

Developing a museum brand to enhance awareness and secure financial stability

A brand can be defined as “a combination of words, design, symbol and signs, employed in creating an image that identifies a product or service to differentiate it from its competitors, and which over time becomes associated with credibility, quality, and satisfaction in the consumer’s mind” (Chiaravalle et. al, 2006). However, a brand is much more than a mere source of identity. Successful brands lead customers to trust and emotional attachment to a product or service, fostering relationships with these, and consequently withstanding pricing wars, transcending offers from competitors, and even overcoming occasional lapses in delivery excellence. Brands indeed are thought critical in maintaining the customer base in an increasingly fast moving and competitive market. Finally, brands are also linked to increased market share and profits, improved marketing decisions, and repeated businesses (Aaker, 2010).

In the for-profit sphere, brands are often seen as central to the success of organisations as performance is based on the behaviour of customers, that is, whether they choose to purchase a particular product or service. That behaviour, however, springs from the perception customers have of the brand: how differentiated it is from other brands in the same category and how relevant it is to them. The customer experience is then defined by what the brand stands for: the promise it is willing to make and keep in the market.

Yet, unlike the many contributions covering the subject in for-profit organisations, literature on museum branding is merely in its infancy. Museum marketing studies have been mostly concerned with topics such as public relations, advertising, and sponsorship, and the success of these efforts has been mainly measured in attendance levels (Kotler et. al, 2008). However, with the increasing pressure to demonstrate their worth under several aspects, the concept of museum branding is beginning to take root and it is thus imperative to understand what brands can stand for in the museum realm.

From the 1980s, most OECD countries started facing recessions and growing demands for public services, leading these to the adoption of reforms to increase accountability and restrain public spending that threatened bankrupt. In order to produce balanced budgets, governments redefined their roles, divesting themselves of the service delivery characteristic of welfare state governments, and requiring evidence in quantitative form that inputs were providing outcomes. The worth of cultural institutions was now mostly based on efficient/effective and transparent use of public funds, resulting in the need for museums to find the perfect balance between high-quality visit experience and market success in the form of high attendance levels. Not only that, but museums also face further challenges as they compete with other leisure providers for audience, donations, partnerships and sponsorships. Moreover, Anheier et. al (1998) noted that, as the museum field experience significant growth both in terms of new museums and expansion of collections and buildings, capital support for these is relatively easy to find, but support for the resulting increased operating costs is not. Finally, as museums are generally subject of ‘cost disease’, increases in labour costs are generally not compensated by gains in productivity.

Being compelled to demonstrate their worth in terms of current policy to maintain ongoing funding has, therefore, lead museums to articulate their core functions and responsibilities in sufficiently persuasive ways to secure continuous support. In that way, museums are no longer exclusively about collections and exhibitions; multidisciplinary programs are more prominent, and educational programmes, events, and

online presence are becoming more popular. As a result, museums' worth is now measured by the experiences and benefits it generates as much as by the collections and exhibitions they display, and professionals in this area begin to understand that a balance between the traditional views of what a museum should be and responsiveness to new pressures must be achieved.

So how can a museum stand out, attract audiences, and generate sufficient earnings to ensure self-sustainability without losing its identity? Bradford (1994) provides a framework where three distinctive branches are seen as central for a successful strategy: the management of the museum, of the museum's reputation, and of the relationship with the museum's support groups, where solid museum management is the basis for a good reputation, which in turn intensifies the relationship with the audience, patrons, and sponsors. Aaker (2010) also suggests that a strong, meaningful brand personality can help organisations such as museums enhance their reputation and attract further support, being therefore critical to have their image clearly defined and managed so that the audience can identify and bond with it. Indeed, strategies such as these have been undertaken by cutting-edge museums, as these recognise brands as a relationship-building tools, where the audience not only becomes loyal to, but also continuous support is more likely to be attained.

Museum brand development

Strategic planning is a platform for reviewing a museum's challenges and planning its performance, providing a complete perspective on where the museum has been, where it is, and where it should go given its strengths and weaknesses. Wide-ranging internal and external environmental scans and customer analyses spot opportunities, threats, and emerging trends, helping the organisation to establish tactics to fulfil its mission and identify directions for future growth. A strategic plan, therefore, identifies objectives, establishes an action plan and timeline, and allocates resources in order to achieve goals.

Most museums acknowledge nowadays the benefits of market segmenting as it enables them to focus resources on prospects that are more compatible with its mission, by offering a range of experiences that appeal to each and reflect their varying needs. Ideally, museums should segment markets according their demographics, lifestyle, preferences, benefits sought, user status, and visit style, developing targeted offerings for each, such as segment pricing, communication material, services, events, and programmes (McLean, 1997). To be effective though, each market segment should be clearly distinctive from all others, but large enough to be worth developing a specific strategy aimed at it.

Nothing so perfectly identifies a museum as its exhibits, and it is with these that the branding process begins. The collections and exhibitions are built up according to the mission, and thus reflect the essence of the museum. Therefore, the museum's task is to develop a branding strategy that will communicate and deliver value based on its core offerings. Indeed, most museums focus on their functional attributes, that is, the conservation and exhibition of articles for educational and enjoyment purposes, but as the audience views the museum experience as a whole in terms of the perceived quality and benefits offered, focusing solely on its core attributes means there is a failure to understand what the brand represents. The extended brand identity, then, includes elements that provide completeness and uniqueness, adding details that help portray what the museum stands for. To ensure that its brand identity has depth and texture, the brand structure can be based on Aaker et. al's (2000) four perspectives:

Brand-as-product. As the public frequently rely on associations of fame with excellence to assess the quality of an offering, the relationship between artist/artwork reputation and value is generally strong in the art market; the presence of a significant artist/artwork means that the museum will be recalled when the

former is mentioned. Furthermore, a museum may not only display esteemed artworks, but also provide visitors with unparalleled customers' service, educational programmes, and/or events.

