Museum marketing and virtual museums in 21st century: Can museums survive without it?

Abstract

Museum marketing is a dynamic and complex field, usually (mistakenly) considered less attractive to researchers. The goal of this paper is to discuss current role of marketing in museums and market trends which are affecting their business (new visitor needs, search for intelligent fun, and new technologies - virtual museums) in the context of a transitional market. The results of an exploratory qualitative research, conducted in 17 Croatian museums show that museum professionals have positive opinions about marketing although they still consider it as tactical and not as strategic tool. Moreover, they perceive virtual museums only as extensions of existing physical museums. Findings provide a valuable insight to arts marketing academics and professionals about changes in museum marketing and help to shape (at least) one of the missing parts of marketing museum picture.

Keywords: *arts marketing, museums, virtual museums*

1. Introduction

The connection between museums and marketing begins in the late 1970s. Since then museum marketing has had everything but an easy path. "What many in museums feared, however, is that in pursuing a larger market they will be forced to temper with their product in a way that compromises its artistic integrity" (Rentschler, 2007, p. 12). Besides, there were historically rooted prejudices between museums and marketing. One of the biggest was and still is, to consider marketing only as museum promotion (Šola, 2001).

The main reason why the field has to be more explored lies in the fact that "marketing in museum is in a period of major reassessment" (Rentschler, 2007, p. 12). Also, there are "within the international academy many scholars outside of arts marketing, who have a stake in theorization of art and its relation with the market. It is important that arts marketing, and indeed mainstream marketing scholars should listen what they have to say" (O'Reilly, 2011, p. 26).

Visitors demand and want more and more fulfilling experiences. They can choose between different types of education and/or entertainment services, between new and old media, and between physical and virtual environment. That is why the role of a museums and of visitors as well, have changed significantly. Museums are places of intelligent entertainment. Successful museums throughout the world have recognized important changes in their environment and adapted to them, without compromising their mission (i.e. heritage preservation).

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First we discuss theoretical contributions about the role of marketing in museums and about trends affecting their business, in order to better understand contemporary role of marketing in museums and the need for the so called "fresh approach". Secondly, we focus on researching the role of marketing in Croatian museums and offer an insight into the current state of practice in a context of a transitional market.

After the introduction, relevant literature is presented in the second section. The third section is dedicated to research methodology and findings of an exploratory qualitative research of the phenomena. Finally, conclusions, research limitations and recommendations are presented.

2. Marketing between museums mission and reality

2.1. Contemporary role of marketing in museums

Much of the literature in the 1980s and early 1990s dealt with marketing in museums as the tactics, as opposed to strategic issues (McLean, 1995). Rentschler (2002) has analyzed arts marketing articles published over 25 years and identified three important periods (The Foundation (1975-1984), The Professionalization (1985-1994) and the Discovery (1995-2000)) with different marketing roles. As a part of "the Broadening of Marketing Movement", prophesied and encouraged by Kotler and Levy (from 1969), cultural marketing finally became an important part of the history of Marketing thought (Kotler, 2005). "The relationship between art and the market is increasingly complex and dynamic, requiring a transformation in the way the arts are marketed" (O'Reilly & Kerrigan, 2010, p. i). Research shows that the development of arts marketing and management field has been modestly analyzed (Rentschler & Kirchner, 2012). O'Reilly (2011) tried to visually map the arts marketing field, and discovered its multidisciplinary nature. Therefore he is advocating a "fresh approach" to arts marketing.

The role of museums has changed significantly. According to Rentschler (2007), the shift went from the functional definition, where museums were object-based and focused on

acquisition, conservation, communication and exhibition of art (for the purpose of education), to purposive definition, which was people-based (for enjoyment and learning). The shift was supported and promoted by the The International Council of Museums (ICOM), which since its creation in 1946, updates the museum definition in accordance with the realities of the global museum community (ICOM, 2014).

According to Mencarelli, Marteaux and Pulh (2010) museums were for a long time considered to belong to culture in the most classical sense. In the light of recent marketing management actions, the relationship between museum and visitors has changed, although changes are not always obvious and clear. In arts marketing literature (e.g. McLean, 1995; Gilmore & Rentschler, 2002; Kotler, Kotler & Kotler, 2008), museums are considered as distinctive and unique service organizations that offer and provide experiences. As the heritage sector has been very slow to recognize the paradigm shift (to services and experiences), some resistance from funding bodies, conservation groups, local and national governments can exist (Conway & Leighton, 2012).

Alcaraz, Hume and Mort (2009) emphasize the existence of great debate on the scope and practices of museums in the 21st century. Museums are shifting toward the need for increased financial returns, which puts a lot of pressure on their everyday business. They operate and compete with "aquariums for family outings and with books and educational TV for art appreciation, and with movies and restaurants as places to socialize" (Andreasen & Kotler, 2002, p. 49); which makes it harder to attract the attention and interest of modern consumers. "Today's consumers are increasingly demanding and discerning, not only wanting mutually beneficial relationship and excellent goods and services, but also positive experiences" (Conway & Leighton, 2012, p. 35). That's why "traditional museums are gradually shifting toward the search for intelligent entertainment, as they are looking for the tools to make visits more of an "experience"" (Mencarelly & Pulh, 2012, p. 149).

