

# MARKETING *the* MUSEUM



FIONA MCLEAN

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## MARKETING THE MUSEUM

The history of the museum is one of shifting purposes and changing ideals. Taking a necessarily close look at the specific needs of this sector, this volume asks if it is possible to define the 'product' which the modern museum can offer. Are the theories of marketing developed for manufactured goods in any way relevant to the experience of visiting a museum? Or, as anti-marketing lobbies believe, should marketing play only the smallest of roles, if any at all?

In this volume, the marketing of a museum is not seen in terms of 'product', but rather as the process by which one can build a relationship between the museum and the public. This study is the ideal guide to the ways in which museums can overcome the numerous hurdles on the route to truly achieving a marketing orientation. It gives practical guidelines to the specific ways in which marketing can be tailored to the needs of museums and become a useful as well as an acceptable part of today's museums in fulfilling their ultimate purpose in serving the community.

In covering one of the most highly disputed issues in the field, this book is essential reading for museum professionals, students and anyone who has dealings in the many branches of the heritage industry around the world.

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*The Heritage: Care-Preservation-Management* programme has been designed to serve the needs of the museum and heritage community worldwide. It publishes books and information services for professional museum and heritage workers, and for all the organisations that service the museum community.

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#### **Publisher's Note**

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint  
but points out that some imperfections in the original may be apparent

To Alan  
and in memory of  
my Mum and Dad

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# Introduction

The museum is a complex phenomenon. Its history is one of shifting purposes, juxtaposed with changing ideals. It comes in various styles and types, and is governed by innumerable organisations and people. Its intentions are not precise, and its meaning to the public is undefined. A museum is full of contradictions; no two museums are the same. It has been compartmentalised into subject types and organisational structures, but no labels can make an entity out of disparate parts. There is no common understanding of a museum. Definitions are mooted, but debates on the principles of museums continue unabated. The roles assumed by museums are as uncertain and unqualified as the definition of a museum. All that is agreed to constitute a museum is a collection, although even this assumption has recently been called into question.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the collection lies uncertainty. A museum is any number of permutations of collection. It can be an art gallery, a science museum, or in some cases, a railway.<sup>2</sup> What do all these collections have in common that endows them with the title 'museum'? Are these agglomerations of artefacts and relics the detritus of a bygone age? What constitutes a museum?

The organisational and staffing structure is equally diverse. A small, volunteer-run museum is as entitled to call itself a 'museum' as a large, civil service-staffed national museum. A museum that is open by appointment is comparable to a museum that actively encourages access. A museum that maintains an education service has the same generic title as that which operates train rides. The public attracted may vary from specialists and academics to tourists and children. How are these anomalies reconciled in the generic term 'museum'? Can the category be defined if it is composed of disparate and often conflicting meanings and functions?

Marketing is equally uncertain of its credentials. There is no one definition of marketing: its concepts being slotted in to comply with the requirements of differing situations. One concept that does reconcile the various definitions is the notion of the customer. Without people, there would be no rationale for marketing. Marketing is a process that brings together an organisation and people, whether it be for profit, to satisfy their needs or wants, to increase visitor figures, etc. Working on that basis then, marketing at its lowest common denominator is about building up a relationship between the museum and the

public. There is no specific reason why the museum should in any way relate to the public. In fact, some museums choose not to do so, by closing their doors to them, such as museums that are open only by appointment, or at certain times of the year. Strictly, restricted access is more common in some major American collections than in the UK. The recent legal wrangles over the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia is a case in point.<sup>3</sup> The question of why museums want or ought to communicate with a public in some way is a legitimate one. Part, at least, of the museum's *raison d'être* would be 'for the public benefit' (Museums Association 1984). The central questions here are to do with identifying the 'public', establishing the 'benefit' contained, and in governmental terms, the cost of the 'benefit'. Marketing has been in the centre of this dispute. Its business-orientated approach to 'turnover' in visitor figures and 'profit', whilst alienating many museum professionals, has generated an instructive debate about the role, purpose, and self-presentation of museums.

In order to establish a consciousness of the public in the museum, the marketing agent requires a more than superficial understanding of the museum. The fundamental problem to be clarified before any attempt can be made to comprehend marketing in museums is the complicated interests involved in the notion of 'museum'. It is apparent that an investigation of marketing reveals the conflicts within the museum community. Deeply polarised debates rage on in the museums profession on these fundamental concerns. Museology cannot be a straightforward concept. The operations of marketing would be simpler if this were the case. Issues relevant to the museum debate need to be extrapolated. Ambient changes in the wider patterns of economic, political, social, and cultural life will inevitably continue to determine the dispute.

Rather than being set apart from that which is being marketed, a public consciousness is intrinsic to the process. In effect, communication with the public can only be enhanced if it is integral to the whole museum framework. This is paralleled in recent discussions on museums in the postmodern condition, of a 'new museology', where society is considered to be intrinsic to the interpretation of museums. This contextual understanding is the benchmark in the generic museum context. It is equally applicable in the individual museum situation.

