Museum marketing: no longer a dirty word

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Although most arts organizations are non-profit institutions, they are not non-market institutions.

(DiMaggio, 1985)

Introduction

Marketing is still a dirty word to some in museums. With the term comes images of used car salesmen and the ‘Disneyfication’ of culture. Is it possible to market your product successfully without ‘dumbing’ it down? This brief history of museum marketing, the changes it has undergone, and the approaches taken in many museums, shows that it is.

It would be nice if museums did not have to worry about marketing. It would be nice if the money just rolled in by itself. Sadly, new economic realities mean that cash-strapped museums cannot afford to be complacent about attracting visitors through the doors to exhibitions. To stay afloat, they need to attract new audiences as well as keep established ones. Marketing is no longer an option: it’s a survival tool rather than a dirty word.

What many in museums fear, however, is that in pursuing a larger market they will be forced to tamper with their product in a way that compromises its artistic integrity. They are worried their art will suffer at the hands of the market. Finding the middle ground between complacency and Mickey Mouse is the tricky part, and the challenge.

Background

Marketing in museums is in a period of major reassessment. This change in the purpose and priorities of museums has impacted on the nature of museum marketing. The recognition of new museum roles and the need to appeal to differentiated audiences has created new challenges for previously traditional, custodial directors (Gombault, 2002; Rentschler, 2002). This chapter explores the role of marketing in museums over 30 years, from the mid-1970s. It briefly overviews some of the changes which museums have undergone that have
led to an increased focus on marketing. It contextualizes the change in marketing approaches and roles within the different management styles for museum directors. In doing so, it shows how these different styles illustrate the changes in professional perspective from the traditional focus on custodial preservation to the more current focus on educating and entertaining the public.

Museums: changing roles, changing context

Since the early 1900s, not-for-profit museums have been subjected to accelerated change, due to a refocusing of government policy; a well-educated community with higher expectations of museums and a more diverse community which desires a better reflection of contemporary issues in museums (Griffin, 1987; Ames, 1989). At the same time, the level of funding to museums has come under increased pressure, arguably forcing directors of museums to become entrepreneurial, particularly when devising strategies to meet the needs of their creative mission (Rentschler and Geursen, 2003). Museums are fulfilling a role of tellers of a sacred story and sometimes on a sacred site.

Museums are therefore combining the traditional, functional role with their new purposive role (Weil, 1990; Thompson, 1998), using a range of approaches including online technologies. Functional definitions relate to activities performed in the museum and are object-based: to collect, preserve and display objects. More recently, the shift in definitions relates purpose to the intent, vision or mission of the museum where the focus is on leadership and visitor services: to serve society and its development by means of study, education and enjoyment (Besterman, 1998). These definitions are illustrated in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Shift in museum definitions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functional</th>
<th>Museums acquire, conserve, communicate and exhibit art for study and education</th>
<th>Object based</th>
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<tr>
<td>Purposive</td>
<td>Museums are for people to enjoy and to learn from collections which are held in trust for society</td>
<td>People based</td>
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As museums themselves are changing to meet the needs of a changing world, so too important concepts change. Change has led to an increased interest in marketing in museums and to a reappraisal of their purpose, evident in the changing definition of the word ‘museum’. The change in definition has been gradual and has been influenced by prevailing social and philosophical attitudes. The change in purpose affects not only the stories museums tell, but also the method of telling those stories, the corollary of which is a greater role for marketing—the focus of this chapter.

Museums contribute not only to social and cultural development, but also to the spiritual and emotional sense of national self through telling stories. In the UK, government is responsible for roughly 60 per cent of museum funding
In the USA, museums receive a median figure of 24 per cent of their funding from government sources (AAM, 2006). The Australian museum sector alone reached 1329 museum locations in June 2004, with income of $919.4 million. While most museum income was derived from government funding, 9.7 per cent came from fundraising, 6.1 per cent from admissions and 5.4 per cent from sales of goods (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). The museum sector faces more competition from new venues and leisure attractions for visitors who have less and less free time (Burton and Scott, 2003). Contemporary approaches, using marketing, to tell legendary stories are appropriate for museums.