However, Lagier and DeBarnier (2013) have found that museum experts believe how their mission still is, primarily, conservation (traditional and historical museum mission). Yah and Lin (2005) report how museum directors are not always ready to enable visiting museum as a comfortable and pleasant experience. So, dilemmas from the 1990s still exist. As a leading author in the field, McLean (1995, p. 614) stated: "A revolution is occurring in terms of attitude. Now museums need guidance, expertise, and commitment to revolutionize their marketing".

2.2. Museums, new technologies & current trends

Recent AECOM Report (2013) shows that museum visits worldwide are (slowly) increasing, after the global economic recession. Some countries have recognized the potential and the value of (re)investing in (new) museums, because there is a strong and documented connection between the success of arts and culture, and regional economic success. European museums are the most visited, followed by the American ones. China plans to establish 1,000 new museums, and by 2020, total museum attendance is projected to be 1 billion (AECOM, 2012). It is not hard to predict that the battle for the visitors in coming years is going to get a new dimension and really require some "fresh approach".

In comparison to physical museums that exist for more than three centuries, virtual ones are at the beginning stage of their development. As reported by Styliani, Fotis, Kostas, and Petros (2009), virtual museums are developing by means of innovative methods and tools and by taking advantage of the potential of the Web. They are also called on-line museums, electronic museums, hypermuseums, digital museums, cyber museums or Web-museums. Schweibenz (2004) claims how the idea behind this phenomenon is to build a digital extension of the museum on the Internet. Virtual museum (as new technologies) "helped to

make culture more accessible to mass audience, and on the other hand it started the process of desacralization of the museum institution, which would expand its boundaries across the modern entertainment industry" (Carrozzino & Bergamasco, 2010, p. 452) Also, consumers are turning to time-saving arrangements which virtual museums are ready to meet.

The total number of virtual museums in the world is yet unknown. Many museums offer some kind of "their version" of virtual museums (via Web, DVD etc.). Furthermore, Google has its own version, Google Art Project, and has "partnered with hundreds of museums, cultural institutions, and archives to host the worlds cultural treasures online" (Google Cultural Institute, 2014). Hume and Mills (2011, p. 287) emphasize the importance of finding the answer to the question: "Is the virtual museum leaving the physical museum virtually empty or is it enabling the increase in on site visitation?".

Among the numerous changes, convergence of education and entertainment in one trend, called edutainment is becoming more influential. Addis (2005, p. 730) states: "Along with the rise of edutainment, the application of new technologies to the world of arts and culture is quickly spreading". Mencarelli and Pulh (2012) point to the existing fear - if museums become fun and interactive, entertaining and accessible, they will become indistinctive from places of entertainment. In their research, Yeh and Lin (2005, p. 283) discovered that museum directors believe how virtual museum is "like a preview that provides general information and exhibition schedules to encourage visitors to visit the museum in person". It still remains quite unknown what museum professionals think about these trends, i.e. are they for or against the new technologies in museums? How they predict the future of museums according to these new conditions?

3. Research on museum professionals' opinions about marketing and new market trends

In line with the presented theoretical frame and identified lack of research on museum marketing (in general and especially in the context of transitional markets), an exploratory research was conducted in order to unveil contemporary museum marketing issues and to help marketing academicians and practitioners to get a better understanding of of the dynamics of the field.

Until today, only one study aimed to discover the opinions regarding marketing among museum professionals was conducted in the Republic of Croatia (Government of the Republic of Croatia, 2003). When it comes to researching the importance of new technologies and trends, no study was found. Therefore, two field research goals were set: to investigate the current role of marketing in Croatian museums, and to explore opinions of museum professionals about the emergence, development end possible influence of new technologies and trends (virtual museums, internet and edutainment). Based on research goals, two research questions are posed:

RQ1: "What is the role of marketing in Croatian museums?"
RQ2: "How virtual museums, internet and new technologies are changing museums business in 21ˢᵗ century?

3.1. Methodology

An exploratory qualitative research was carried out. Official data from Report of Museum Visits (2012) was obtained from Museum Documentation Center and used for the purpose of sampling. Out of 147 active museums in Croatia, a convenient sample of 17 museums located in the capital city of Zagreb, was chosen. Ten out of 17 museums from the sample are among 50 most visited museums in Croatia. All 17 museums from the sample together accounted for approx. 30% of total number of visits to Croatian museums in 2011.

Although the interviewing method relies heavily on the opinions, perspectives and recollections of respondents, it allows an in-depth examination of phenomena (Snow & Thomas, 1994). To obtain the data, combined approach of open-ended and structured interviews was chosen. The aim was to interview marketing managers (if an employee had that job description) or museum directors. Finally, 7 museum marketing managers and 10 museum directors were interviewed. Each interview consisted of two parts. The first set of questions was related to the role of marketing in museums and the second to new technologies and trends. Also, respondents were free to initiate their own topics. All the interviews were recorded and then transcribed for further analysis. The interviews lasted at average for an hour. Additional information was collected through internet sources and internal materials. The field research was conducted in September and October of 2013.