Brand-as-organisation. It is the museum's duty to build a strong organisational culture in order to get employees delivering the brand's values appropriately. Further organisational associations, such as social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and commitment to technological innovations can also provide benefits based on admiration or simple identification.

Brand-as-person. Just as a person, a museum can be perceived as having human characteristics, being considered fun, active, youthful, intellectual, and so on, suggesting that its image can be supported by a rich personality which can be the basis of brand-customer relationships.

Brand-as-symbol. A strong visual imagery strengthens the museum brand identity and gains recognition and recall, whether it is through the use of a specific artwork, a photograph, a logo, a tagline, a meaningful heritage, or distinctive architecture.

The museum should also create a value proposition to the various target segments, reflecting their needs and expectations and creating a framework on how the brand connects with prospects and how offerings are provided. The value proposition explains then the functional, emotional, self-expressive, and/or social benefits delivered to the audience. Finally, museums are different from one another and its appeal lies exactly in its distinctiveness. For that reason, once a museum identifies its market segments, it considers its position. Positioning position (e.g. as the most diverse museum in the area, the most innovative museum, and so on) is the way in which a museum communicates its unique values, being crucial to achieve differential advantage so that the audience understands, appreciates, and is drawn to what it stands for.

Once the foundations of the brand are defined, the museum must carry out implementation strategies to ensure that the brand is being delivered coherently. As employees are responsible for delivering museum services, a critical part of ensuring the communication of the brand identity consists of effectively training and motivating these providers in terms of its brand identity. Furthermore, museums must design its promotional and communication efforts after the brand identity, informing prospects in a way that interests and motivates them to take action, whether it is to visit the museum, become a member, or make a donation. Messages must speak directly to the needs and wants of the audience, addressing their top-of-mind concerns, and do so in a compelling way. However, as the bewildering array of communication vehicles and market segmentation today makes the brand implementation extremely complex, an integrated communications strategy throughout all channels must be planned so as to moderate distortions.

Traditional museums typically invested little or nothing in marketing and advertising, making few efforts to raise demand for the services offered. Compared to commercial organisations, museums operated in the little league, but now these are realising that brands can be highly effective in building audiences and generating alternative sources of revenues; when in possession of high levels of positive brand equity, museums not only find it easier to reach break-even points through box office earnings and activities offerings, but its name becomes relevant enough so that these organisations can count on membership programmes, merchandising, licensing, franchising, and private/corporate giving to increase awareness, loyalty, and consequently income.

Although branding practices are becoming widespread throughout the museum sphere, it certainly does

not come easy and is still subject to much controversy and debate. Firstly, a dichotomy still exists between the responsibilities directly related to the collections and exhibitions and those dealing with the business of managing these institutions. Management strategies associated with the private sector are often presented as contradictory to the status of museums as institutions whose fundamental purpose is to acquire, exhibit, and interpret works of art.

Accordingly, criticism arises for museums whose policies have been deemed inappropriately commercial, giving way to the notion of museums as corporate entities with highly marketable inventory and desire for growth (Wu, 2002). Concerns that commercial interests might override the public interest are persistent, particularly in countries where a philanthropic base is (nearly) non-existent mostly due to a combination of substantial past reliance on government subsidies and the lack of tax incentives and significant reductions in funding levels were directly translated into a pronounced commercialisation trend.

Second, branding is a long-term investment of time, human resources, and capital. Museums should be aware that once they initiate branding process they will have to commit resources to sustain it. Museums must then maintain a consistent identity, position, and execution over time, resisting organisational biases towards changes.

Finally, although brands give organisations credibility and add value, it can also act as a carrier of contagion by magnifying the impact of negative information. Once there is negative news about a brand, the effect can be devastating. Brands are therefore susceptible, as a single event can seriously compromise its reputation. It is highly desirable, therefore, to continuously invest in monitoring the brand as it can take a lifetime to build it, but seconds to break it.

Conclusions

This study has attempted to provide the usefulness of branding strategies in the museum realm, indicating that these can be adapted and applied to the museum sector to further missions and goals. Museums can benefit from a successful brand strategy, not only by enhancing general awareness and developing brand-customer relationships, but also by giving these institutions the possibility to engage in alternative income generating enterprises, such as membership programmes, merchandising, licensing, franchising, and donations. Branding tools can therefore be applied to museums without falling into commercialism, not only because these brands are not exclusively related to secondary revenue streams, but mostly because a successful strategy walks hand-in-hand with the museum's mission and values. As public institutions, branding strategies in museums may be adopted as a way to reach greater efficiency/effectiveness and reduce dependency on uncertain support, but never at the cost of its service provision to the public; building strong brands requires a clear understanding of who are the audiences and what benefits they seek.

Whilst museums are increasingly becoming more entrepreneurial, the development of a sounder understanding of the goals sought through business ventures seems of paramount importance. If branding strategies can be of use in the museum realm, one could argue that given the current economic instability and the urgency of finding immediate revenue-generating activities, investing resources in the development of a brand that will only bring benefits in the long run does not seem to be a matter of utter importance. However, through a coherent brand strategy, museums can reach and move prospects not only to take action, but also to get involved in loyal relationships where branding investments eventually get amortised and the profitability grows without undermining the mission, but actually furthering it.

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