

Museum next

Robert Jones is deeply involved in cultural and heritage organisations, and has worked with Tate, the National Trust, Historic Royal Palaces, CABE, the Aldeburgh Festival, the National Portrait Gallery and the National Maritime Museum. In this article, he draws from his extensive knowledge of the museums sector to argue that museums and brands are changing – and to show that even the arts need brands

Brand, in its true sense, is not primarily about name or logo or graphic design or even about marketing. It's what an organisation stands for, through everything it does. So a museum brand should be delivered in particular through its programme. Exhibitions, events, displays from the collection: all should be inspired by the distinctive idea the museum stands for.

Brand is vital for museums – indeed, for any organisation – because it answers the question 'why?' For any given museum, why should the public visit it? Why should the government provide funding? Why should corporations support it? Why should curators join it? Why should anyone care? Why, in the end, should it exist? These 'why?' questions have both an external and an internal dimension.

External presence

Now more than ever, people have huge choice and limited time. Faced with hundreds of options, they need to know quickly how they can relate to any given museum. They need to know why they should give it their time and money, or their creativity or ideas.

This is clearly true where museums are private, as in the USA. But it's increasingly true of state-funded museums too. Museums need to

assert their role in the world.

Every museum faces competition, not just for visitors or funding, but also for influence in the world. The latest ideas in art practice, for instance, are often explored not by the great museums, but by private galleries, auction houses and art fairs. New findings in archaeology may be found first on television. Scientific thinking is spread through websites like TED (www.ted.com). Many museums have put online thousands of pages of information about their collection – pages that no one ever visits, because knowledge is more accessible, and more clearly related to people's interests, elsewhere.

By answering 'why?' questions, brands can help museums assert their importance, increase their presence and unlock their potential.

Internal purpose

Museums are hard institutions to manage. In trying to fulfil their potential, most museums have a huge intellectual energy. They're interested in exploring every possibility that comes along. They want to do everything, but can't. Time and resources are limited. So they need to know what to do and what not to do. And brands can help here too.

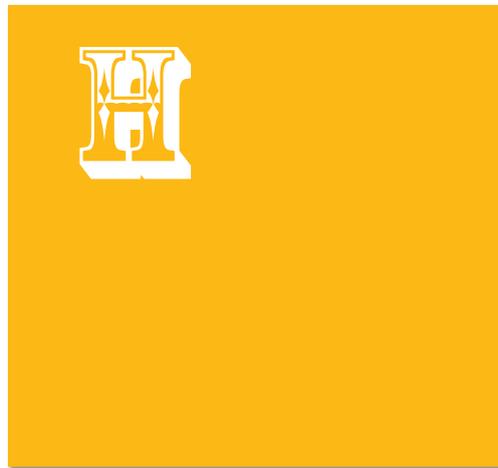
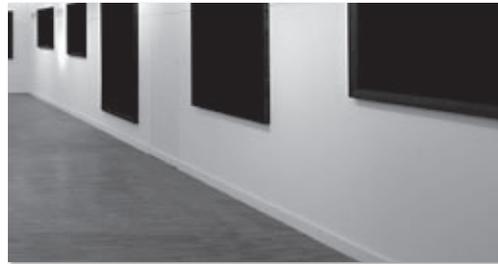
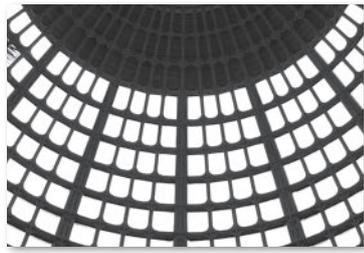
Internally, a brand is a contemporary tool for management. By asserting

what a museum stands for, it suggests what it should and shouldn't do. It's a much subtler management tool than command-and-control (if indeed that's ever been possible with intellectually independent curators).

And by asserting an idea, even an ideal to stand for, it sets standards high. Brand is attitude, the museum's unique take on the world, its climate, its touchstone, its magnetic north. That's what motivates audiences, curators, funders. And it's what drives the progress of ideas.

Historic Royal Palaces, for instance, which runs the Tower of London and Hampton Court Palace, stands for the idea of 'story' – the story of how monarchs and people have shaped society. This idea has given the organisation a huge sense of purpose internally, and has helped prioritise projects and raise aspirations.

