Investigating the role of marketing in museum management: Australia's state museums

Dr Kim Lehman
School of Management
University of Tasmania
Locked Bag 1316
Launceston
Tasmania 7250
Australia

Tel: +61 3 6324 3001
Fax: +61 3 6324 3369
Email: Kim.Lehman@utas.edu.au

Investigating the role of marketing in museum management: Australia's state museums

Introduction

Museums have been slow to consider marketing in an operational sense, with the term 'marketing' not appearing in the UK museum sector until the late 1980s (Kawashima, 1997). However, as Rentschler (2002) has noted, over the last 25 years museums have responded to an increased interest in their visitors by incorporating marketing into their organisational strategies. During this period marketing moved from the periphery to take a more central role in museum management. This is not to say that marketing has been universally accepted by the museum profession. There is still some scepticism about the usefulness of marketing in cultural organisations such as museums (Kolb, 2000), and confusion within the profession about the marketing concept itself (Neilson, 2003). Nonetheless, marketing does now appear to be part of the discourse of the museum sector.

Still, the question remains as to the extent marketing plays a *strategic* role in museums. It is possible that marketing is simply seen just as a tactical tool, for communicating in a broad sense, albeit to the wide range of publics with which museums now need to deal (Lehman, 2006). This paper seeks, then, to provide insight into the role of marketing within museum management using the six Australian state museums as case studies (see Table 1).

Case study museums

The Australian state museums were selected on the basis of their role as the pre-eminent cultural institution of their type in their respective state—each is the current iteration of an original Australian colonial museum, which allows for a useful historical perspective, as well as a national census. As a significant cultural institution, each Australian state museum faces pressure from many stakeholders. Importantly, government is one such stakeholder, with government funding making up the greater percentage of each state museum's total funding (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005). The Australian state museums also provide an example of the tension between the potentially conflicting multiple roles within society museums now have (Kotler and Kotler, 2000).

Table 1: Case study museums

Museum name	State	Year of establishment - notes
Australian Museum	New South Wales	1827 - First known as the Colonial Museum
Museum Victoria	Victoria	1857 - First known as the National Museum of Victoria, later as the Museum of Victoria
Queensland Museum	Queensland	1862
South Australian Museum	South Australia	1861 - First known as the South Australian Institute Museum
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery	Tasmania	1852
Western Australia Museum	Western Australia	1891 - First known as the Perth Museum

Methodology

Within a qualitative case study approach the principal method adopted involved extensive interviewing of at least two staff from each of the six case study museums. The aim was to interview the most senior person available with board-level strategic responsibility (either the director or a member of their executive management group) and the most senior person available with an operational marketing position (such as the marketing manager). This occurred in all cases. A semi-structured interviewing approach was then utilised, with the expectation that the views of the interviewee would be more freely expressed given that the format of the interview was flexible and open-ended (Flick, 2002).

Other methods were also used as part of the case study research to allow for the triangulation of data sources (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 2002). Unstructured observation, in the form of field visits, aimed "to record in as much detail as possible… with the aim of developing a narrative account" (Bryman and Bell, 2007: 283). The field visits were supported by the taking of comprehensive notes and photographs, which documented elements of the museum experience. In addition, printed marketing materials relating to the museum in general, or to an exhibition in particular, annual reports and official websites were viewed.

Findings

Analysis of the data resulted in three themes becoming apparent in relation to the interviewees' perception of the importance of marketing. These themes, 'marketing activities', 'organisational structure' and 'the significance of marketing', can be viewed as areas within which it is possible to gauge the role of marketing within museum management.

Marketing activities

There are various forces that have meant not for profit museums now operate in the same fashion as for profit firms, albeit with a social mission. As a consequence, museums also use similar marketing communication tools and adopt similar marketing strategies. With a view to establishing the extent the Australian state museums use such tools and strategies, interviewees were asked to comment on their own museum's marketing activities. Throughout the data the presence of a substantial range of marketing activities—branding, rebranding activities, the various integrating strategies, and marketing to their publics—are an indicator of marketing being seen as integral to the modern museum. In general, the evidence pointed towards a strategic role for marketing, at least in the larger institutions.

