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### **Don't Tate Us! The impediments and drivers of branding museums**

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#### **Abstract**

There is much debate about marketing and branding within the not-for-profit and particularly the museum sector. Yet, in an unpredictable operating environment it seems imperative for museums to take control of their identity and image. This study examines the applicability of brand orientation, and its drivers and impediments in the museum context. A multiple case study approach, with 12 institutions across two countries (United Kingdom and Australia) was carried out. Results suggest that brand orientation provides the cultural platform to retain the distinctiveness of the institution and build the symbolic representation required to remain competitive in the future.

#### **Key words**

Museums, branding, brand orientation

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## Introduction

Museums simultaneously compete and in some instances cooperate, for exhibitions, events, government funding, corporate sponsorship, customer visitation, discretionary expenditure and consumer brand recognition. Swanson and Davis (2006) suggest a crisis is looming for arts funding in America. It is an unpredictable world for museums to operate within, exemplified by the impact of the London Bombings (July 2005) on visitor attendance at London Museums and the influence of escalating petrol prices (2005-2006) on visitor attendance to regional museums across Australia. In such a challenging operating environment the importance of the brand should not be underestimated. Within the marketing domain the brand's importance as both an asset generating resource and a business orientation that provides a compass for organizational decision-making has been firmly established (Urde, 1999). Keller (2000) asserts that "the rewards of having a strong brand are clear" (p.3). So why is there such debate about marketing and branding within not-for-profit and particularly the museum sector?

Within cultural industries there is much distrust of marketing (Lee, 2005; Sargeant, 1999) let alone branding. From an organizational perspective two cultures are perceived to be at odds. First and foremost, museums operate with an institutional orientation where the priority is excellence in scholarship through the collection, preservation and study of objects (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002). Second, is a market orientation (Gainer and Padanyi, 2002) whereby the compass for decision making is an organization's customers, competitors and the sharing of such insight. We propose that the rewards of branding are realized when it acts as a bridge between the competing interests of institutional and market orientations. Through brand orientation the institution identifies its' unique and distinctive scholarly resources and capabilities and also ensures that it remains relevant to its customers and is positioned appropriately in the marketplace. This exploratory study builds upon previous brand orientation literature (Bridson and Evans, 2004; Ewing and Napoli, 2005; Hankinson, 2002) in addition to arts marketing literature (Scott, 2000; Soutar and Close, 1997 and Rentschler, 2002) by specifically examining the dimensions of brand orientation and its drivers and impediments in a museum context.

## Definition of Brand Orientation

Brand orientation is defined as *the degree to which the organization values brands and its practices are oriented towards building brand capabilities* (Bridson and Evans, 2004). Existing literature suggests that organizations need to develop four critical capabilities based on the distinctive roles that brands play: (1) distinctive, (2) functional, (3) value adding, and (4) symbolic (Bridson and Evans, 2004). One important indicator of how highly a firm or institution values its brand is the development of *distinctive* capabilities. A brand oriented museum recognizes the brand as a distinct asset, beyond the value of the collection it represents. The brand is an identifiable logo, symbol or word that differentiates the institution from

competitors and, therefore, acts as a decision-making heuristic for visitors. A brand oriented institution must also utilize their brand as a means of satisfying consumers' basic needs. This capability is termed *functional* and relates to the degree to which the brand communicates to visitors that the museum will provide superior utilitarian benefits. A brand oriented institution also adds service and quality features to enhance the museum experience. These *value adding* activities are viewed as an investment in the long-term future of the brand and are directed by a desire to communicate a superior brand image. Museums must also determine how their brand will be used to reflect the visitor's current view of themselves and the manner in which it can enhance their aspirational self identity. In this way *symbolic* capabilities establish the brand as a distinctive cultural icon.

### **Drivers and Impediments of Brand Orientation**

The emergence of brand orientation as a dominant business orientation in the museum sector is driven, in part, by significant changes in the operating environment. The sector faces strong competition from new venues, destinations and leisure attractions. Coupled with this is a sophisticated and demanding visitor base that has less and less free time (Burton and Scott, 2003). In addition, Government funded institutions are under increasing pressure to reach certain visitor targets in terms of absolute numbers and capturing diverse segments of the community. These factors have been identified in previous research as driving the adoption of more commercial marketing practices in general. We propose that such factors are also contributing to a cultural shift where the emergence of the brand as a governing philosophy is changing the priorities, processes and strategies of museums.

