

Back to the future

Karen Moore reveals how their recent capital project and rebrand will take the People's History Museum into the future

The People's History Museum (PHM) is a national museum in Manchester city centre. In early 2010, after a closure of almost two and a half years and a £12.5 million capital redevelopment, a new People's History Museum opened. The Original Pump House building had been renovated and joined by a spectacular walkway to a brand new four-storey extension. This redevelopment offered a great opportunity to rebrand the museum.

Pre-opening

Design consultants True North were appointed to lead a collaborative process for the rebranding rather than being appointed based on initial design concepts. After consultation with staff and external stakeholders, an analysis of market research and an immersion into the organisation, they suggested that the museum should develop a radical new proposition to force a step change in external opinion. They created a positioning for the museum that focuses not on the objects, collections and archives but on the ideas that the museum espouses such as liberty, democracy, fairness, protest, equality and reform. These are ideas that historically individuals and groups have fought and died for – hence the positioning: there have always been ideas worth fighting for.

The new logo is flexible; the 'roundels' act as a mobile brand interruption across all applications throughout the building, marketing literature, staff uniforms, stationery, etc. True North also worked with architects Austin-Smith:Lord and exhibition designers Headland Design

to ensure the building, design of the galleries and branding complemented each other.

Once the rebranding process was under way, digital agency Reading Room were appointed to develop a new website. They adapted the interruptive brand for use on the web and the new website (www.phm.org.uk) went live just before the museum's soft opening in February 2010.

We negotiated additional funding from the tourist board and regional development agency, which enabled us to undertake a variety of different marketing activities through Visit Manchester and to appoint a PR agency for three months in the run-up to reopening. The ongoing annual marketing budget of £20k would never have allowed us to do either of these. Brunswick provided additional resources and expertise which helped to secure an enormous range of press coverage (the top seven articles in national publications had an AER of almost £1.5 million). However there were some internal implications in terms of providing access to staff for interviews, having a good selection of high-resolution digital images of our collection and the new galleries/building (which were not even finished at the time) and finding the time to actually manage the relationship.

Opening period

The museum had a soft opening on Saturday 13 February. Between this date and the official opening (Saturday 6 March) we marketed this 'test drive' period as an opportunity for local people to have a sneak preview of the new museum. This also gave us valuable feedback (we had over 1,500 comments from approximately 400 people, with comments ranging from opinions of the new building, to signage and even the colour of napkins in the cafe!). We commenced questionnaire-led market research with visitors as soon as we opened (as part of the N W Museums Hub data collection project) so that the data could be benchmarked across the city and region. We also commissioned Morris Hargreaves McIntyre to carry out observational research about how people moved around the building and how the different spaces were being used. This was invaluable to test our signage and building orientation – notoriously hard to get right first time.

Fortunate to secure some extra funding from Renaissance North West towards our launch party and the period from launch party to official opening, we worked with Walk the Plank to create a lighting and fire display on the launch night with the

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lighting remaining in place for a week to cover the official opening event, thus maximising its impact.

Museums and galleries across Manchester have been working together for several years under the brand of creativetourist.com. There were a number of different exhibition openings taking place in February/ March 2010 in addition to the PHM reopening, so they were packaged together to offer a bigger story to the press. This helped to 'sell' Manchester to national media. It also helped to make the cultural offering in the city look joined up even if some of it was luck in terms of timing!

Year one

In our first year of operation we programmed two exhibitions in our Changing Exhibition Gallery, accepted a range of different exhibitions for the Community Gallery and programmed a variety of events. Wherever possible, events were tied in with national initiatives such as the Big Draw, Black History Month, Museums at Night and Heritage Open Days to maximise listings and PR opportunities.

We were also proactive in working in partnerships with city-wide events such as the Manchester Food and Drink Festival, Unconvention, Family Friendly Film Festival, etc. For relatively little money (staff time involved), these helped to raise our profile and also to reach new audiences.

Results

The museum welcomed over 80,000 visitors in the first year since reopening – an increase of almost 300% when compared to the highest figure achieved before the

redevelopment. The new website experienced a 260% increase in traffic from reopening until the end of 2010. Subscribers to the e-newsletter more than doubled in the first year of operation and followers and friends on social media sites are increasing on a daily basis.

The museum has been nominated or won a variety of awards for its café, building, website, rebranding, main galleries, etc. In addition we were one of ten museums up for the most prestigious museum and arts award in the UK, the Art Fund Prize 2011.

Year two

In year two we are back to our 'standard' level of marketing budget (£20k) and we've had to make some hard decisions. One was not to produce a What's On leaflet. Evidence from our market research suggested that very small numbers of people mentioned the leaflet as having persuaded them to visit, and with budget constraints and environmental issues, it just wasn't viable. Instead we are concentrating on making our website as good as possible by adding content, images and resources and a newly improved What's On section went live in September this year. Since the reopening we have been

experimenting with social media and now use both Twitter (@PHMMcr) and facebook (facebook.com/PHMMcr) to engage with existing and potential visitors and are making full use of listings and PR opportunities (all of which take up staff time but don't cost much money). We are monitoring feedback and any possible impact on numbers.

With the current squeeze on arts funding, the challenge now is to maintain the momentum we achieved around reopening last year. Over 80% of visitors said they would be very or quite likely to return in the future and nine out of ten people were very or quite likely to recommend PHM to their friends or family – we have to capitalise on this influential 'word of mouth' marketing and encourage them to do so. ●



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