Organisational structures

A study by the Smithsonian Institution (2002) concluded that in a museum where marketing was a senior level position—one that participated in strategic planning—that museum was most likely to be successful in attracting large audiences. Where marketing fits into the organisational structures of the case study museums is, then, an important question. The perception of marketing by the museum staff interviewed was indicative of strong support for marketing having a prominent role in museum management. For example, there is now a tendency to include marketing managers in the decision making process. Even when marketing is not at the level of the board or an executive, it does appear as an area that is now part of any consideration of museum policy.

The significance of marketing

The first two themes are relatively practical and grounded in museum actions and actualities. To an extent, interviewees could recount to the researcher facts in answer to questions. Following on from these, though, the interviewees were asked to provide their perception of the overall significance of marketing. In this way this theme developed in such a manner as to 'conclude' with a more philosophical response to the role of marketing. Interviewees

considered their opinion of marketing's worth generally, as well as their perception of how it might fit into their own museum. The result was that interviewees appeared to clearly understand that there was a measure of 'politics' surrounding the role of marketing within the Australian state museums. The data demonstrated that one determinant of the role of marketing within museums is how it is perceived by all the staff, from senior management to those who operationalise marketing strategies.

Conclusions

Overall, the findings indicate that the Australian state museums, though not necessarily always strategically using marketing, are clearly undertaking marketing activities indicative of them having a marketing perspective. However, one overarching concern seen throughout the data relates to stakeholders and publics. All staff seemed to consider the issue of marketing to a range of publics as important. It was, though, the internal publics, including other staff and departments, that appears to be the most crucial in some respects. It was clear that support for marketing throughout the organisation needed to be nurtured, cultivated and grown with appropriate internal strategies.

The evidence suggests that it is vital to have a culture within a museum that will allow marketing to have a *strategic* role, as well as a tactical role. For the most part, such a culture was apparent, though perhaps embryonic, in the museums studied. However, there is no doubt that the absence of a culture that sees marketing as having a strategic role within general museum policy is still a concern in some parts of all the museums. There are, then, considerable implications here for any museum wishing to increase its marketing focus.

References

Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005. *Museums 2003–2004*. 8560.0. Canberra: 27 May.

Bryman, A, Bell, E. 2007. *Business research methods* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press: Oxford.

Easterby-Smith, M, Thorpe, R, Lowe, A. 2002. *Management research: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications, Inc: London.

Flick, U. 2002. *An Introduction to qualitative research*. Sage Publications, Inc: London.

Kawashima, N. 1997. *Museum management in a time of change: Impacts of cultural policy on museums in Britain, 1979–1997*. Working Paper 3. Centre for the Study of Cultural Policy, University of Warwick: November.

Kolb, BM. 2000. *Marketing cultural organisations: New strategies for attracting audiences to classical music, dance, museums, theatre and opera*. Oak Tree Press: Dublin.

Kotler, N, Kotler, P. 2000. Can museums be all things to all people? Missions, goals, and marketing's role. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 18 (3): 271–287.

Lehman, K. 2006. Which constituencies should we market to? A conceptual model of publics for the not for profit museum. *Proceedings of the 2nd Biennial Conference of the Academy of World Business, Marketing and Management Development*, Paris: July.

Neilson, LC. 2003. The development of marketing in the Canadian museum community, 1840–1989. *Journal of Macromarketing*, 23 (1): 16–30.

Rentschler, R. 2002. Museums and performing arts marketing: The age of discovery. *Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 32 (1): 7–14.

Smithsonian Institution 2002. *Marketing exhibitions: Will they come?* Office of Policy & Analysis, Washington DC: June.