

Brand new

Catherine Holden explains how a clear and compelling brand for National Museums Scotland was created

What are museums for? When we decided to review our brand, we put the logo to one side, and started with the big questions. Who are we, who are our competitors, what makes us different, who do we want to engage, and what do we want them to do and know?

The facts and figures weren't too difficult – surely. Our group of museums are all in Scotland and have National status – but their names didn't say so. We've got a clear remit – or have we? We cover flight, costume, rural life, war, Scottish history, applied art and design, the natural world, science and technology, world cultures – and more. And our target market? We exist for families, couples, taxpayers, schools, students, tourists, researchers, members, sponsors, donors, volunteers, suppliers, web surfers, politicians, the media – to name a few. So – we've got just about everything for everyone. We had to ask ourselves how we would make a strong and compelling brand out of all this variety.

We'd also been going through a lot of change. A new director, Dr Gordon Rintoul, had established a new vision, mission and values, reorganised departments and reprioritised our public programmes. We had ambitious plans to transform our flagship site in Edinburgh with a £46m capital project – and needed a strong profile, plenty of support and funders to make it happen. Outside the museum, devolution had brought a fresh dynamism to life in Scotland, with a new government keen to increase footfall, hit high tourism

targets and improve social inclusion. Research told us many non-visitors had outdated perceptions of museum-going, and we faced increasing competition in the marketplace for people's attention, time and money.

We started tackling this challenge with a 'big conversation' – asking the questions above and more. We talked to colleagues at all levels and roles across the organisation – and there are 450 of us. We also talked to people outside – opinion formers, policy makers, supporters, visitors and non-visitors. We wanted to know what to build on and what to drop, where we were and where we wanted to be. We talked – but we also listened. And heard lots of positives, about quality, the experiences people had and our staff. But there was a clear lack of understanding about what our museums offered, and how they were relevant to people's lives today.

Our identity clearly needed work. There was low awareness of our group acronym (NMS) and names of individual museums were inconsistent. Several had both official and unofficial names, neither of which visitors could consistently recall. Our visual identity was slightly recessive, in a world of partnerships and competition where we need to punch our weight. And it included eight logos, adding to (rather than combating) the visual clutter of the hundreds people encounter every day. It was elegant, professional, high quality, well structured and well managed – but didn't go beyond the logo, or capture hearts and minds. We had the logic, but not the magic.

We didn't face this alone. Appointing

consultants Jane Wentworth Associates and Hat-trick Design brought us the X factor – extra external expertise and experience; plus the useful ability to extract honest answers from our stakeholders. They helped us make sense of what we heard, and find a strong, true and inspiring 'brand blueprint' to guide our strategy and communications.

We interpreted communications in the widest sense – from our graphic identity to our tone of voice, from our staff uniforms to how we interact with visitors, from how we advertise jobs to what we sell in our shops and cafés. Together we developed a 'what' and a 'how' for our brand – a market positioning statement and a 'big idea', supported by a definition of our 'personality' and values in as few words as possible. This gave us a brand that could act as the DNA of the organisation.

It was very important to us that the new brand rang true, and was deliverable. Before we embarked on the new look and feel, we made double-sure, with internal and external consultation, that our plans were rooted in what we'd heard, and supported National Museums Scotland's overall strategic plans.

One main challenge was to find a 'big idea' that unified our diverse public programmes. We settled on the 'real things' in our collections, which continue to fascinate in today's virtual world – with their scale, colour, texture, complexity, invention, familiarity and unfamiliarity. And even more important, particularly for prospective new visitors, were the 'revealing stories' these objects bring with them, making



a connection to people's lives today and their families' histories.

We also knew that, without the mega-budgets of our commercial competitors, we need to make sure every bit of communication reinforces every other bit. It's what I call 'musketeeer branding' – or 'all for one, one for all'. In other words, a much more consistent and integrated approach to brand management.

This meant one look and feel, photographic style, font, colour palette, logo and tone of voice for all our museums, exhibitions and external and internal communications. This

would help us gain a share of voice in the big world outside, and state again and again what we have in common – what makes us, us. It also helps us to communicate our group of museums, to build loyalty, and send clearer signals to non-visitors about what we offer. Finally, 'musketeeer branding' is more practical, as you don't spend precious time and money reinventing the wheel for every new, short-lived exhibition or event.

However, we didn't want homogeneity. The brand toolkit gives us a framework, but we vary the placement and treatment of copy and

colour, and what we say and show, to give us flexibility, enable creativity and show distinctiveness and variety to our audiences.

Photography was especially important, to get across the quality of our 'real things' and the atmosphere of our museums. Visitor research showed us that Place is one of the most important of the five 'marketing Ps for museums. People visit to 'be' there as much as 'do' there. Images enable us to role-model visitor profiles and behaviour to others. We can show in our images that 'people like you' do visit, and that you can



relax, have fun, learn, observe, chat, run around, get up close – and even (sacrilege!) touch some things.

On a very practical level, we simplified the names of our museums. Instead of 'Shambellie House' or 'Granton' as they were known before, all now include the words National, Museum and Scotland (see picture on page 19). It's an unashamed 'Ronseal' (does exactly what it says on the tin) approach – simple, consistent and self-explanatory.

But what about the logo? In talking to our visitors, we explored the experience of visiting any one of our sites. We realised people come to explore, enquire, question – and we provide answers, discovery, delight, surprise. This is where the creative genius of Hat-trick Design came in. They represented this process graphically with a question mark and an explanation mark – and combined them to form a symbol with a hint of the Scottish flag (see picture). See in it what you will – some see the flag, and others see a propeller, crossed swords, a scythe, hooks and eyes, even a knife and fork for our café manager.

We like this ambiguity. It helps suggest the variety of objects and museums we have on offer, and is one way of effectively being all things to all people. It also intrigues – and anything that keeps people's attention for a split-second longer is priceless.

We support the 'question and answer' idea in our copy, using questions to engage people's interest and encourage more of a dialogue. For example, we used to have plain banners outside our sites spelling out the name in big letters. This effectively said 'take it or leave it' to

our visitors. Our new banners, and leaflet covers, now invite them in, using close-up shots of our objects and simple questions to pique people's curiosity (see picture).

The logo and questions begin that vital process of engagement – yes, the old textbook mantra AIDA: awareness, interest, desire and action. They help us catch people's attention, get them thinking, and encourage them to look for more.

Alongside the question device, we developed a guide for everyone who writes – or speaks – for National Museums Scotland. This 'verbal identity' was supported by a training workshop, and encourages people to use questions judiciously, in a warm tone of voice. We opted for everyday language, which addresses 'you' not 'the visitor', offers surprising facts rather than hyped adjectives, and employs storytelling devices and even a touch of humour.

We've changed a lot – and it's still going on. We were delighted by the positive response we got when we launched the new brand this time last year – but were very conscious that was the beginning, not the end. Aside from the endless joy of discovering another 'old logo' lurking in hidden corners, we will be working with colleagues on what the brand personality and values mean for the strategic choices we make and how we do things. It's a huge team effort, and couldn't have happened so far without the insights, creativity and hard work of colleagues right across the organisation – and in particular our marketing and design teams. While we do feel 'brand new', we've also stayed true to what we are and want to be. ■



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