

MUSEUM NEXT

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We're approaching a new age for museums: not institutions but places of exchange, not cathedrals but bazaars. Museums therefore need to rethink how they work, and how branding can help them.

This think-piece is based on a presentation given to the Communicating the Museum conference, organised by Agenda in Venice in June 2008. It includes the results of a questionnaire we gave to the hundred-or-so senior museum marketers who attended the conference. Around 80% of delegates were from Europe, with the biggest contingent from the UK, but the Americas, Asia and Australasia were also represented.

MUSEUM V BRAND

The ideas of 'museum' and 'brand' don't naturally go together. People tend to associate 'museum' with institutional integrity, and 'brand' with commercial exploitation.

23% brand is a dirty word

In many museums, brand isn't talked about, or only in the marketing department. In our survey, 23% of delegates overall said brand is 'a dirty word – too commercial'. This attitude is particularly marked in the USA and Asia Pacific.

But the picture is changing. 61% of the delegates said the word is 'OK – a useful part of modern life'.

Top five museum brands:

Tate
MoMA
V&A
Louvre
Guggenheim

And some museums have very clearly become 'brands': they've captured the public imagination. This is particularly true of big, multi-site institutions with iconic buildings, like Tate and Guggenheim. And our survey confirmed this. Asked to name museum brands they admire, delegates picked five in particular: Tate (55 mentions), MoMA (the Museum of Modern Art, New York, 19 mentions), V&A (the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, 17 mentions), Louvre (12) and Guggenheim (9). Tate scored highest in every part of the world, even among delegates from the USA.

The way these big brands work varies. One is a brand based on subject matter – MoMA and modernism. A couple have a brand idea that covers a wider range of subject matter with a particular approach or attitude – Tate and V&A. Three of the brands depend on architecture – most people's ideas about Tate, Louvre and Guggenheim are heavily influenced by their mental picture of particular buildings. For all of them, to differing degrees, brand unites a multi-site operation – Guggenheim most famously.

As these big brands have emerged, museum branding has become a live topic. Margot A Wallace's book *Museum Branding* gives a basic primer. Angus Hyland and Emily King's *c/id* gives case studies, with a strong visual bias.

But neither of these books recognises the full potential of branding for museums, beyond marketing and beyond visual identity.

Sometimes doubtfully, sometimes reluctantly, often questioningly, museums have adopted the idea of brand, usually in a limited way. Now they need to fully embrace it.

MUSEUMS NEED BRAND

Brand, in its true sense, is not primarily about name or logo or graphic design or even about marketing. It's what an organisation stands for, through everything it does. So a museum brand should be delivered in particular through its programme. Exhibitions, events, displays from the collection: all should be inspired by the distinctive idea the museum stands for.

Brand is vital for museums – indeed, for any organisation – because it answers the question 'why?' For any given museum, why should the public visit it? Why should the government provide funding? Why should corporations support it? Why should curators join it? Why should anyone care? Why, in the end, should it exist?

These 'why?' questions have both an external and an internal dimension.

EXTERNAL PRESENCE

Now more than ever, people have huge choice, and limited time. Faced with hundreds of options, they need to know quickly how they can relate to any given museum. They need to know why they should give it their time and money, or their creativity or ideas.

This is clearly true where museums are private, as in the USA. But it's increasingly true of state-funded museums too. Museums need to assert their role in the world.

Some museums, of course, already have an unassailable stature, and in our survey, 21% of delegates described their museum as 'one of the best in the world'.

Tate, for example, whose brand is an invitation to 'look again, think again', has built a huge presence, and over seven years has tripled its visitor numbers to 7.7 million. Even a small museum, like the New Museum in New York, which stands for 'new art, new ideas', can create a presence way beyond its physical size.

47% huge potential but largely unknown

But for other museums, there's a huge gap still to fill. Almost half of delegates felt their museum needs a stronger presence in the world: when asked how they would describe their museum at the moment, 47% said it has 'huge potential but is largely unknown'.

Many museums worry that, however good their audience figures, they serve a narrow audience, and are rarely visited by (say) local residents or ethnic minorities.

And every museum faces competition, not just for visitors or funding, but also for influence in the world. The latest ideas in art practice, for instance, are often explored not by the great museums, but by private galleries, auction houses and art fairs. New findings in archaeology may be found first on television. Scientific thinking is spread through websites like TED. Many museums have put online thousands of pages of information about their collection – pages which no-one ever visits, because knowledge is more accessible, and more clearly related to people's interests, elsewhere.

By answering 'why?' questions, brands can help museums assert their importance, increase their presence, and unlock their potential.

