

GEEK SPEAK

A Conversation on the Future of Museum Technology

In this issue, *Geek Speak* talks with Dr. Mario Bucolo, a cultural experience designer and the publisher of the portal Museumland.net. Dr. Bucolo, from southern Italy, was in British Columbia in February to give a lecture on the visibility of small and medium sized museums and offered *Geek Speak* a preview of his lecture. We discussed how museums can improve their visibility by embracing new technologies.

We began our conversation discussing blogs and podcasts and how interactive media such as these can improve the number of visitors to a museum. Dr. Bucolo believes that one of the problems facing museums, especially smaller ones, is attracting new visitors or reigniting interest in past visitors. New technologies bring greater exposure to museums, allowing them to reach a larger number of potential visitors. With blogs and podcasts, the audience grows from a community-wide pool of visitors to one that is world-wide. To continue attracting visitors, museums must create new ways to interact with the public and must involve themselves into the visitors lives.

What about regional museums that have a small staff group and little extra time or money to work with new technologies? Dr. Bucolo believes that the new interactive media is an easy way for these museums to attract visitors. Podcasts and blogs are cheap and easy to produce and they allow for a museum to reach more people than traditional advertising. These new technologies create curiosity among potential visitors, a curiosity that will compel them to see the physical collections. As well, with blogs and podcasting, the information is available to the visitor at their leisure - they can read information on the blog at home after they have visited the museum or in the case of podcasts can listen to them while driving in the car or working out in the gym - it keeps them thinking about the museum long after they have left. As well, the information available in the podcast or blog may offer a new way to look at a collection and it may bring the visitor back to view the work again. Dr. Bucolo stressed that museum podcasts should be brave, push boundaries or offer information in new ways to attract the attention of youth and new museum visitors.

We ended our chat discussing the future and what new technologies might be particularly useful to museums. Dr. Bucolo was excited about the rise in cell phones and PDAs and envisioned new ways that museums can communicate with their visitors including:

- conveying collection information directly to a cell phone or PDA at the museum so that visitors can store and read it later
- interactive Bluetooth applications that allow for museums to send an advertisement automatically to a visitor's cell phone or PDA as they walk by the museum
- communicating with visitors via SMS (Short Message Service). SMS allows for short text messaging to a cell phone or PDA from the Internet and could be used by museums to remind patrons of new exhibits and important information.

Finally, Dr. Bucolo believes that ultimately "the trend in museums must be that information follows people's needs, and what people use to communicate". Museums must work with the tools their visitors use.

David Alexander (david@zeroonedesign.com) is one of the geeks at Zero One Design and is looking forward to talking to more museum visionaries at the Museums and the Web conference in April in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

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PODCASTING

Podcasts are web-based audio files that are downloadable by listeners from a website and played on a computer or an MP3 player such as an iPod. Podcasts are growing in number and popularity with media organizations like the CBC and BBC and museums such as MOMA, the Smithsonian and the Victoria and Albert Museum embracing them.

Podcasting is popular because it is easy to create a podcast. A minimal amount of technical equipment is needed, all of which is affordable, and podcasters don't need a technical or journalism background to make a good podcast – they just need a compelling idea. Creating a podcast requires only a computer, a microphone and audio recording and editing software, which is often available for free. Websites like odeo.com simplify the process even further by allowing visitors to create a podcast online. All a potential podcaster needs to do is hit the record button on the website, talk into the built-in microphone on their computer and their podcast will be recorded and put on the web.