

# Say “Cheese!”

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3 Ways Museums Can Compete  
with Instagrammable Pop-Ups

**luci**  
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## 3 WAYS MUSEUMS CAN COMPETE WITH INSTAGRAMMABLE POP-UPS

As recently as in 2015, the average admission price for an art museum in North America was eight dollars, and according to the American Alliance of Museums, as of 2012 approximately 37 percent of all U.S. museums were free.

Meanwhile, people are paying thirty-eight dollars — and buying tickets weeks in advance — for a chance to see the Museum of Ice Cream, which is not a museum at all (because it neither collects, conserves, nor interprets material), but a maze of colorful rooms where visitors wait in long lines to take selfies with clever backdrops.

The Museum of Ice Cream is not alone. Instagrammable pop-ups are popping up everywhere, and they’re pulling in crowds of people willing to plunk down their wallets for the chance to take fun photos and share them on social media. 29 Rooms, The Color Factory, Candytopia, The Pizza Experience, and Happy Place are just a few others.

Can museums compete with these venues in attracting visitors? Signs point to yes: many large art museums have already figured out the formula. In 2015, the Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., opened WONDER, a multi-room immersive experience featuring nine leading contemporary artists. The Washington Post dubbed the exhibition “Instagram famous.”

Installation artists like James Turrell, Choi Jeong Hwa, and Yayoi Kusama practically guarantee museum blockbusters. Kusama’s polka dot rooms and Infinity Mirrors exhibits are prime material for selfie backdrops. In early 2017 her exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum in D.C. brought in a record-breaking 475,000 visitors and was credited with increasing membership by 6,566 percent. And to the point, it was Instagrammed more than 34 thousand times.

But it's not just art museums that are jumping on the bandwagon. D.C.'s National Building Museum set attendance records a few years ago with its Summer Block Party exhibit, The BEACH, a giant pit filled with thousands of white balls in which to frolic and snap selfies. The museum brought back a smaller version in the summer of 2018 as part of its Fun House exhibition. At Chicago's Museum of Science and Industry, the exhibit Numbers in Nature, designed by Luci Creative about patterns in the universe, includes an eighteen-hundred square-foot mirror maze—a funhouse of sorts—which gives visitors a place to play, provides unique photo-ops, and conveys educational messages hidden in “Easter eggs” and secret rooms. The traveling version has set both attendance and Instagram-hashtag records for its hosting venues.

As the saying goes, if you can't beat 'em, join 'em! For museums that are actively trying to compete with growingly popular Instagram pop-ups, here are three tips:

### No. 1 | Be OK with Fun and Funny

Because of their focus on education and their echelon among respected cultural institutions, museums are often seen as too serious: formal places with objects and information. But including humor and amusement—even silliness!—in exhibitions (except when the subject matter clearly doesn't warrant it) can greatly enhance a visitor's experience.

In her recent article “‘Entertainment’ is Not a Dirty Word,” market researcher Colleen Dilenschneider provides data showing “that entertainment value is the single biggest contributor to overall satisfaction” in museums.

When museums go head-to-head with colorful pop-ups designed primarily for selfies, it's not a matter of which one is more “authentic” or educational, but only that they're both competing for people's leisure time. In addition to their value as institutions for collection and informal learning, museums must offer a bit of razzle-dazzle to get visitors in the door.







