 **Articulating the Idea**

**Cleveland Museum of Art, Ingalls Library and Museum Archives**

1. Describe your project idea in two sentences.

Art museums seek to inspire, to spark imagination, to encourage questions, yet the answers aren’t always as readily available. The aim of this project is to harness the curiosity of art museum visitors by creating a digital “ask an expert” service that provides the means to interact publicly yet anonymously with museum experts, to seek answers to questions where and when inspiration hits, and to provide a platform for the voice of all museum visitors.

2. What is the purpose of the project? Does it solve a problem? Meet an institutional need? Address an interest? Put existing resources to new use?

If the goal of the art museum is to provoke thought, the natural response to any visit to the galleries is to question. The need to connect with art museum visitors at the point of curiosity is clear. As an art museum visitor, it’s hard to know who to ask. Unlike living history museums (i.e. Colonial Williamsburg) art museums do not staff galleries with staff who can interpret collections for visitors. Wall labels, audio tours or docent led tours are the traditional methods used to share information about museum collections. This project seeks to provide a means to share information that will not only satisfy the known question but will also feed on the answers as visitors continue the conversation about the works of art with new questions and thoughts. Making the answers to questions more readily available by asking visitors to ask questions publicly and then providing answers publicly as well, will encourage an increased culture of critical thought.

At the Cleveland Museum of Art, the need is clear. Recently the museum invited visitors to observe the conservation of Caravaggio’s *Crucifixion of St. Andrew* in person in a specially equipped gallery. As part of the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to ask questions at an Ask-An-Expert installation in the gallery. The intention was for Ingalls Library reference staff to provide answers to questions inspired by the exhibition and then display the answers in the gallery. The response was overwhelming, with nearly two hundred questions posted in the three month exhibition run. Visitors asked both on-topic questions, about the painting and the conservation process, as well as more general questions about the museum and the collection.

Answers to these questions have long been available to visitors. The Ingalls Library is open to the public four days a week, with a reference desk staffed during all open hours. But interactions at the reference desk have been in decline. With a generation of born digital visitors walking into the museum and with the Internet in every pocket, the library is no longer the first thought when inspiration hits. The problem we seek to address is then, how do we reach out to people and effectively provide the information they seek?

The proposed project will allow the library and archives to share its rich collections with a user group that has not traditionally taken advantage of the library’s resources and the expertise of the staff. The expertise of the staff and the extensive library collections will be mined for answers in an alternative context by an under-served user group, many of whom are not library patrons.

3. What will be the impact of your project? How will it affect your institution, the profession, the public?

Visitor engagement will be enhanced by creating an ongoing conversation between the institution and all visitors. It will create a new platform for engagement between the library and the public and give us the opportunity to share our wealth of resources. In addition, the project will complement museum exhibitions and permanent gallery installations and potentially increase visits. The proposed project would place the Ingalls Library and Museum Archives at the forefront of art museum libraries that provide reference services in an innovative manner with answers to questions repurposed for publication via social media, etc.

4. What are the products? Should you consider any standards, mandates or best practices?

This project will gather data and analyze how museum visitors seek answers to questions with the aim of developing a new strategy for placing the museum library into conversation with visitors via technology. The library maintains standards for interaction with patrons based on national best practices which can be maintained in the new forum proposed.

The goal is to find an appropriate medium for that conversation. Products currently available would be considered including streaming information on the museum’s ArtLens App, through the museum and library websites, and other social media as questions are asked and answered, and conversations are had between library staff and visitors, and between visitors, in addition to the development of new digital tools.

**Identifying Audiences and Key Constituencies**

**Cleveland Museum of Art, Ingalls Library and Museum Archives**

Questions and considerations:

* Characteristics: Who will participate in, use, and/or benefit from the project? Is there a specific group already asking for this resource? Who?
* Resources: What are the technical abilities, constraints, and resources of potential project audiences?
* Relationships: What relationship do my audiences have with our institution(s)? Do we need to build bridges and relationships?
* Primary and Secondary Audience: The “general public” is too general an audience. The more specific your audience is the more likely you are to meet their needs.
* Internal Constituency: Within your organization, what is the key constituency you need to engage, involve and persuade?

Primary audience

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristics | Resources | Relationships |
| On-site museum visitors. A previous exhibit where visitors could submit questions to librarians generated a lot of interest but the tool was paper based and clumsy. | Museum visitors often come armed with smart phones and knowledge of social media. The targeted audience will consist of visitors with mobiles devices and knowledge of their use. Tablets would be made available as well. | Museum visitors already have a relationship with our institution and may be students, scholars, children, adults and senior citizens. They may be members, long time museum visitors, casual visitors or first time visitors. We would need to advertise our digital service and provide instructions. |

Secondary audience

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristics | Resources | Relationships |
| Virtual researchers and visitors to the museum’s website. The library routinely receives requests for information via email and via our website feature, “Ask-an-Expert.” | Virtual researchers and visitors are knowledgeable about the web and expect quick service and easy to use tools. Secondary audience will also be technically savvy users of mobile devices and social media. | Virtual researchers and visitors are already coming to the library and museum website. Some virtual visitors may be actual on-site visitors as well. We will need to explain and advertise our service to raise awareness. |

Internal constituency

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Characteristics | Resources | Relationships |
| Upper management in the departments of Design, Information Technology. Education and Development. | IT would need to devote staff time and advise us in current technologies. Designing an interface and necessary instruction will require the expertise and involvement of the education, marketing and design departments. | The library already interacts with all of the required departments but would need to ensure bridges of efficient communication and buy in for success. |