A museum is neither a large conglomerate, nor a McDonald's hamburger restaurant, nor a hospital or educational institution, nor a theatre. A museum is different things to different people; it is not one entity, but enshrines a multiplicity of values, images, and attitudes. It cannot be compartmentalised as a service or a non-profit organisation. It has these characteristics, but it is more complex than such definitions would suggest. It does not have a defined 'product', a consistent 'customer' profile, or a defined communication system between a 'product' and a 'customer' (Kotler and Levy 1969). It is not necessarily communicating with a 'customer' in order to make a 'profit' or 'the best financial outcome' (Diggle 1984). It may have various motives for 'identifying, anticipating, and satisfying the needs of its users' (Lewis 1991: 26), which may have little to do with 'public benefit' (Museums Association 1984).

Since museums exist for the public benefit and, by implication, their goals are social, their marketing needs to reflect these social goals. In this regard, some of the more recent marketing theories developed in Europe are considered, theories which do not subscribe to the cut and thrust tradition of marketing espoused in the US, but which appear to be more sympathetic to the way museums actually operate.

This book attempts to reconcile museums and marketing. Marketing has been regarded as a response to funding crises, a means of survival in museums. By appointing a member of staff, usually at a low level in the museum's hierarchy, to deal with publicity and advertising, it is envisaged that the museum's problems will be solved. It is assumed that what the museum has to offer is inherently interesting, and that the public only needs to be persuaded and cajoled to visit. The myths about marketing need to be dispelled.

Fundamental to this book is the belief that marketing is a process that seeks to achieve the museum's purpose in relation to its public. It is not a commercial tool, meted out to serve the politicians of the free market economies. Marketing has been around a lot longer than the free market. It is not marketing that commercialises or compromises the integrity of the museum and its objects. Marketing in museums has been misunderstood. What is required is an understanding of marketing developed specifically for the museum context, one which reflects the purpose of the museum. This book does this by introducing the context of museums and marketing in Part I, by addressing the various issues that impact on marketing in museums, and by challenging contemporary interpretations. It thereby attempts to create a 'philosophy' for marketing which is specific to the museum context. Part II outlines the practice of marketing in museums, acting as a guide to best practice. At the same time it is recognised that in reality, museums face significant hurdles in achieving a marketing orientation, while the practice itself may have limitations. Part II concludes by considering the future for museum marketing, and indicating some areas that require further research if the limitations of current practice are to be overcome.

Chapter 1 attempts to interpret the purpose of the museum, by assessing its continual redefinitions within the context of new technical resources and new social demands (Hudson 1977). The historical dimension is examined, followed by a discussion on the contemporary situation, looking at the museum in the postmodern condition. The various issues that occupy the minds of the museums profession, and which reflect the development of the museum, are debated. The museum is then located in its wider environment and within the public dimension.

Chapter 2 considers the rise of marketing to its seemingly unassailable position in capitalist countries. Recognising that marketing can be harnessed for the unethical and corrupt, a discussion ensues which defends marketing against its detractors, in the form of 'marketing baiters'. A number of arguments have been developed, notably in the diatribes against heritage, placing the blame firmly at the door of marketing. This is disputed. The second half of the chapter assesses

the various theories of marketing, suggesting that although museums can benefit from an understanding of the services and non-profit marketing theories, marketing needs to be translated into the context of museums.

Chapter 3 reflects on the various factors in the museum's external environment that can impact on a museum's marketing. Chapter 4 ends the discussion on the issues and challenges for museums in adopting a marketing orientation by focusing on the public, and addressing the changing role of the public's relationship with the museum. Consideration is given to access and an appreciation of why people visit or are deterred from visiting museums.

The second part of the book takes a more practical focus, and continuing the discussion of Chapter 4, Chapter 5 outlines the techniques that a museum can use to understand the public and learn about their needs. A discussion then ensues on the various methods a museum can use to break a public down into homogeneous groups.

Chapter 6 returns to the museum to investigate what constitutes the museum's 'product'. The various aspects of that product are commented on, while the management of the product, so that it meets the needs of the public, is discussed. Some specific techniques developed in the services sectors are introduced and translated for museum use.

Communication or promotion is traditionally viewed as the domain of marketing. Chapter 7 outlines the various activities that can inform the public about the museum and improve its accessibility. Chapter 8 then considers the other traditionally held view of the role of marketing, that of resource attraction, both in terms of income generation and development activities.

The techniques used to implement the marketing effort are outlined in Chapter 9, which takes the reader step by step through the process of marketing planning. Chapter 10, though, argues that for marketing to succeed, marketing planning is not enough. The museum needs to do more than just initiate the activities of marketing; it needs to adopt marketing as a process. This may require some fundamental restructuring and a cultural revolution in the museum. The second half of the chapter anticipates the future for museum marketing if marketing is truly to achieve the purpose of the museum. Finally, some suggestions are posited for future investigation into museum marketing, an area which to date has seen a relative dearth of research.