INTERNAL PURPOSE

Museums are hard institutions to manage. In trying to fulfil their potential, most museums have a huge intellectual energy. They're interested in exploring every possibility that comes along. They want to do everything, but can't. Time and resources are limited. So they need to know what to do and what not to do. And brand can help here too.

Internally, brand is a contemporary tool for management. By asserting what a museum stands for, it suggests what it should and shouldn't do. It's a much subtler management tool than command-and-control (if indeed that's ever been possible with intellectually independent curators).

And by asserting an idea, even an *ideal* to stand for, it sets standards high. Many museums suffer from consensus decision-making, and in many state-owned museums it's hard to get rid of poorly performing people – so it's easy for mediocrity to prevail. Brand counters mediocrity.

Brand is much more than the traditional 'remit' or 'mission' that most museums have always had. That's a cold, official, unexciting piece of verbiage. Brand is attitude, the museum's unique take on the world, its climate, its touchstone, its magnetic north.

That's what motivates audiences, curators, funders. And it's what drives the progress of ideas. Great university departments are very clear what they stand for, so they attract great people, and collectively move their topic on, much more effectively than individual academics can. The same thing should be true of museums.

Historic Royal Palaces, for instance, which runs the Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace, stands for the idea of 'story' – the story of how monarchs and people have shaped society. This idea has given the organisation a huge sense of purpose internally, and has helped prioritise projects and raise aspirations.

17% brand guides the way staff behave

But for most museums, brand doesn't yet have this internal power. For the vast majority, branding is just a marketing tool, with very little influence outside the marketing department. In our survey, almost two-thirds of delegates, 65%, said that their brand 'determines the look of stationery, signs and leaflets'. Only 23% said 'it guides our exhibition programme', and only 17% claimed 'it guides how our staff behave'.

These figures are even lower in most countries outside the UK, though there's evidence than in continental Europe the brand idea does more effectively influence programming, with 28% of delegates claiming it guides the exhibition programme.

Museums can and must do much more to answer the 'why' questions. Externally, there's huge untapped potential: society could get much more from its museums if it understood them better. Internally, the power of brand mostly goes unrecognised. Indeed, there's often a wide gap between a museum's external message and its internal reality – a gap that will eventually become unsustainable.

MUSEUMS ARE CHANGING

Brand, properly understood and properly used, is vital to museums. And, as both museums and branding are changing, the two are becoming allies, not enemies.

Three shifts:
taking part
multiplying organisations
many perspectives

In museums, three shifts are clearly under way. First, visitors who used just to partake (come and look) now want to take part (comment, contribute, create). Second, museums that used to work mostly on their own now want, nor need, to collaborate – with other institutions, with neighbours, with media businesses. And third, museums that tended to think in a western-centric way now want to show and investigate many cultures, many perspectives, many voices.

This means museums are becoming less authoritarian, more about engagement, more about the exploration of ideas: they can no longer simply assert. They're also becoming less self-sufficient, less defensive, more collaborative, more modest, more outgoing. And they're broadening their perspective.

In short, they're less like institutions (one point of view, handed down from on high), and more like platforms (places that enable many people and organisations to form and share views).

At the same time, brands are changing, in surprisingly similar ways. They're becoming tools for people (think of big new brands like Google or Wikipedia), links between organisations (like Fairtrade), and multiple in form (even Pepsi and Starbucks now aim to be pluralistic, not the same everywhere). As consumers become creators too – the French call them *consommacteurs* – so brands are much less like marketing gadgets for corporations, much more like platforms for ordinary people to use.

In the museum world, these shifts are clearly visible in projects like Tate's Long Weekend, where visitors become contributors. Or in initiatives like History Matters, where the National Trust, English Heritage and others collaborated to make heritage a topic of national debate. Or pluralistic organisations like the Southbank Centre in London, which wants to promote the widest mix of artistic practices and whose brand is about 'arts' new chemistry'.

Our survey shows these are not isolated examples.

TAKING PART

55% want to be a useful resource

Most museums want to activate their visitors. 62% say they want 'to stimulate visitors to react and comment', and 63% want visitors 'to become more active supporters'. Almost as many, 55%, want 'to become a more useful resource for people'. Over a fifth, 21%, 'want to be less authoritarian'. And 51% want to transfer the sense of ownership to their visitors so they 'feel the museum belongs to them'.

This aspiration to get visitors more active is considerably less urgent in continental Europe, but very high in Asia Pacific (where, for instance, 75% of delegates want their museum to be a useful resource). And in the USA, where the trend towards user participation – in particular, user-generated content on the internet – is most advanced, the figure is an astonishing 88%.

MULTIPLYING ORGANISATIONS

64% want to do more in partnership

Collaboration is everywhere. 64% of our sample say they want 'to do more work in partnership with other museums'. Over half, 51%, want 'to work in partnership with media organisations'.