The move towards a brand orientation is not without obstacles. For many museums the focus on scholarly excellence has resulted in a strong institutional orientation that is inward looking and resistant to change. This persistence with established cultural values in the face of a changing operating environment is consistent with the assertions of Kotter and Heskett (1992). Kotter and Heskett (1992) also note that senior management can impede organizational change in two ways: (1) a lack of endorsement from senior management can frustrate the change process; (2) even when the advocate for change is at a senior level, they may fail to convince all of the key stakeholders of the need for change. Moreover, museums may lack the necessary resources, both financial and managerial, to successfully pursue brand-oriented practices.

### **Methodology**

The museum sector comprises art galleries, historic properties, social history museums and other types of museums. The research design for this study adopts an exploratory approach across two countries (United Kingdom and Australia). A multiple case study design was adopted, as this research method is particularly appropriate in exploring the 'why' and 'how' of social phenomenon (Yin 1994).

Each case study consisted of key informant interviews and analysis of institutional documents. Data was collected from 6 leading British museums and 6 leading Australian museums. The criteria for sample selection was to canvass a spectrum of museums with an even split between galleries of art and museums with historical, science and social history works. In each case, the director nominated by each institution as having overall responsibility for marketing or commercial operations was interviewed. All case study interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with an average length of approximately 90 minutes. Subsequent interviews of a less formal nature included opportunistic, casual (over coffee), phone and email correspondence which were not recorded and transcribed at the time but were field-noted and coded. These latter types of interviews were frequently used to clarify particular aspects of the analysis as they arose. Conceptual ordering (Strauss and Corbin 1998) was conducted whereby the data was organised into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions, and then using description to clarify those categories. Employing the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998), data was collected, coded and analysed concurrently for similarities, differences, general patterns and relationships.

### Research Findings

Three key themes emerged in relation to **brand orientation**; namely, the brand's increasing importance within the institution, its ability to act as a compass for decision making and the brand capabilities that are prioritised in the museum sector. In all cases respondents noted that branding activities and the brand in general had been elevated in the institution's list of priorities. As one museum respondent indicated;

*“It's critically important. You can see that from the last three strategic plans have been on how our brand has been elevated structurally and how it's positioned and also about construction.”*

Many respondents viewed this new focus on the brand as part of a cultural revolution within the institution: “...we have a political opportunity here to change the culture of an organisation steeped with a lot of tradition and baggage”. This highlights the recognition within the sector that the brand is more than a marketing tool and that it has significant implications for organisational culture. As stated by one respondent, “it's not about advertising, it's about defining what you are as an organisation”. As a business orientation, the brand does act as a compass for decision making in many institutions. One respondent noted that “we kept calling it a tool kit for decision making and that's exactly what it is”. The brand's ability to guide the strategic direction of the institution is reflected in the following quote:

*“...whenever anything is agreed at a strategic level by the Director and the senior management team they're always revisiting that brand statement and thinking about how it impacts on that and whether that's relevant.”*

In terms of the dimensions of brand orientation, all four brand capabilities are evident in the museum sector. At a fundamental level the value of a distinctive logo

is unanimously endorsed. As the following statement indicates, museums are devoting resources to establishing immediately recognisable brands;

*“But the key thing really was establishing that XYZ stood for [full name of institution]... in developing the sort of new brand design, basically we needed to work out a descriptor for the XYZ.”*

Of great concern to many respondents is that the brand needs to communicate something meaningful about the experience that visitors can expect. The statement *“You can know what to expect especially if they’ve never been there before”* is typical of the social history museums. While the social history museums have developed this functional capability, it still poses a significant challenge for many of the art galleries included in the study. As one respondent stated;

*“The name XYZ, it’s not immediately obvious what it is that we’ve got here, what our collection consists of...So I think to help people understand it’s their collection, what’s here and how in any way that could be of interest and of relevance to their lives is our big challenge really...”*