The cultural industry, a growth industry in which museums play a central part, contributes $19 billion to the Australian economy annually, emphasizing also the economic contribution museums make. This is mirrored in the UK where museums contribute £3 billion to the economy (BBC, 2004). Museums closely follow popular music as the most frequently attended cultural activity, both in terms of number of people attending and number of visits (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). The Australian Bureau of Statistics conducted a survey of attendance at selected cultural venues in March 1995. It revealed that a total of 3.1 million people (22.3% of the Australian population aged 15 years and over) had visited a museum in the period studied and museums were considered to be either very important or important by 71.5 per cent of the Australian community. This support was evident across all states and territories, irrespective of whether the reporting individuals were users of the facilities. US museums receive 600 million visits annually (AAM, 2006). In the UK, museums attract upwards of 100 million visits per year (BBC, 2004), this number is steadily increasing, being up from 59 million in 2000 (Wright et al., 2001). By marketing museums, their role can be improved, which is of national benefit in times of change and funding scarcity.

Museums: managers and marketers

Museums may differ in the types of collections they hold, but they do not differ in their principal aim: education (Griffin and Abraham, 1999). How then do museums and their directors implement effective marketing practice, without compromising the needs of their educational mission. Indeed, a rational economic approach to museum marketing often dilutes the effectiveness of the educational mission.

In this chapter, by taking a historical perspective, it can clearly be seen that both directors and marketing styles have evolved to meet the changing needs found within the museum sector. The style of the director impacts on the performance of the museum, given that there may be a gap between the desired performance and actual performance, due to the nature of museums as professional bureaucracies (Griffin and Abraham, 1999). In professional bureaucracies, individuals are influential in setting the agenda of the organization, often by appealing to colleagues outside the organization rather than those within.
As such, directors’ styles and managerial preferences may not be applied evenly across the museum.

Traditionally the prime function of museums has been to gather, preserve and study objects. The director was perceived as the keeper of objects, as one who performed the custodial role for the cultural capital of the institution: its creative works. Today, managing museums entails understanding both the custodial role and the need to attract visitors. As museums are part of the not-for-profit sector and depend on government for up to 70 per cent of their income, they must be seen to offer value to government by attracting increasing visitor numbers. Government funders are asking for greater accountability for money granted. One way accountability can be documented is by sound marketing approaches (Laczniak and Murphy, 1977).

Marketing approaches have been used to increase visitor numbers and to encourage, change and expand the museum role from one of custodial emphasis to one of audience attraction and increased participation. Hence, museums are developing marketing techniques to help them become more successful in meeting these challenges.

These transitional changes have impacted on the internal cultural organizational factors such as museum structure, complexity and diversity of services (Gombault, 2002). Together with the drive towards formal accountability, these changes have increased the need for museum directors to have the orientation and skills of marketers, in addition to their custodial skills. Rentschler (2001) identifies four types of museum director, two of which are relevant to this discussion. These are the ‘entrepreneur’ and the ‘custodian’. Each type brings a different emphasis to aspects of museum service. For example, the entrepreneur focuses on the furtherance of the organization through creative programming. The generation of funds—through changing exhibitions, identifying donors, personally contacting major donors, developing efficiency measures, using consultants strategically and preparing market analyses—is a consequence of this outlook. The entrepreneur also uses relationship-marketing programmes to encourage visitors to become members and then donors. In contrast, the custodial manager focuses on the traditional activities of research and collections. Custodians are less involved in business activities. For example, they do not use consultants or prepare market analyses, survey non-visitors, or encourage visitors to become members and donors. Today’s museum managers are required to use the skills and approaches of both the entrepreneur and the custodian in order to fulfil the changed mission found in today’s museum sector.

Changes in museum marketing reflect the changing directorial role. Museum marketing has been academically conceptualized as falling into three main periods, each building on the previous—the foundation period, the professionalization period and the entrepreneurial period (Rentschler, 1998).

