

Market'eum 05: Museum Marketing Congress– Bruges, March 14 – 15, 2005

conceptual text

The municipal Museums of Bruges, CultuurNet Vlaanderen and the non-profit organisation Culturele Biografie Vlaanderen are working together on the 14th and 15th of March, 2005 to organise the *Museum Marketing Congress*. In Flemish museums, marketing is still seen as a foul beast, which only very few, armed with swords and axes, are brave enough to take on. Marketing has achieved a mythological status: it is either a damned curse or, completely the opposite, a magical mantra. Museums risk losing their footing in this bi-polar swamp. High time to come ashore and take a neutral look at marketing within the context of museums.

The purpose of the congress is to dissect marketing based on the daily practice of museums. This will provide us with some thematic cross-sections. First of all there is the characteristic aspect: sector-specific marketing which, in this case, will be *museum marketing*. We will mark out this territory in a logical and deductive way based on the more general concept of cultural marketing. What exactly makes cultural marketing different? Is it the characteristics of the 'product' that make it stand out? Or the cultural desires of the public? Is there a distinction to be made depending on the different 'types' of marketing? Perhaps museums are on their way – trying to follow the dogma of people having to "live" everything or trying to compete against other leisure activities– to following rather more commercial marketing processes? It is very likely that most of the current cultural marketing plans meander between both the commercial and non-commercial extremes. In the end, every museum decides on its own marketing strategy taking into account on the one hand the type of museum, its collections, strengths and weaknesses and, on the other, the preferences of the target audience.

If you analyse museums' marketing strategies, you will quickly come across the term '*audience policy*.' After all, aren't the visitors the ideal starting point for every marketing strategy? Only if you know who the visitors really are and what their needs and preferences are, can you meet them as a museum. The main question remains what the museum can "mean" to a visitor. Enquiries among those visitors can help museums to find an answer to this question. The results of such an enquiry also enable the museum to differentiate its activities according to the different segments. If the museum makes the additional investment of carrying out a *market analysis* or market investigation in which environment factors are taken into account it can start building its profile or start positioning itself. In this case, it is crucial to illustrate the added value of the museum. And perhaps this *unique selling point* needn't be as far-fetched as you would think. Despite the trends towards globalisation and mass-production, the pendulum is starting to swing in the opposite direction. People are once again looking for authenticity and originality and their awareness of the cultural heritage in their region is growing. The museums need to pick up on this and use it to their advantage. It's their move.

Marketing is also about *communication*. Solid communication planning is an essential part of any effective marketing strategy. Furthermore, the communication plan should also be an on-going concern and not an ad hoc instrument or contingency plan for temporary exhibits or promotions. A good communication plan should therefore be the result of a structural approach and the starting-point should - again - be the different target groups. Every target group is then linked to a number of means and forms of communication. These can vary from printed articles to electronic means of

communication and the internet. Using your own 'house' style is essential as it not only makes the museum more visible and identifiable, but it also determines the museum's image. In turn, this image may or may not be a correct reflection of the museum's identity. The museum needs to be aware of its real image so it can intervene if it differs from the desired image. Attention to other factors than the visitors should also be given. By this, we are referring to public relations, promotion campaigns, collaboration or consultation with sponsors, governments, (local) organisations and clubs and fellow museums.

But when we talk about marketing, we often hear critical voices. Questioning the efficiency of marketing for example. Because at the end of the day, isn't marketing usually a stopgap or a form of window-dressing? Isn't it better for a museum to focus completely on optimising its daily functioning? Isn't a full array of products and services a sufficient guarantee of success? Furthermore, is there any point to marketing as long as a museum cannot guarantee good quality services?

In addition, we see that in practice marketing is just another responsibility for the person in charge of communication or publicity in the museum. That is, if the museum is lucky enough to be sufficiently large to be able to enlist people for this purpose. What is the purpose of marketing if it is treated in such an isolated manner?

Besides, how often does it happen that museums deflate, both literally and figuratively, as soon as their spectacular promotions come to an end? Such 'stunts' are also often greeted with disbelief as they are too "un-museum-like." In complete desperation some museums try to trade in their stuffy and antique image for a flashier one. But is this the right way to go? How far can a museum go without losing its character?

And doesn't marketing just boil down to offering the perfect excuse to use superlatives? Should a museum try to be the 'best' and offer the 'most'? Is this feasible? Should you really try to be the 'biggest'? When are investments no longer off set by the results they generate?

The congress wants to deal with all these themes and questions and explore them more deeply to foster and liven up the discussions between participants. However, the organisers expect unanimity about one aspect at least. Marketing cannot be described in terms of rules or a manual or a step plan. This does not mean however that you can go about marketing willy-nilly: reflection is still a prerequisite. The congress wants to give the initial impulse by inviting the participants to do the same...

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