

Reinventing Manchester Art Gallery

Kim Gowland explains what it takes to create a clear and compelling brand

In 2002, Manchester Art Gallery re-opened following a £35 million expansion and refurbishment project. Before the closure we had carried out extensive research with both visitors and non-visitors and learned that there were real issues with the gallery's brand: there was a perception that Manchester Art Gallery was unfriendly and unwelcoming, and also lacking in prestige. These were issues we aimed to address both by the transformation of the art gallery, but also with a wide-ranging communication strategy, including a new brand identity.

The new gallery was successful beyond our expectations, with over 350,000 visitors in the first year. However, like many arts venues in the same position, by 2005–06 we were experiencing year-on-year declining visitor numbers. At the same time, visitor research and feedback identified ongoing branding and signage issues. Our profile within the city was low and, once they had found us, many of our visitors had problems with orientation around our building. Also, because our communications materials had been designed before the gallery re-opened to the public, they were not sufficiently people-focused: they didn't reflect the range of experiences on offer, or the warmth and creative energy that visitors said they experienced in the venue.

To address these problems, a cross-organisational service improvement group was set up and a funding bid was submitted to DCMS/Wolfson Foundation *Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund*. We also

commissioned London-based consultants Holmes Wood to work with us and, in 2006, work began on the £180,000 project which set out to redefine Manchester Art Gallery's identity, rework our signage and wayfinding schemes, and rethink some of the physical spaces in the building.

As part of the brand identity review and improvements, we revisited our brand values and our communications and how these related to our visitors. In a number of cross-departmental workshops, we reiterated that what we do at Manchester Art Gallery is high quality and accessible, and we always try to do this in a way that is friendly and welcoming, engaging and informative. Generic values perhaps, but essential to positioning us as an audience-focused organisation.

Key to developing the new brand was understanding our audiences. With support from *Renaissance in the Regions*, our museums and galleries have invested heavily in audience research and consultation over recent years, and we now understand much more about the profile and motivations of our visitors. Research consultancy Morris Hargreaves McIntyre has helped us to segment our audiences more meaningfully, not only looking at who our visitors are, but at what influences decisions to visit, what messages motivate visitors, what different kinds of experiences they have and so on.

For example, the highest proportion of visitors to Manchester Art Gallery



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falls into two main segments: **Third Spacers**, who have a social motivation to visit (to have a nice day out) and **Self Developers**, who have a learning motivation. Other segments include **Sensualists**, who have spiritual or emotional motivations, and two family segments: **Kids First Families** (with a social motivation) and **Learning Families** (with a learning motivation). It was important to make sure our brand worked across these visitor segments; as a result, we moved from exhibition/event-led content in our communications to putting the visitor and their motivations at the



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heart of how we communicate with them. Working with Holmes Wood, we developed a series of keywords related to visitor motivations which we used in our new seasonal brochures, floor plans and so on. These words include **Welcome, Enjoy, Relax** (for socially motivated visitors), **Explore** and **Discover** (for learning-motivated visitors), **Catch** (for visitors who want to come and see the latest exhibitions) and **Play** (for families).

One of the most important improvements we instigated was to establish a new tone of voice which was friendlier and more informal, and had energy, warmth and clarity. We employed a copywriter to help us with this, which was invaluable in helping us to move from our previously 'curatorial voice'. This is an example from the opening page in our new seasonal brochure, *Inside Manchester Art Gallery*: 'Welcome. New to our gallery? Hello. Whether you've got 10 minutes, all day, are on your own or have the children with you, come in. You don't have to like everything inside. And you don't need to be an expert to enjoy a visit.' People really responded to this new tone of voice, and we had positive feedback from our visitors, colleagues and other cultural venues.

Alongside this, we created a new photography brief and commissioned high-quality photography showing

visitors enjoying and experiencing the gallery in a range of different ways that related to their motivations. We wanted to see our range of visitors engaging with works of art, and to produce images that were natural, confident and expressive.

Other essential elements of the branding and signage project involved new external banners, which helped passers-by and visitors to identify the building and get a sense of what is going on inside. This new external signage helped to take away some of the intimidation factor that old Victorian buildings like ours often generate. Inside the gallery, Holmes Wood created a new signage and orientation scheme throughout the building.

Since the new branding project, we have seen very definite results. Since 2006–07, visit figures have gone up year on year (from 267,000 in 2005–06 to over 420,000 in 2008–09). Of course, we can't say that this is all to do with branding, as many factors are at play, but we do know that this is a contributing factor. The external banners and signs consistently come at the top of main source of publicity for our visitors, and spontaneous visits went up significantly (by 63%) in the period following the introduction of the new scheme. We also saw a reduction in complaints about orientation and signage, and

more positive feedback about our communications.

Clearly, the development of a brand identity or scheme is just the beginning. It is an ongoing job to work with all our colleagues to maintain consistently high standards in brand and design. We have also made a conscious decision to not develop a separate sub-brand for each exhibition or project campaign, but to lead on the gallery brand identity. We want our visitors to associate with us and trust our values on a long-term basis. I think it is particularly vital to engage with our visitor services colleagues, as they are the ones with the face-to-face experience of visitors, and we involve them in our visitor communications decisions.

For Manchester Art Gallery, there is no doubt that this branding project has been a very worthwhile investment. It has enhanced our relationships with our visitors and stakeholders and our reputation in the cultural sector. In 2007, our new brand won a Gold Award at the Design Effectiveness Awards. It also contributed to us winning the prestigious Large Visitor Attraction Award at the Northwest Tourism Awards 2008. ●

If you want to know more about branding and how you can make changes for your organisation, whatever your budget, Kim Gowland will be speaking at this year's AMA conference, Exploring Artistic Excellence and Public Engagement (Curve Theatre, Leicester, 21–23 July).



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