Research on the foundation period (1975–1983) has found that articles on museum marketing were dominated by issues of educating visitors; raising staff awareness of the benefits of visitor studies; and, occasionally, the economic impact of the arts on the community. The articles in the first two groups have
a data-collection focus rather than a strategic action-oriented focus. The modus operandi operating during this time was beginning to be challenged from a number of sources that herald the beginning of a more professional period, in which cultural change occurred in museums.

Museums became more democratized in the professionalization period (1988–1993). These changes forced the recognition of the applicability of marketing to non-profit arts organizations (Andreasen, 1985) and marketing departments were added to museums (Ames, 1989). Restructuring of the public sector also had an impact: evidenced by a shift in power and authority from producer to consumer, funders demanding greater accountability and the contracting out of services occurring at the local level. All of these elements empowered ‘a new managerial elite’, less focused on ‘cultural gate keeping’ and more engaged with the ‘celebration of entrepreneurship’ (Volkerling, 1996). It is assumed that professionalization will draw closer to achieving the twin aims of increasing and diversifying audiences (Rentschler, 2002).

Marketing in museums is in transition, heralding the beginning of an entrepreneurial period (1994–present). Recently, collaborative marketing models and a new view of visitors are evident, which diversify revenue sources by obtaining new audiences, products, venues and multi-art experiences (Radbourne, 1997). In tandem with this shift, has been increased focus on identifying the nature of the relationship between the visitor, the museum and the market (McLean, 1997).

**Different perspectives on museum marketing: then and now**

The identified periods impacting on marketing in museums are discussed in this section. The distribution of academic articles reflects the wider history of museum marketing. Two comments can be made about the distribution and focus of articles. First, the USA dominates in both volume of articles and in thrust of articles. There are approximately three times as many articles in the USA published ‘Museum News’ as the ‘British Museum Management and Curatorship’ on the subject of marketing. Second, even when the North American journals do not dominate in volume or articles (e.g., ‘Muse’), these journals reassert their dominance with special issues on marketing.

The number of articles focusing on marketing as ‘tactic’ has remained steady over the years, while the number of articles which focus on marketing as ‘culture’ and marketing as ‘strategy’ has altered significantly. Prior to 1994, articles in industry journals which discuss marketing as strategy accounted for 10 per cent of the total number of articles. After 1994, this percentage jumps to 60 per cent (Rentschler, 2002). This rise reflects the shift that has occurred in museums with respect to the use and role of marketing within the organization, which is, in turn, indicative of the change in museums’ perception of audiences. As museums are now much more reliant on philanthropic and corporate support,
the relationship has been transformed from a hierarchically based one-to-one of service (Rentschler, 2002), thus marketing now plays a very significant role.

The focus of the articles in marketing as culture is quite different from those which locate marketing within the fields of strategy and tactics. Articles which address marketing as culture often show no awareness of, or interest in, the marketing implications of the study. As DiMaggio et al. (1978) found many such studies are for internal or external political purposes, didactic purposes or to argue for more resources by citing the economic impact of the arts on the community. In contrast, articles which locate marketing as strategy and marketing as tactical are action oriented rather than data-gathering oriented.

A wider interest in the methodologies of the behavioural and social sciences is suggested by the focus of more recent articles. McManus and Miles (1993) visitor studies article entitled ‘United Kingdom: focusing of the market’ chronicles this shift in attitude. A market-driven approach to exhibition planning and design has resulted in an increasing use of preliminary assessments of visitors’ opinions on contents and topics for new exhibitions.

Recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of the museum experience, and consideration of the value of both purposive and functional roles, is vital in any organizational analysis. Adoption of appropriate and current marketing practices keeps museums culturally relevant and ensures their place as loci of cultural importance, particularly in the context of changing consumer practices. The Internet has enabled audiences to visit museums located far outside their physical region, frequently offering new and different kinds of experiences with which to engage on a vast array on topics traditionally explored within museums. It is vital therefore that museum managers adopt such marketing practices as will ensure their continued attraction of audiences and other stakeholders. Links within online exhibitions can direct the visitor to engage in other museum activities, thus utilizing the potential for audience engagement. In an age where income revenue is of high importance it would behove museums to explore all avenues to their full capacity. Philanthropic opportunities to support their preferred institutions can be offered to visitors as they navigate their way through exhibitions without compromising the quality of the content, providing a thoughtful and informed process is designed and adhered to (Burnette and Spann, 2006). Sponsorship opportunities are likewise abundant, harnessing the marketing capacity of the Internet.