Many respondents also refer to a range of strategy decisions that are seen as part of the long-term investment in building a superior brand image. As the Director of Marketing in one art gallery stated the value-adding capability of the brand is reflected in the brand’s ability:

*“to get the experience across and that could be in advertising, it could be in an article it could be through going into a shop, it could be a catering experience, it could be online. So to have that as a standard feeling and experience.”*

Finally, the symbolic capability of the brand is something that all respondents aspired to, but that many were yet to realise:

*“We want to go towards something like ‘it’s my XYZ’. We like that ownership thing but we know we’ve got to be so careful with that because you can’t impose that until very much down the line.”*

It is clear from all of the cases that branding is considered increasingly important in the museum sector. This is **driven**, in part, from a perception of increased competition, as noted by one respondent:

*“I don’t think most museums and galleries actually had much of a marketing focus historically...I think now there is much more, well we’re all under huge competition now in terms of we all have to meet government benchmarks... We compete for visitors obviously and for their time... We compete for the attention of the press all the time... We compete for staff.”*

This has resulted in a corresponding need to increase the degree of commercial and, more specially, branding professionalism within the sector. As stated by one Director of Marketing at an art gallery *“It has to be run like a business and you need to take the brand seriously”* and reinforced by the statement of a Commercial Director at a social history museum;

*“It’s got to be of a professional standard that can stand comparison with anything in the commercial sector, if it doesn’t then people will assume that it reflects the nature of the experience that they’re going to get when they visit.”*

Whilst the increasing importance of branding in the museum sector is heavily influenced by external competition issues, the adoption of a brand oriented business philosophy is facilitated by strong leadership. This is exemplified by the following statement:

*“The Director of Communications is on the same level as Gallery Directors. So they have equal say...and yet you’ve got a lot of other galleries that are run by curators and there’s a marketing manager trying to get their voice heard...”*

The primary **impediments** to the establishment of a brand orientation, however, are also found within the institution. The tradition of a strong institutional orientation has established a climate of distrust and suspicion regarding museum branding. When commenting on the nature of museums and galleries one Marketing Manager noted:

*“...they’re academically led by curators and by academics who, I think not always, but I’ll slightly exaggerate it to make the point, but who quite often feel that it’s slightly a bit vulgar really to sort of be overtly branded and a little bit sort of commercial. You know ‘don’t Tate us...don’t bring your nasty sort of commercial work into our beautiful gallery’.”*

Such attitudes obviously impede the successful adoption of a brand oriented culture, but are also exacerbated by the power that curators still hold in many institutions. For instance, one respondent recounted the following experience:

*“...we take a range of posters to market test them and... and we bring the results back and tell the organisation and the curator just vetos the whole lot... We give them that power.”*

Whilst, the institutional orientation that dominates many museums is a significant obstacle to a change in organisational culture, financial constraints limit the resources that can be devoted to brand-building capabilities. As noted by many respondents *“...being publicly funded there isn’t the money available to put huge resources into establishing the brand”*. The resourcing decision is often characterised as a trade-off between curatorial and marketing needs. This is illustrated by the following quote:

*“...you know as resources get constrained, you’ve got to make choices between...it’s the difference between spending dollars on risk management of a collection or spending million of dollars on brand development...”*

## Conclusion

In an unpredictable operating environment it seems imperative for museums to “step up” and take control of their identity and image. Brand orientation provides the cultural platform to retain the distinctiveness of the institution and build the symbolic representation sorely needed in order to attract increased funding, visitors, their time and discretionary income. This study sought to investigate the dimensions of brand orientation, its drivers and impediments. While the measures for brand orientation have been recently established in retail (Bridson and Evans 2004) and

the charity sector (Ewing and Napoli 2005; Hankinson 2002), this exploratory study lends support to their applicability in the museum context. From a practical perspective, the identification of drivers and impediments to brand orientation offers museum boards and directors critical areas to monitor when evaluating their cultural transition. Finally, this qualitative study provides the foundations for future empirical investigation of the role of brand orientation.

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