

Using Cultural And Other Relevant Images To Improve Museum Finances, Lessons From Past Experience

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INTRODUCTION

As museums struggle to meet their budget needs, each year, one wonders at times, whether their roles are well appreciated by society. In most cases, they are normally not priority institutions for funding, though somehow they have continued to survive.

This conference carries an appropriate theme, which sets one's mind to think as to how to survive in hard times. This discussion attempts to share some knowledge on potential possibilities of improving revenue sources. It is not the ultimate prescription for improving revenue sources. Such an achievement would be an aggregate of several marketing factors that will generate adequate interest for the public to give respective museums the desired support and thereby improve their revenue sources. In some cases it requires a full-time staff to do marketing and fundraising. This discussion is limited to efforts that can be made in improving gift shop souvenirs. Other avenues are mentioned in passing, but require separate discussions on how they can be improved using available tools.

SOURCES OF FUNDING

Museum by nature are non-profit making institutions, but need funding to operate and satisfy museum service demands. Most Museums experience budget deficits and cuts year in and year out. These in turn create operational problems as some activities end up being shelved due to lack of funding. This scenario may be common to all of us.

Typical Museum Revenue Sources

Most of our museums obtain their major funding from annual grants, but they also raise additional funding depending on their ability and clientele. Additionally, revenue comes as Entrance Fees, Coffee Shop/Restaurant, Gift Shop, Donations and Conference/Office space lease.

Entrance fees may not apply in certain circumstances but where applicable is highly dependent on the number of visitors. As a result, it improves with increase in visitor numbers. This may be due to new exhibits, special events, etc.

The coffee shop/restaurant and refreshment centres sell mainly an assortment of refreshments and food to visitors depending on the museum ability to invest and the visitor demand.

On the other hand, gift shops are marketing avenues for the museum. We have, overtime, used these mainly to sell some of our contemporary material culture that a community produces and in some cases form the bulk of our exhibition artefacts. These often have practical home use. They include stools, baskets, axes, drums, etc.

Other sources such as conference and office space rent equally depend on the museum marketing ability to advertise the available space and earn some money for specific periods. Donations are normally windfall income for any museum. Specific donations may however not be windfall income as they be for a particular project.

FUNDRAISING SOURCES

Fundraising on its own requires a particular target for a respective activity or project, such as putting up a new exhibition, infrastructure improvement, etc. The amount required is normally outside the budget and/or may take a while to realise such a project.

Activities for raising funds may be varied, they will include putting extra efforts such as money- making activities. Above all it may include approaching co-operating partners with similar interests and mission for a specific donation. This may

involve writing project proposals to respective institutions.

USING IMAGES AS REVENUE SOURCES

Identity images are important, as they carry a mark of being or belonging. Such images may be culturally linked, or may relate to a particular geographical location. In this case they may also be national images. They could also be natural images such as landscapes, plants and animals of the area.

As observed in commerce practice, corporate images are used in marketing and promoting brands of goods or services that a company may be involved in. Products with such images are also ideal gifts to the clientele for occasions or in recognition of their patronage.

Museums in whatever locality they may be have access to a number of images by way of being heritage institutions. Other promotion images may be obtained directly from collections, while others will be a community identity. Such images are overlooked by most museums and yet they mean much more as souvenirs to a visitor because they carry a particular sentiment for one to remember a particular place and visit. Like cultural materials they can be converted into products, which have functional use.

The Process

The process of making such revenue improvements is based on the premise that a museum has a gift shop and a management capacity to bring meaningful profits, like in any business investment.

Initially the museum management needs to identify a designer (who is creative) to make sketches and in some cases take pictures of identified images. These can then be used on various product possibilities. This in itself should be a promotion collections reservoir.

When the design collection is ready it can be tested on various products such as T-shirts, ceramics, pens, post cards, etc. Each of these products will require a design that carries the right proportions for the final producer to use. Finally, the various images/motifs will be linked to respective products and committed to the production process.

The production process has many vendors. Here one has to identify the various products so that a production commitment can be made. Product vendors include stationary printers who can be used to make items like post cards and other stationary products.

Textile printers will print textile materials with the desired images. The list of vendors is long and is up to the museum management to identify its sources.

PUBLICATIONS

Museums are centres of knowledge wherever they may be located. They have an advantage in that they can turn this wealth of knowledge into publications. Regular publications can be an image on their own for the museum and may range from subjects that the museum operates. These should also be additional to the regular academic publications submitted to journals.

PAST LESSONS

Past lessons from a workshop organised by the Swedish African Museums Programme (SAMP) in November 1996 at the Livingstone Museum, showed that from an ethnographic collection alone comes a number of design possibilities. The design made during the workshop were mainly replicas of traditional motifs and designs, with a strong bias for use in textile production. A number of textile products were later made.

The second lesson was an exchange programme with the Denver Science Museum and Moto Moto Museum, which revealed even a wider range of possibilities for a museum shop. The indication was clear that one has a wide horizon in which to explore. However, despite such valuable lessons, the process is still pending and unexplored.

CONSTRAINTS

As indicated above, the process is a chain of activities and depends on the various capacities of a museum and the available vendors. However, we live in a global village, such that vendors need not necessarily be within the country of the museum locality. They can be sources from elsewhere. For example, a museum in the United States of America may seek for a Publisher in Hong Kong, or Malaysia because it is cost effective. Similarly, services of a Designer can be hired if the museum does not have the staff post on its establishment.

Capital investment may be a major constraint as capital funding is required to start the process. On the other hand, such an investment may be a cause to fundraise in order to start the initiative.

CONCLUSION

Improving museum revenue sources requires a set of strategies and a manpower base with the right capacity. It is more complex than the above discussion attempts. As mentioned earlier it is an aggregate of factors, working either in tandem or individually. Since factors that may affect one avenue may differ from each source, strategies need to be developed for each revenue source. Ultimately, museums deal with the public. It is a question of what can be available as an additional offer in a particular avenue for the public to spend an extra amount.

In the case of direct fundraising, strategies are also required, so as to identify institutions or individuals with a particular sympathy to your museum cause, Marketing and public relations, may in each case be useful tools for achieving the desired goals.

ICME - International Committee for Museums and Collections of Ethnography

<http://icom.museum/icme>

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