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State Historical museum: social media strategy

Introduction

Dear colleagues, I'm delighted to be here today. Many thanks to ICOM Armenia for inviting me to give a talk at the conference.

I am a social media manager at the SHM - State Historical Museum (Moscow, Russia). I am also a PhD Student at the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, where I'm doing research on museum management with a special focus on facility management.

Today I'm going to talk about our social media strategy. I would like to start with a brief introduction in order to give a sense of what the SHM is like.

About the museum: building, history, collections, today's organizational structure

The SHM was founded in 1872 as a museum of Russian national history. It took almost ten years to build it and open to the public. It was given a prime location in the Red square. The exteriors were decorated to resemble the architecture of Ancient/Middle Ages Rus (commonly referred to as 'zodchestvo'). This new variation was popular at the time and called 'Russian style'. Interiors were painted with frescoes which recreated certain historical periods. Prominent Russian artists, among them, for instance, Vasnetsov and Aivazovsky were invited to decorate the museum halls.

Throughout its history the organizational shape of the SHM changed several times, and today there are actually 4 building under the umbrella of the SHM:

- the main building in the Red square
- the Saint Basil's cathedral
- the Romanov Palace Chambers in Zaryadye
- the museum of the Patriotic War of 1812

Even though all these buildings are located in close proximity to each other, it's a 15-minute walk between the most distant ones, it is quite challenging for the SHM administration to promote the idea that all of them belong to the same institution - this is one of the issues I will address later in my talk.

As for the SHM collection, today it consists of almost 5 million objects, thus making the SHM one of the biggest museums in the world. The collection includes archaeological artifacts, paintings, clothes, weaponry, icons, jewelry, ancient documents and books, furniture, et cetera, which makes the SHM a kind of encyclopedic museum of Russian history.

Museums and Social Media in Russia

Before talking about our social media strategy, I would like to provide you with some context regarding the way Russian museums use social media. Some large museums such as the Tretyakov gallery, the Russian museum, the Kunstkamera began using social media in the late 2000s; the most popular social media sites included VKontakte, Facebook, and Twitter.

They were at the stage of looking for their 'voices': they mostly promoted collections and events. In 2013-2014 a new era of social media activity began, when some of the museums joined international projects, such as #AskACurator and CultureThemes. This resulted both in establishing a professional network for social media managers and also in the creation of a number of special social media projects. I will focus on some of them at the end of the talk. There is a new, seemingly positive, trend of minor government involvement. In early 2015 the Ministry of Culture introduced a content management system aimed at helping museums to use social media: it can be evaluated as a rather useful tool for beginner SMM-specialists. Moreover, the system used by aggregators like Yandex and Afisha to collect information about the upcoming events and promote them on their platforms.

SHM: social media strategy

The SHM started using social media channels, primarily Facebook and Twitter in 2010. However, at that point there was no clear understanding of how to do this, or even why. The first three years can be characterised as "copy and paste" approach to social media activity: museum staff simply reposted information from the official website on social media with minor audience interaction. At the end of 2012, the Ministry of Culture started requiring museums to provide data on the use of social media. The SHM staff realized that the situation had to change drastically.

At that time, there was no special team or department to run social the media accounts, however, there was a person at the Press Department who was responsible for posting on Facebook and Twitter, and there was a volunteer (also a member of staff) who created a group on VKontakte. Since all these activities were quite unstructured, the SHM IT department formed a special team which was asked to develop a social media strategy for the museum. In the Spring 2013 I was asked to join the team and this is how my collaboration with the SHM began.

We drew inspiration from the experience of Tate, based on the guidelines published on their website. Our first projects focused on Facebook, resulting in a major increase in the number of views and comments.

Then, due to inner reorganization within the SHM, social media tasks were assigned to the PR department, and there were changes in the size and in the structure of the team. Today we have 11 people working with the social media:

- 2 senior managers
- 1 photographer
- 1 movie maker
- 5 members of staff who have access to SHM social media accounts
- 2 managers that provide support (both with tech and content) if required

As I've mentioned earlier, the SHM has a complex structure - there are four buildings - which impacts the way we present the museum online. At the moment we have the following social media accounts:

- FB page for the main building
- FB page for St Basil's cathedral
- FB page for the Museum of the Patriotic War of 1812
- VK page for the main building

- VK page for St Basil's cathedral
- Instagram account for the main building
- Instagram account for St Basil's cathedral
- Joined Twitter account

All together, we have approximately 480 thousand followers. By the end of 2015 we will create a page on Odnoklassniki website, which is one of the most popular social media sites in Russia and an untapped source of audiences, primarily from provincial towns and cities.

In addition to the main website there is a platform called MediaPortal which stores multimedia content about the museum both produced by outside agents such TV and radio companies, and by the SHM staff.

As you might've noticed, I haven't mentioned the Romanov Palace Chambers. The reason is that this small museum doesn't require any additional advertisement, since it has limited spatial resources and it is quite popular as it is.

Now let's talk about our social media strategy. It is an actual published document. Although it doesn't have any legal power, this product of teamwork is a guideline for the whole department.

The document contains the following sections:

- the role of social media for the SHM
- the goals and objectives
- the principles of teamwork
- tips and advice regarding social media sites
- strategic planning and evaluation

Our social media strategy supports the museum mission, which is 'to present Russian history in the most engaging way possible in order to help raise self-awareness of the Russian identity.'

Our social media goal is, first of all, to promote the SHM among different audiences thus engaging those people who are not familiar with the museum, and, secondly, is to invite new visitors who would come to the museum on their own (i.e., not as members of tourist groups). We're doing this by promoting our collections and stories behind them.