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This book is intended to be used by professionals and students alike, to enable them to appreciate marketing that is tailored to the museum situation. Although many of the examples used to illustrate the practice of marketing in museums are predominantly of UK origin, and to a lesser extent derived from the US, this book is intended to be universal, of relevance and applicable in any national context.

It is hoped that this book will shed new light on the discussion of marketing in museums. The main contention is that criticisms of marketing in museums

are legitimate, but only in so far as they reflect an approach to marketing that is inappropriate to museums. Adapting marketing techniques developed for manufactured goods is by implication irrelevant to the museum situation. By drawing on the various marketing theories, and by selecting and locating those most appropriate to the museum context, the intention is to posit a marketing approach tailored to the museum. The underlying premise of this book is that museum marketing is the appropriation of the museum's ultimate purpose, that of serving the public.

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***Part I***  
***Issues and challenges***

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## *The museum context*

Museums are wonderful, frustrating, stimulating, irritating, hideous things, patronizing, serendipitous, dull as dishwater, and curiously exciting, tunnel-visioned yet potentially visionary. The real magic is that any of them can be all of these simultaneously ... What is a museum and what is it not?

(Bonniface and Fowler 1993: 118)

An examination of the history of museums would suggest that museums are all of these things because of the combination of their inertia to change in the first half of the twentieth century and their more recent transformation in the 1980s and 1990s. The sleepy, balmy days which have existed since their infancy are long gone. Museums have dusted down their glass cases, and have opened them up to ever-accelerating change. The 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a rapid makeover in museums, unprecedented in their history; twenty years of progress to parallel the past two hundred years of quiescence. No longer merely the guardians of the detritus of bygone ages, museums have assumed new roles as the demands and expectations of them have developed. An accumulation of factors, both internal and external, positive and negative, controlled and untrammelled, proactive and reactive, chosen and imposed, have brought museums, sometimes kicking and screaming, into the twentieth century. Instead of gazing at their navels, museums are opening their doors wide and responding to a world beyond the inner confines of their 'cabinets of curiosities'. A revolution is sweeping through museums, a revolution which has seen museums move 'from twilight to spotlight' (Cossons 1991: 186).

The purpose, or *raison d'être*, of museums has expanded in recent years in response to the changes in their environment. In 1904, Murray posited this definition of a museum: 'A museum, as now understood, is a collection of the monuments of antiquity, or of other objects interesting to the scholar and the man of science, arranged and displayed in accordance with scientific method' (Murray 1904: Introduction). A more recent interpretation has been adopted by the UK's Museums Association: 'A museum is an institution which collects, documents, preserves and interprets material evidence and associated information for the public benefit' (Museums Association 1984). These definitions are not dissimilar, although the definition from the turn of the century implies

rather than states the functions addressed in modern museums. Whereas in 1904 museums were collections of objects which were arranged and displayed, now they also document and preserve. As scientific methods have improved, so equally have the methods of preservation and conservation. Whereas these objects were displayed 'in accordance with scientific method', now they are interpreted; and significantly, where museums were 'interesting to the scholar and the man of science', now they operate 'for the public benefit'.

The Museums and Galleries Commission (1988) described the Museums Association definition as follows. By 'institution' is meant an establishment that has a formal governing instrument and a long-term purpose. It should 'collect', that is possess or intend to acquire, substantial permanent collections in relation to its overall objectives. 'Documents' obliges the museum to maintain records, while 'preserves' includes not only all aspects of conservation, but also security. Through 'exhibits', at least some of the collection should be on show to the public, while it also implies that the museum will be open to the public at appropriate times and periods. 'Interprets' is all-encompassing, referring to display, education, research, and publication. 'Material' means something tangible, while 'evidence' suggests something authentic. 'Associated information' is the knowledge associated with the object, including all records of its past history, acquisition, and subsequent usage. Finally, 'for the public benefit' means that museums should be non-profit, and indicates that 'museums are the servants of society' (Museums and Galleries Commission 1988: 5).

The international museum community has developed a definition with a wider vision for the scope and parameters of museums. Thus the museum is, 'a not-for-profitmaking, permanent institution, in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates, and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of man [sic] and his environment' (ICOM 1974; 1987). A mixed bag of functions, then, which often conflict, leading to tensions in priorities for decision-making. A historical analysis would discern how these functions and conflicts emerged, for as Mergolis commented, 'we cannot really consider the function of a museum without considering something of its history and historical purpose' (Mergolis 1988: 175).

## THE HISTORICAL DIMENSION

Museums have existed in some form since the time of Ancient Greece, where a *museon* was a place dedicated to contemplation and learning (Murray 1904). By the eighteenth century a museum had come to mean, according to Dr Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755), 'a Repository of learned curiosities'. Prompted by the bourgeoisie's new-found wealth and their desire for social prestige, collecting was seen as one way of climbing the social ladder. The opening up of new trade routes and the fashion for archaeological excavations made objects more easily obtainable (Bazin 1967). These collections were