But for most museums, brands don't yet have this internal power. For the vast majority, branding is just a marketing tool, with very little influence outside the marketing department. In a survey conducted at the *Communicating the Museum* conference organised by Agenda in Venice in June 2008, almost two-thirds of delegates (65%) said that their brand 'determines the look of stationery, signs and leaflets'. Only 23% said 'it guides our exhibition



programme', and only 17% claimed 'it guides how our staff behave'. Indeed, there's often a wide gap between a museum's external message and its internal reality – a gap that will eventually become unsustainable.

Museums are changing

Brand, properly understood and properly used, is vital to museums. And, as both museums and branding are changing, the two are becoming allies, not enemies.

In museums, three shifts are clearly under way. First, visitors who used just to partake (come and look) now want to take part (comment, contribute, create). Second, museums that used to work mostly on their own now want to collaborate – with other institutions, with neighbours, with media businesses. And third, museums that tended to think in a Western-centric way now want to show and investigate many cultures,

many perspectives, many voices.

This means museums are becoming less like institutions (one point of view, handed down from on high), and more like platforms (places that enable many people and organisations to form and share views).

At the same time, brands are changing, in surprisingly similar ways. They're becoming tools for people (think of big new brands like Google or Wikipedia), links between organisations (like Fairtrade), and multiple in form (even Pepsi and Starbucks now aim to be pluralistic, not the same everywhere). As consumers become creators too – the French call them *consommacteurs* – so brands are much less like marketing gadgets for corporations, much more like platforms for ordinary people to use.

This is the beginning of a new age for the museum: giving people a platform, multiplying organisations together, provoking different

perspectives – all guided by brand as the organisation's magnetic north. But to achieve all this – to be not institutions but places of exchange, not cathedrals but bazaars – museums need a new kind of branding.

Starting from here

The opportunities for museums are huge – to build brands that make them into useful, indeed vital, platforms for people, whether they're visiting in person or online. But there's a long way to go.

In our survey, some delegates were very confident, but over a third felt they hadn't yet pinned down their brand: 38% said 'we have a brand but it's not well defined'. As many as 25% admitted 'we've never done serious work on our brand'.

So the starting point for museums is to do that definition. And, as the role of museums changes, to make that definition work for the future, not just the past.

To communicate with the world, an arts organisation needs first of all to be clear what it stands for. It needs, in other words, a clear brand. That clear brand, or idea, should help guide all the things the organisation does.



The best place to begin is to look inward. A museum can most easily explore what it stands for by asking what it was set up for. The ambitions of its founders – very often, far-sighted Victorians – are often still resonant today. It's worth then investigating the museum's principles and beliefs today, by talking to senior staff, trustees, old hands and new joiners. A good question to ask is: what, as an organisation, are we for? And what are we against? The second question often reveals more than the first, in establishing the museum's role in society.

The second step is to look outwards. With the help of its own experts, commentators, writers, artists, academics, the museum should take a hard look at the world it inhabits, and ask what's wrong with it, what's missing from it? What does society need in the sphere of art, or archaeology, or science, or military history, or conservation, or transport? Why are people interested in these things? What more would they like to know and do? What new concerns and interests are emerging? Perhaps

most importantly, how can you be useful to people? Not in a narrow utilitarian sense, but how can people, by interacting with you, do more of what they want to do?

By combining the inward with the outward view, a museum can start to define its core idea: the thing it uniquely stands for. As the thinking becomes sharper, it's worth testing it, with the best minds inside the museum, and well-informed observers outside it.

Finally – and this is the critical point – the museum must translate this into its programming, into the whole experience its visitors get, before looking at logo or graphic design. The most common mistake in museum branding – and, indeed, in every kind of branding – is to try to change image ahead of reality. A logo can only ever be a flag: what matters more is the ship.

The museum must make the idea live in its displays, exhibitions, events, collection policy, interpretation, education programme – even the things on sale in its shop – before making big new claims in the

outside world. A museum shouldn't try to change its image until it's demonstrably changed its reality.

The museum world needs this new kind of branding. Even the biggest brands need it: what does Guggenheim really stand for? Is Tate ready for the next generation? Dozens of less well-known museums need to make their mark in the world. There's no longer a fight between 'museum' as institutional integrity and 'brand' as commercial exploitation. In the future, both museum and brand will be platforms. ●



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