The push for collaboration is at its highest in the UK and the USA, but a little lower in continental Europe and Asia Pacific, where museums seem still to be acting independently.

MANY PERSPECTIVES

42% want to be multicultural

A smaller, but still very significant, number of museums want to broaden their cultural horizons. 42% 'aim to be more multi-cultural'. 37% already 'invite people from outside the museum to curate exhibitions'.

The move towards multiple cultures is led by the USA, where 88% of delegates reported that their museums are heading in that direction. Perhaps because the social climate is different, or government pressures are lower, this move isn't so urgent in continental Europe, where the figure is only 28%.

Worldwide, a huge number of museums want to be effective beyond their walls, on a world stage. 67% say 'we're expanding our online activities', and 65% want 'a global, not just national, presence'.

This is the beginning of a new age for the museum: giving people a platform, multiplying organisations together, provoking different perspectives – all guided by brand as the organisation's magnetic north. As the public's appetite to explore, learn and engage increases, museums will play a central role, offering places and things to inspire new thinking, and putting the 'muse' back into museum. But to achieve all this – to be not institutions but places of exchange, not cathedrals but bazaars – museums need a new kind of branding.

STARTING FROM HERE

The opportunities for museums are huge – to build brands that make them into useful, indeed vital, platforms for people, whether they're visiting in person or online. But there's a long way to go.

38% our brand is not well defined

In our survey, some delegates were very confident, but over a third felt they hadn't yet pinned down their brand: 38% said 'we have a brand but it's not well defined'. As many as 25% admitted 'we've never done serious work on our brand'.

So the starting point for museums is to do that definition. And, as the role of museums changes, to make that definition work for the future, not just the past.

The best place to begin is to look inward. A museum can most easily explore what it stands for by asking what it was set up for. The ambitions of its founders – very often, far-sighted Victorians – are often still resonant today. It's worth then investigating the museum's principles and beliefs today, by talking to senior staff, trustees, old hands and new joiners. A good question to ask is: what, as an organisation, are we for? And what are we against? The second question often reveals more than the first, in establishing the museum's role in society.

The museum's current strategy can help here too: what is it aiming to do more of? and less of? What path is the organisation on, with what possible destinations? But strategy shouldn't dominate: the brand will last longer than the current strategy.

The second step is to look outwards. With the help of its own experts, commentators, writers, artists, academics, the museum should take a hard look at the world it inhabits, and ask what's wrong with it, what's missing from it? What does society need in the sphere of art, or archaeology, or science, or military history, or conservation, or transport? Why are people interested in these things? What more would they like to know and do? What other organisations are interested in this field – academic, media or whatever? What new concerns and interests are emerging?

Perhaps most importantly, how can you be useful to people? Not in a narrow utilitarian sense, but how can people, by interacting with you, do more of what they want to do?

By combining the inward with the outward view, a museum can start to define its core idea: the thing it uniquely stand for. As the thinking becomes sharper, it's worth testing it, with the best minds inside the museum, and well-informed observers outside it.

From this core idea, a museum should be clear about two other things. First, to use the brand jargon, its 'proposition' – what kind of platform it offers its visitors, members, funders, employees, volunteers.

And second, its 'personality' – the distinctive character of its organisation that will invite people and engage people.

Then – and this is the critical point – the museum must translate this into its programming, into the whole experience its visitors get, before looking at communication, logo or graphic design. The most common mistake in museum branding – and, indeed, in every kind of branding – is to try to change image ahead of reality. A logo can only ever be a flag: what matters more is the ship.

The museum must make the idea live in its displays, exhibitions, events, collection policy, interpretation, education programme – even the things on sale in its shop – before making big new claims in the outside world. A museum shouldn't try to change its image until it's demonstrably changed its reality.

This may all sound like a huge undertaking, consuming huge resources, and demanding a corporate way of thinking that curatorial staff would find suspect. But it needn't be any of these things. The process can be done with a light touch, and the thinking can be intellectually hugely stimulating. And the work isn't narrowly instrumental (how can we get people to buy something?), it's deeply philosophical (what are we for?) The thinking must be led by the director – in the end, it's an act of leadership. But it must involve lots of people from the start, particularly curators, and should be genuinely open to their thinking.

And it should be given time: in fact, it should be seen as a never-ending task of definition and realisation, changing as the outside world – and the people inside the museum – change.

The museum world needs this new kind of branding. Even the biggest brands need it: what does Guggenheim really stand for? Is Tate ready for the next generation? Dozens of less well-known museums need to make their mark in the world. There's no longer a fight between 'museum' as institutional integrity and 'brand' as commercial exploitation. In the future, both museum and brand will be platforms.