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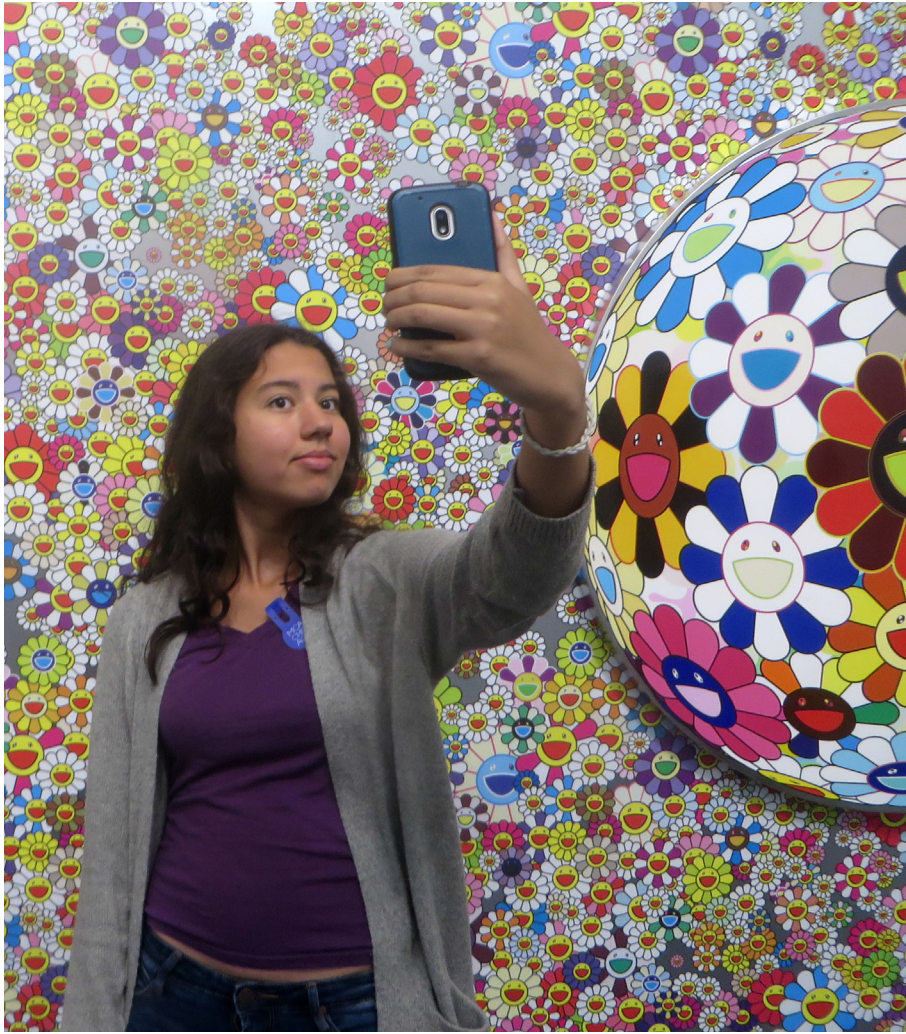
#### No. 2 | Review Your Photo Policies

Most museums are coming around to the reality that nearly everyone has a camera in their pocket. And they're allowing visitors to photograph almost anything they like (with some exceptions, often related to copyright protections for temporary exhibitions or loaned collections). Others, however, continue to hold increasingly outdated policies that forbid photography because of building security concerns, fear that the ease of online photos will discourage visitors from coming to see "the real thing," or just the old-school belief that museums are places to be appreciated with your own two eyes, period.

Only two short years after the first iPhone was released, Nina Simon, author of *The Participatory Museum*, wrote a detailed blog post advocating for "open photo policy [as] a cornerstone of any institution that sees itself as a visitor-centered platform for participatory engagement." If museums are to compete with selfie-focused pop-ups, they'll need to be comfortable with visitors taking photographs.

#### No. 3 | Don't Confuse Tech with Socialization

There's a myth among the museum community that guests are eager for the ability to use their smartphones during their visits. This has resulted in museums devoting significant resources and funds to the development of mobile apps and other smartphone-based exhibition complements (i.e. QR codes, etc.) that aren't used in significant numbers. In another article by Dilenschneider, she shares data illustrating that few people use museum-specific mobile applications either before or during their visits.



People aren't flocking to Instagrammable pop-ups just because they allow visitors to use their smartphones. The phone is just the tool for what visitors are after. What people want is the social dimension enabled by the smartphone, to have enjoyable experiences and to share them with others. They want to be seen, to show off, and to say that they've been somewhere interesting.

### **"LET ME TAKE A SELFIE"**

Mar Dixon, a museum consultant, created Museum Selfie Day in 2015 as a way to publicly showcase the fun memories that people are making in museums, and to combine the worlds of history, art, and science with the lighthearted global trend of taking selfies. Museum Selfie Day is on January 16th, each year.

Take advantage of this special date to visit museums and cultural institutions to see what – if anything – they're doing to hop on this bandwagon and to compete with selfie-focused pop-ups. Or, if you can't get out of work on the 16th to visit a museum, use it as a springboard date to start a conversation with your curators, marketers, creative team, or consultants about things that your museum can do to develop educational and Instagrammable exhibits and visitor experiences. ●

Get in touch with us.  
We'd love to work with you!

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