.

Research highlights that making museums more engaging and fun can significantly boost visitor spending and repeat visits, and many museums and educational visitor attractions are capitalising on this idea.

Clever use of digital signage technology can help museums do more with less, ensuring financial sustainability and enriched visitor experiences.

Digital signage solutions can do this by providing interactive, contextual, and multilingual content, promoting donations, and enhancing visitors' engagement with the exhibits.

The best way to get the right balance between costs and benefits is work with a consultancy experienced in creating exciting digital touchpoints, and in working with different sized charities. This will ensure that your museum gets the right hardware in the right place and with the right content.

5. Next Steps

Saturn Visual Solutions is a UK-based digital signage consultancy that specialises in the leisure industry.

We have worked with several charitable organisations responsible for heritage, arts and entertainment venues, plus leisure businesses like cinemas, bowling alleys.

We use this collective experience to create fun, interactive visitor experiences, and to look for ways to improve the financial standing of our clients – e.g. through increasing the volume and profitability of food and beverage sales, increasing merchandise sales, encouraging charitable donations.

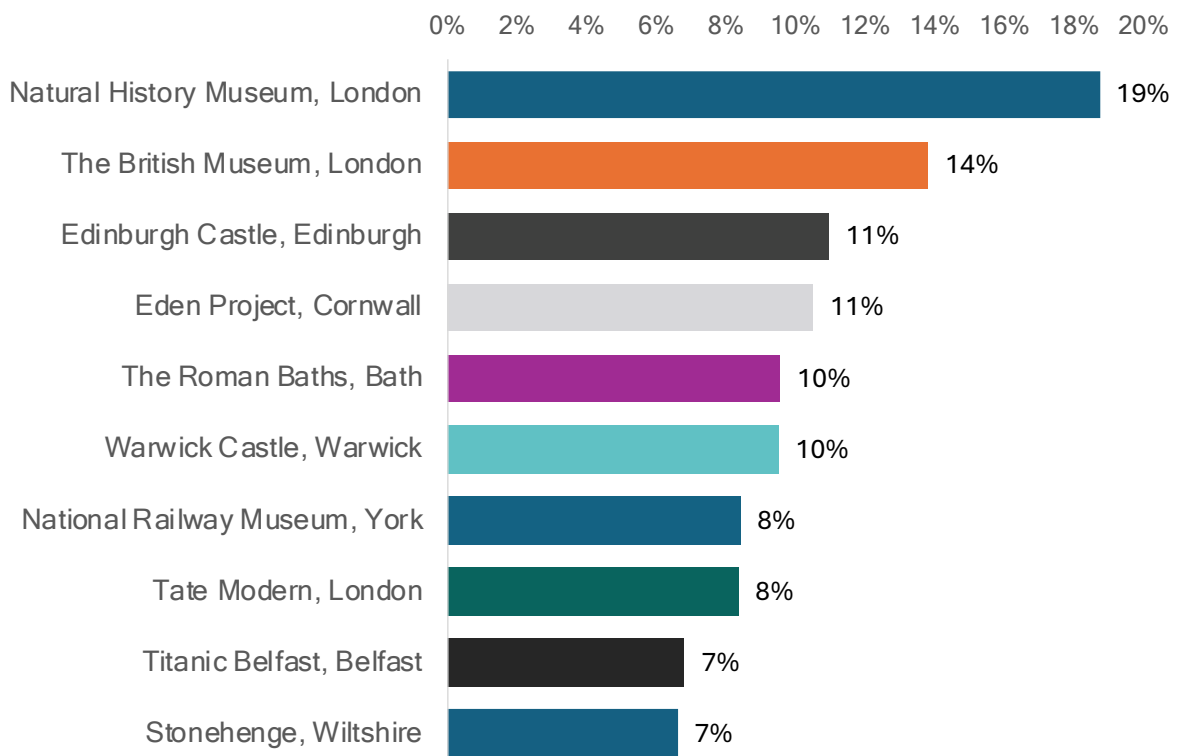
We offer a range of complementary design, build, content and support services.

Saturn is responsible for managing more than 20,000 screens across the UK. We have worked with organisations of varying sizes from large, (e.g. Odeon Cinemas, Ten Pin, Royal Shakespeare Company, Seiko) and medium (People's History Museum, Royal Exchange Theatre) to small (e.g. The Met Theatre in Bury, Salford Lads Club).

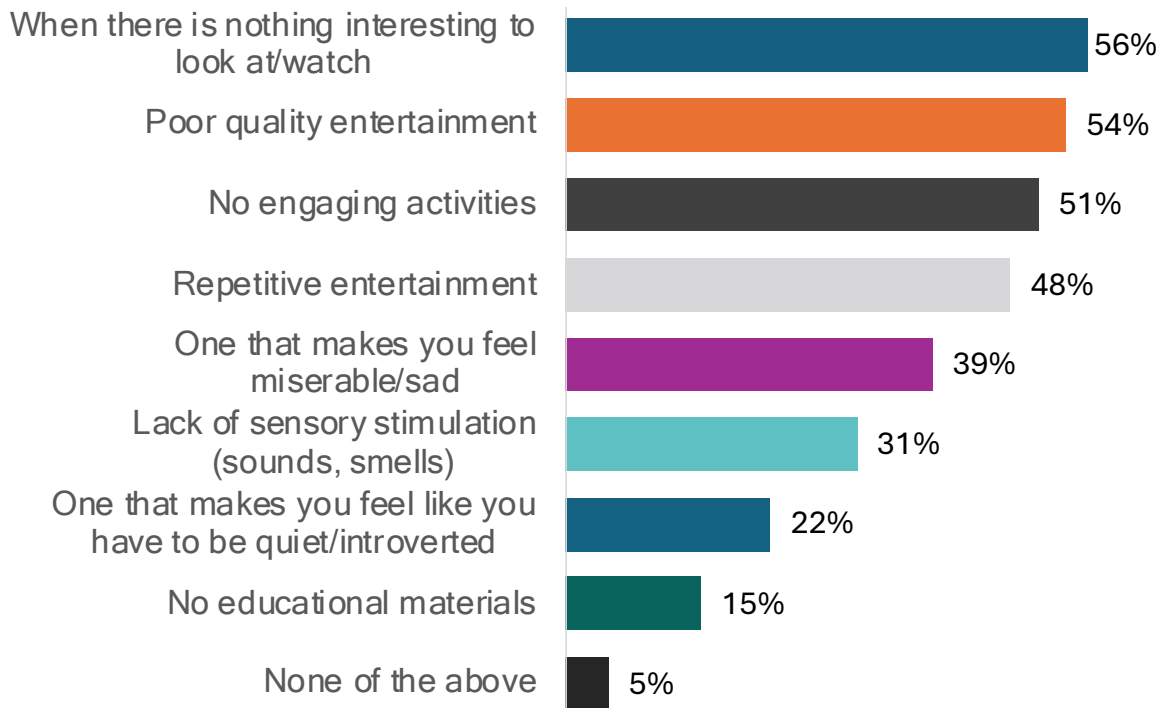
Data generated by OnePoll on behalf of Saturn Visual Solutions

What is the most fun educational leisure attraction (e.g. museum, historic site etc.) you've visited in the UK? [Select best match]

Top 10 venues



What makes something feel like a boring experience? [Select all that apply]



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