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Heritage retail: museum and gallery shops

Heritage retailers are having to become increasingly savvy in order to compete with the high street, growing online giants and increasing customer expectations. No longer can a museum or gallery shop take a passive role; and long gone are the days when a shop could be tucked away in a gloomy corner relying on bland postcards and tasteless mugs to swell the coffers. A museum shop now has to take centre stage and be a front facing and vital part of the whole visitor experience. In doing so it can become one of the strongest marketing tools an organisation can possess. Retail is marketing - and bad retailing is bad marketing.

To this effect it is key that museums and galleries take full advantage of all the possible marketing opportunities available to promote their retail offers. It is essential that the retail management team engages with all departments within an organisation and gets total buy in from department heads and their staff, ensuring that the plans for retail are very much part of the overall strategic vision. With budgets being tight, they need to explore every way in which possible cross collaborations could work and think creatively about how they can turn their retail offers into something to shout about!

In today's information hungry society, museum shops can take real advantage of a vast array of marketing tools in order to promote their own unique offers, the aim being to drive traffic to their stores and increase overall profitability. Many of these methods are simple, low or non-cost, easy to implement and just rely on a spot of imagination and creative thinking from the retail team.

The very first marketing tool to be considered is that of the bespoke and branded product that the shop will produce and sell. These are key items and it is vitally important that all the branded merchandise produced and sold is of good design, high quality and real relevance, strongly reflecting the overall message and aesthetic of the museum. Museum logos on mugs, bags, and pads are walking advertisements and they need to give out the right message, or the brand will suffer.

Obvious easy fixes include ensuring that as much shop information is placed on any hard copy marketing material and signage as possible. Information about the shop, its offer, location and special offers needs to be clear, obvious and not lost in the small print at the bottom of a page or the corner of a sign.

Online promotion of the shop is another quick, easy and effective marketing tool. The online shopping page / offer should be easily accessible on a museums website and it should be crossed linked with as many relevant pages and text as possible, giving viewers constant opportunities to click and buy. For the more serious shopper, websites can also host retail micro sites, where detailed information about products, designers and links to the collections can be found.

Social media networks are extremely powerful marketing tools that museum shops can tap into very easily. They offer low cost, low risk platforms for spreading the word and if used imaginatively can reach a wide and engaged audience. A shop Facebook page can be created and invitations posted to join; a blog can be updated weekly with the very latest news on product ranges and tweets can inform followers of special offers, shopping events and seasonal gift ideas. Shops can then start to reward their social media followers with their own exclusive deals.

In order to take real advantage of all marketing opportunities, museum shops should aim to create and promote their own unique selling points (USPs). What makes the store really unique and why would anyone want to shop there? Could the museum's retail space stand alone as a destination shopping outlet and does it stand out from the crowd? Shops need to create their own strong identities and becoming talking points in their own right.

If a shop is doing something interesting, selling amazing products and has unbelievably good offers, then this will be quickly picked up on by customers. Word of mouth is something that should never be underestimated. Customers can snap pictures on their iPhones and instantly upload to Twitter or Facebook, or feature in specialist blogs. Today's customers are clued up and expect consistently exceptional service with a smile. Under promise and over deliver (a free postcard or a discount voucher will do the trick) and your score rating and reputation will rise dramatically.

Some marketing methods are easier to measure and track than others, and these have a very clear and defined impact on the reach of a brand. Some results can be immediately tangible, such as calls about your product ranges from around the globe, editors wanting more information, photographs and copy for special articles. To get an exclusive item of merchandise featured in a high quality design / home magazine is worth its weight in gold and also helps to raise the overall profile of shop. Better still, invite the editor of a glossy or a media sponsor to come in and tag their favourite pieces in the shop.

Museum shops that showcase and sell the work of artists and designers, established and emerging, can greatly benefit from publicising these special collaborations. Producing and selling limited editions and artworks can create ideal marketing opportunities and word can be spread via gallery networks and collectors groups. Museum shop suppliers can also be close allies in the search for publicity and it is always worth asking them to spread the word via their own websites or social media networks.

Heritage retailing has come a long way in the past few years as museums and galleries rely more heavily on their commercial income streams to bolster slashed budgets. Museum shops now have the tools to promote their brands, create a strong reputation and become destinations in their own rights. Retail finally has a voice!

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