A new economic reality is emerging where financial viability is more dependent on ‘success in the commercial marketplace’ (Williams and Rubenstein, 1992). Museums continue the trend by targeting and segmenting the marketplace, and recognizing the variety of audiences to whom they are marketing their services—the funders, the public and the organizations’ staff and volunteers, whether board members, curators or artistic directors (Tweedy, 1991; Scaltsa, 1992; Mclean, 1997). Kotler and Andreasen (2003) cite the importance of these constituencies in not-for-profit marketing. The marketer needs to be sure to whom they are marketing—whether to funders to make them feel confident and therefore a source of funds to the museum, or to the visitors to whom the service is delivered. Different strategies are needed for each audience.
Conclusion

This chapter has provided a framework within which the development and history of marketing in museums can be analysed. This chapter has looked at the role of marketing in museums since the mid-1970s. It briefly overviews how increased focus on marketing has been underpinned by changes in museums’ appreciation of the role of marketing, as also their mission has changed. It contextualizes the alteration in marketing approaches and roles within the different management styles for museum directors. It has shown how different styles exemplify the transformation in professional perspective from the traditional focus on custodial conservation to the more contemporary focus on educating and entertaining the public.

Awareness of the concurrent responsibilities of the director to attract new audiences through appropriate marketing is essential if museums are to remain culturally salient institutions. Successful museum marketing may require a combination of different management styles. However, this needs careful consideration in relation to how each aspect should be managed. The custodial style works well with education, the core dimension of the museum service. All staff need to know the value, history and context of education as it forms the core part of the service delivery. The more augmented dimensions of service delivery such as interaction, interpretation, communications and accessibility need to be addressed, particularly in relation to complex and interactive, social exchange service queries. This requires a greater marketing emphasis. Diversity, degree of variability and complexity of individual customer service requirements are valid experiences in museums. This is an inherent characteristic of the multi-dimensional museum service and the varying degrees of customer needs, requirements, perceptions, experience and ability to comprehend instructions and directions. Therefore, recognizing the importance of the augmented aspects of the museum service is vital. A key purpose of museum directors is to continually develop and improve all dimensions of service to visitors. This requires staff commitment, as well as staff development and the need for guidelines and measures for both core and augmented service dimensions.

The implication for museum directors is that they become more ‘hands on’, outwardly focused managers as well as efficient managers of a ‘collection’, in all aspects of museum management. The use and recognition of informal networks are important if internal performance in terms of communication and cooperation are to be successful. The thinking and behaviour of managers are also particularly important within museums. The willingness and ability of individual managers to adapt and develop their internal communication and cooperation, underpins successful development of the service marketing offering. Often, any change in the nature of management decision-making will necessitate a change in managerial structure and have an impact on the individual staff roles and competencies required. Custodial and entrepreneurial skills will assist the effective manager to form a cohesive entity which is meeting its service delivery requirements to all its stakeholders.
By recognizing the multi-dimensional nature of service delivery, museum managers can ensure that the benefits of both custodial and entrepreneurial marketing, management styles are used to achieve cohesion. All the aspects of service quality require attention and, as each interacts with the other, unity is vital for staff. Participation and involvement contribute to the commitment and cooperation of staff in the evolving work environment. In this context, the continual development of service quality in which marketing plays a central role can become the museum ethos.

The implications that are emerging from this shift in attitude to museum marketing since the mid-1970s, can be speculated: the strategic focus will continue to develop, along with the tactical focus, and visitor analysis studies will be integrated into mainstream decision-making for marketing and general management purposes. Given indications since the mid-1990s, marketing will continue to be a crucial issue as it is a proven method of positioning museums in times of change.

References


