Museum After Dark: Capturing the Elusive Millennial

How does a 50 year old science museum in one of the most expensive cities in the world stay relevant and inspiring?

Presented by
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01 About the Exploratorium

Founded in 1969 by physicist Frank Oppenheimer with revolutionary science-for-everybody exhibits, the Exploratorium is an interactive museum in San Francisco's waterfront, a professional-development home for teachers, and an exhibit-design trailblazer that creates joyful, inquiry-based learning experiences for audiences worldwide.

50 years later, the Exploratorium is faced with the challenge of adapting to the changing demographics of the San Francisco Bay Area.

02 Background & Context

2011: Exploratorium visitor net survey showed 49% of Exploratorium visitors come without children; 51% do have children living in their households.

With more dogs than children and a continued influx of young professionals, it has become mission critically attractive and fostered new audiences – including the elusive “millennials.”

“There are more millennials living in California than people residing in Switzerland, Denmark, or Poland.”
- Quartz, February 8, 2016

03 Expanding After Dark

Addressing the fact that traditional museum hours create barriers to access for working professionals, the Exploratorium created an additional evening event called After Dark. After a successful pilot decade ago, After Dark had become a marquee in San Francisco nightlife, and has continued to grow in its potential to reach adult audiences.

With this potential in mind, the Exploratorium shifted its focus to build out a comprehensive marketing campaign in active new adult-only membership product with young professionals at the forefront.

04 Goals

- Increase After Dark attendance
- Promote rich and engaging programming
- Make membership feel more valuable and meaningful
- Address philanthropic values of millennials
- Pass the word of mouth across the Bay Area
- Change market perception of the Exploratorium as a “children’s museum”
- Address negative substitution

“The need to cultivate new audiences at regular attendance is critical for our long-term survival.”
- Cullen McElhinish

05 Approach

- Create an internal cross-departmental team across marketing, programming, finance, design, editorial and more
- Perform pricing model free from 10 price evaluations
- Create a more affordable After Dark membership
- Provide deep programming calendar
- Partner withCollins to develop a dynamic campaign
- Launch a multi-channel digital and email campaign
- Reposition Visitor Experience dining After Dark
- Produce on-site membership sales incentives

06 Challenges

- First of its kind: No other existing museum sells only membership nights
- Pressure to deliver member-only content on a weekly basis
- Quick turnaround for After Dark membership product was created in two months, from concept to launch
- Increasing digital subscription and more

07 Evaluation

- After Dark attendance continues to grow
- Limited partnerships can be successful ways to amplify messaging for a more targeted audience
- Social media is becoming an increasingly common tool for the future of Excursions
- Campaign fatigue settled in after ~2 years, leading to additional campaign refresh
- Customer retention with new and ongoing partnerships will be key in reaching new potential audience

08 Future of After Dark

- Reframe After Dark campaign strategy to incorporate social media interaction and visibility in market
- Implement cross-departmental partnerships for timely features and personalized communications
- Continually evolving After Dark program
- Continue building brand-aligned local partnerships
- Offer benefits such as themed giveaways and more

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