3.2. Results

In relation to the *RQ1*, respondents were asked a series of questions regarding marketing, museums mission, museums orientation (towards objects or visitors), and were asked to provide information about their formal education, too.

Marketing is positively perceived among respondents, although they think how it is not always applicable in museums. It is still dominantly perceived as a museum promotion (i.e. marketing communication - advertising, PR). Additionally, respondents see marketing's role as the way to collect funds and to earn money. Sometimes, they think of marketing as of sales (of products and/or souvenirs). All respondents agree that museums today need marketing;*"Today it is necessary. We must say that in the past that wasn't so".*

Furthermore, respondents were asked to compare the mission of museum they work for with the ICOM's definition. Their answers show that museums are equally oriented towards objects and visitors, explaining that "*it is inseparable one without the other*" and *"it is both important"*. But, not all the respondents admit that this is the reality. There are still conflicting opinions among museum professionals, within museums and between museums, regarding museum's mission and its purpose. In fact, some museums are still objects oriented, even though, respondents say they are visitors oriented (or equally oriented toward objects and visitors). According to one respondent, in the museum where he works, they are not willing to make compromises between objects and visitors, but they are forced to make them because of their visitors. The decision about museum orientation is not an easy one. Some respondents obviously struggle with the idea of abandoning the "full" objects orientation. Some probably do not want to admit the old fashioned toward objects orientation, knowing the current trends and requirements.

None of the respondents had formal marketing education (academic degree in marketing), and only 7 had some kind of informal education (seminar, short courses and alike). The biggest problem is, according to respondents' opinions, that museums often do not have a person in charge of museum's marketing, and that every employee has to do any job in museum according to the museums' needs. If there is a marketing person, he/she has multiple roles and jobs at the same time. This is due to a serious lack of financial resources. In museums they wish to have a person dedicated to marketing alone, but that person, as pointed out by the respondents, should also know much about arts and culture (preferably having two educations, in marketing and arts).

All the respondents agree that investing in marketing is important for the achievement of good and desirable business results. Some believe that investing in marketing is just an ideal situation they should have, but is not an existing option and museum reality. Surprisingly, several respondents (museum directors) think that they do not perform any marketing activity in the museum.

In the second part of the interviews, aimed at answering the *RQ2*, respondents were asked to express their opinions regarding new technologies in museums. They all agreed that museums today cannot neglect new technologies and be successful at the same time. Respondents consider new technologies as important in every part of museums' business - for communication with visitors, providing information about museum, buying tickets and for administrative tasks. *"New ways of exhibiting simply demand new technologies, they are necessary because they increase attractiveness of an exhibition."*

Majority of respondents support the idea of virtual museums and projects like Google Art Project, showing more or less enthusiasm regarding this matter. Only few are against, because of the lack of physical contact with the art in virtual museums. However, respondents are concerned about the quality of virtual exhibitions. Even though they support it as idea, respondents believe that virtual museums cannot and will not replace physical museums for several important reasons, *"we will never have the same sensation in virtual museums as in physical one"*. *"Objects have a soul, which only can be sensed in physical world."* From the point of view of the majority of respondents*,* new trend of edutainment is (extremely) undesirable, even bad for museums. *"It's somehow vulgar to me and I am starting to think it's a way of pandering"*. *It's a horror, trying to make everything fun, is horror to me." This will lead to destruction of all museums activities"*. Respondents warn about the necessity of making limits and finding a balance between museums, education and fun. Minority believes that edutainment is positive for museums, and it can be used for getting closer to visitors.

4. Conclusions, research limitations and recommendations

This paper makes two contributions to the field. First, it offers a concise and critical overview of current state of museum marketing as an academic discipline, pointing to the new environment and trends affecting museum business. Second the study is conducted in a transitional market (Croatia), where research on museum marketing (and arts marketing as a whole) is rather neglected.

In answering *RQ1* we can conclude that museum professionals have positive opinions about marketing although they still think of marketing as of business tactics, and not as of a museum strategy (probably, due to the lack of formal education and some historical reasons). Museum professionals are willing to invest in marketing, but they are often limited with number of constraints, like personnel, finance and even physical environment. Regarding *RQ2*, virtual museums are perceived as only extensions of existing museums, not trying to replace physical ones. Additionally, virtual museums are assessed to be useful for visitors and museum professionals. Although edutainment is not desirable, it is today's reality. The question is, can it be neglected and what would be the cost of ignoring these new market demands?

It is important to consider results from the context of research limitations - intentional, convenience sample and perspective of one employee of the museum (marketing manager or director of the museum). Although not generalizable, results are indicative. Future academic research is needed and could be directed, among other topics, toward e.g. research of visitors' opinions and motivations to a particular choice of museum (physical and virtual). Museum professionals should listen to their visitors, follow trends, but without compromising their mission and values. They need to invest in additional (marketing) education, and employ a marketing professional who can build relationship between museums and visitors.

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