

Attack of the 100-Year Old Startup

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On what museums and startups can learn from one another — from Basecamp’s “museum model” to “failing forward.”

At first glance, museums and startups may not seem to have an overwhelming amount in common. The majority of museums are not-for-profit, mission-driven institutions and operate in a different realm than the high-growth (and high risk) enterprises of Silicon Valley. Over the last few years, however, I’ve noticed something very interesting happening in the museum space. Museum professionals are talking about their jobs like they’re working at a 100-year old startup.

“I thought about it and actually talked about it for a number of years as a kind of 100-year old startup.” – Arnold Lehman (on transforming the Brooklyn Museum in New York)

“I feel like I’m working at a 100-year old startup.” – Tim Gihring, Minneapolis Institute of Art

“Feels very much like a startup within a 100+ year old institution, but like all startups, there is only the opportunity to grow.” – JiaJia Fei, Director of Digital at the Jewish Museum New York

In particular, I think that we owe people like Max Anderson (veteran museum director), Nancy Proctor (“Museum as Startup”, Executive Director at MuseWeb Foundation), Rob Stein (Executive Vice President and Chief Program Officer at the American Alliance of Museums) and other industry professionals who are taking the lead on innovation in the museum space a lot of credit for looking at their work in new ways, and starting conversations about how to keep museums relevant and sustainable. But what exactly do museums and startups have in common, and what are the productive takeaways that each of these spaces can lend each other?

Finding the Overlap Between a “Museum Mentality” and a “Startup Mentality”

As someone who is uniquely positioned to observe these two seemingly opposite mentalities overlap, I would argue that the commonalities between them point to a brighter (and exciting) future for both institutions of cultural heritage and startups. Asking ourselves, “What can museums learn from startups?” is one thing, but I think that we can also flip the script and ask, “What can startups learn from museums?” There is a lot of innovation that the museum community deserves credit for, and some of their more traditional practices have also been successfully translated into compelling approaches to business.

What Can Startups Learn From Museums?

Rethinking your business model? The Harvard Business Review published a piece in 2011 directing professionals to look to art museums, and that advice continues to hold true now more than ever. Ray Weaver, an Assistant Professor at Harvard Business School, highlights the way that museums present

organized information and objects, and draws parallels to how some web businesses (and retailers), such as Apple, successfully use a “curatorial” approach to their products for growth and profit. With an abundance of potential products, curating and highlighting particular offerings can produce positive responses from customers and make them more inclined to complete a purchase. Web companies such as Groupon and Facebook have succeeded at intelligently presenting and organizing information that adds value beyond just the discounted offerings and social networking function that they are respectively known for.

Museum Values in the Startup World: Founder Insights

Museum values haven’t just served the likes of Facebook and Apple – they are working for smaller software companies, too. Chances are that, at some point in your professional life, you have used (or at least heard of) Basecamp. Basecamp is one of the most successful bootstrapped companies in the software space and its founder, Jason Fried, has publicly referenced the museum space as a guide to how successful products should be conceived and developed – in essence, Jason says that you should follow a “museum model” when thinking about your product:

“Software has no edges. This makes it more difficult to stop it from expanding beyond where it should. Think of your product as a museum and the features as the pieces of art you select. Only the most important pieces should make it into the museum.” – TechCrunch, 2009

Fried offers further insight into the parallels he draws between museums and product development:

“If a museum had every piece of art in the world, it’s not a museum, it’s a warehouse. The museum is a museum precisely because it turns down most of the pieces of art and curates only the best ones. Likewise, learn to say no to feature requests.” – No More Startup Myths, 2015

Seeing a successful business in the software space looking to museums for inspiration is exciting, and speaks to how cultural institutions can provide useful, transferable guidance to businesses’ focus. There is a lot written about focus in the business world (notably immortalized in cult-favorite books like Al Ries’s best-selling *Focus: The Future of Your Company Depends On It*), and one could also argue that in the museum space focus has similar importance in terms of ensuring future sustainability and producing carefully curated displays and exhibitions.

Flipping the Lens Back: What Can Museums Learn From Startups?

To come full circle, we have to ask, “What can 100-year-old startups [a.k.a. museums] learn from startups?” There are a few words that are often thrown around when thinking about qualities of successful startups, such as the methodologies of “agile” and “lean.” Being agile and lean has transformed the way businesses operate, whether a startup is building its first prototype or a large corporate takes steps to cast off the shackles of clunky, cumbersome layers of management. And while these approaches deserve consideration as museums examine their own businesses models, what really stands out in the rhetoric of the innovation community as far as its potential applications to the museum space is the directive to make mistakes and do so faster (these particular words of wisdom come from Andrew Grove, co-founder of

Intel). Grove isn't the only one with this in mind, of course. Attend any talk on innovation and entrepreneurship and you'll probably hear a variation of the below:

“Fail fast, fail forward.”

“Fail fast, fail often.”

“Fail early, fail fast, fail often.”

“Fail fast and cheap. Fail often. Fail in a way that doesn't kill you.”

Undeniable proof of the growing presence of a startup mentality in the museum space was the talk titled “Fail Early, Often and Off-Broadway” given at the 2014 American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting session and featuring the prowess of top museum directors such as Kaywin Feldman (Director of the Minneapolis Museum of Art), Brian Kennedy (Director of the Toledo Museum of Art), and John Wetenhall (Director of the GWU Museum and the Textile Museum).

The mindsets of being agile, lean, and failing fast are accepted in the startup community and ingrained in Silicon Valley culture, and this emphasis at the annual AAM meeting a few years ago indicates that this attitude has an increasing ubiquity in the museum sector.

Learning to Thrive in Uncertain Times

I won't try to blur the fact (or reality) that museums, as organizations, have different responsibilities than businesses. Museums are perfectionists and have a commitment to cultural preservation and education. It's in the museum's nature to exist in perpetuity, and there is no “exit strategy”. But these are uncertain times for museums around the country and the world. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of our country's biggest museums, is in financial peril, with an estimated deficit of \$15 million last year. The current administration has proposed eliminating the National Endowment for the Arts, which provides much needed support for museum initiatives around the country. It has become increasingly important and even urgent to think about how we, as museum professionals, can react to these realities and make small pivots sooner rather than later to avoid large-scale financial crises and flourish in the face of an unpredictable future. How can we be more nimble and leverage the startup spirit?

Exceptional things are bound happen when we not only share amongst each other, but also look to communities outside of our own. We should seize opportunities to learn from the innovation sector and its mantra to fail early, and fail often. It's time to begin an open dialog about failure, agility, and lean startup scrappiness as it applies to museums, because we can only hope that 900 years from now, in the year 2918, the future generations of our community will be talking about our endeavors and the joys of working at the brilliant 1,000-year-old startups called museums.

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