In order to reach the goal we need to perform the following tasks:

- to create a friendly profile on social media so that people can feel comfortable while communicating with the SHM
- to use social media as a platform for dialogue rather than for monologue
- to provide users with relevant and interesting content that can be valuable and useful
- to facilitate communication within the SHM and engage more members of staff in contributing to social media production

Teamwork requires constant dialogue between its members. We use email, WhatsApp and Facebook messenger chat in order to stay in touch 24/7.

Each member of the team is assigned a special list of tasks, and we try to meet regularly (at least once a month) in order to brainstorm ideas and discuss current and future projects.

I am responsible for the following tasks:

- creating content plan each week, which is discussed during the weekend and approved by Monday morning
- writing an SHM MediaPortal blog
- evaluation
- Twitter posting
- organization of professional events about social media
- audio guide development

In Autumn 2014 we conducted an online survey aiming at understand how our audience interact with social media channels. Survey shown that people are interested in knowing more about our social media projects as well as get up-to-date information about events taking place in the museum. As a result, we created a blog to share stories about both social media projects and the collections, and also started working on audio guide to enhance visitor's experience.

Due to my current status as a full time PhD student in the UK I'm doing all these tasks remotely.

Now I would like to focus on particular projects which help us to both increase the number of followers and engage new audiences.

First of all, I would like to talk about our Instagram account. As I've mentioned earlier, one of our challenges is to present the complex structure of the SHM online; in addition to that one of our goals is to promote the main building itself and show its interiors. While researching posts on Instagram that have the SHM geotag, we have noticed that people post rather good pictures of the SHM interiors, so we have decided to re-post these images so that other people can appreciate their work too. We also post our own pictures focusing on the details that the visitors usually miss - either because they are in a rush, or because it is something that is difficult to discover, or because it may seem uninteresting at first sight. We try to provide thorough comments explaining the meaning of those details. In order to increase our online presence, we collaborated with #empty project which is run by some the most active Instagram bloggers. The idea behind the project is to spend several hours in a cultural venue when it is closed for general public. Instagram bloggers organize creative photo sets, wearing special topical costumes or using props, and then publish the best pictures on Instagram using the museum's account name, hashtag and location. We did this project earlier this year, and it helped us to almost double our audience on Instagram.

Secondly, I would like to spend the final minutes of my presentation talking about our Twitter projects. At the moment we're running the following ones:

- museum marathon (#МузейныйМарафон)
- museum salon (#МузейнаяГостиня)
- museum postcard (#МузейнаяОткрытка и #ОткрыткаМузею)
- twitter tour (#твиттерэкскурсия)

I would like to focus on the museum marathon. We started this project in March 2014, and today it can be considered as one of the most sustainable Twitter projects among others run by Russian museums.

The aim of the project is to promote Russian museums on Twitter. Russian segment of Twitter is normally used for sharing news and having political discussions. We decided to diversify the feed by sharing stories about museums. There are more than 3000 museums in Russia, and at least 200 of them use Twitter on a regular basis. I created a list of Russian museums that have Twitter accounts and started randomly selecting them to be featured in the project.

Twice a week, usually on Tuesday and Sunday evening, 8 pm Moscow time, I start an online session using the SHM twitter account. The session usually lasts for 30-40 minutes depending on the amount of data about the museum I have. I prefer using official the museum website or other sources like, for instance, museum.ru and/or Wikipedia in order to collect the data. The story I tell has the following structure:

- the history of the museum
- the museum building
- collections
- the most interesting objects
- Internet resources and projects that can be shared online, for instance, a virtual tour around the museum

At some point of time, when the project became popular among our followers, museums started contacting me in advance in order to be included in the museum marathon, which makes the process much easier for me, since colleagues provide me with all the required information.

What is even more important, is that I was able to make this project a participatory one. I invited the most active followers to run museum marathon by telling their stories about museums. So far, I have 7 followers who ran several sessions. For instance, one of them, a young man from Moscow, actually visited two museums and took pictures before participating in the marathon. He did not only share some actual facts about museums, but also provided us with feedback and advice on how the exhibitions could be improved. This really helps to bring new voices to the project.

As for the metrics, I'd like to share the following:

- so far, 135 museums were presented during the marathon
- we get approximately 4000 impressions (the amount of individual views) for each tweet of the marathon
- each session is followed by approximately 40-50 active followers who support the project with retweets, mentions and favourites.

To sum up I would like to share some of the results we achieved:

1. We successfully developed and, what is even more important, implemented the social media strategy, and built a team which works effectively.
2. Today we spend less time working with social media accounts: we developed a system of collecting and publishing that helps us to perform these tasks very quickly.
3. We built an audience that is interested in the museum's life, and we can see that the amount of followers keeps growing.
4. Our initiatives and projects, mostly those on Twitter, helped us to network with colleagues from other museums. As a result, I created a group on Facebook, which

aims at building a community of enthusiasts, share ideas, solving problems and running projects. I'm happy to invite international participants to join the group.

Lessons learned:

- social media (as well as other Internet resources) should support the museum mission;
- teamwork at the core of every social media activity
- initiate new projects and try to think “outside the box”
- constantly analyse your achievements and failures
- follow new trends and emerging technologies and be ready to change

What's next?

Our next goal is to develop a communication strategy with a primary focus on the relations between departments within the SHM. We would like to engage more members of staff and enrich the content we publish on social media and the blog. In addition to that, we're working on social media signage system which will be installed in the museum halls. The idea is to invite visitors to join our social media channels when they are in museum, and at the same time invite them to share pictures and stories using the museum hashtag. We are also going to conduct an onsite visitor survey in order to understand which social media networks are popular among our visitors.