

Marketing Strategy for Museums

A Practical Guide

Christina Lister

Routledge Guides to Practice in Museums, Galleries and Heritage



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Marketing Strategy for Museums is a practical guide to developing and delivering marketing that supports museums' missions and goals. Explaining how museums can be strategic and proactive in their approach, it also shows how to make effective decisions with limited resources.

Presenting examples from a range of museums around the world, the author positions marketing as a vital function that aims to build mutually beneficial relationships between museums and their audiences – both existing and new – and ensure museums are relevant and viable. Breaking down key marketing models, Lister shows how they can be applied to museums in a meaningful way. She also lays out a step-by-step framework for developing a museum's marketing strategy and for creating marketing campaigns, which can be scaled up or down. Readers will also be encouraged to reflect on topics such as sustainable marketing, ethical marketing, and accessible and inclusive marketing.

Marketing Strategy for Museums provides an accessible guide that seeks to demystify marketing and boost the confidence of those responsible for planning and delivering marketing in museums. It is aimed at people working in museums of all types and sizes and will also be relevant to students of museum and heritage studies.

Christina Lister is a marketing consultant with over 20 years of experience working in marketing, audience development, and PR in a range of agency, in-house, and consultancy roles. Her experience has included international marketing for a global skincare brand as well as PR and communications for a range of leisure, public sector, tourism, and not-for-profit organisations. Over the past 15 years, Christina has specialised in developing marketing strategies, facilitating workshops, running training, and providing mentoring for cultural and heritage organisations including museums, libraries, archives, festivals, arts centres, and theatres. She has worked extensively with larger museums and sector support organisations such as the Museum of London, the Arts Marketing Association, and the Association of Independent Museums, as well as many smaller and independent museums including Jane Austen's House and the Museum of Cambridge. She is a strategic thinker with an insight-driven approach, and her work has won a range of marketing and PR awards. She is passionate about championing audiences, and passionate about the impact that effective and meaningful marketing and audience development can have.

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Contents

<i>List of figures and tables</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>x</i>
Introduction	1
PART I	
Marketing as a bridge	5
1 Museums	7
2 Marketing	18
3 Audiences	29
PART II	
Marketing strategy in practice	43
4 Managing and implementing marketing	45
5 Developing a museum marketing strategy	52
5a Situational analysis: Where are we now?	57
5b Goals and objectives: Where are we going?	69
5c Target audiences: Whom do we want to reach?	75
5d Strategy and approach: How will we get there?	86
5e Tactics and action plan: What are we going to do to get there?	98
5f Resources: What will it cost?	106

5g Monitoring and evaluation: How will we know if we've got there?	113
6 Planning and delivering a marketing campaign	125
PART III	
Deeper dives	135
7 Branding	137
8 Pricing	146
9 Communication channels	159
10 Messaging	169
11 Accessible and inclusive marketing	177
12 Ethical marketing	190
<i>Bibliography</i>	206
<i>Index</i>	213

Figures and Tables

Figures

2.1	An illustration highlighting the more visible and behind-the-scenes elements of marketing	19
5b.1	An example audience journey	71
5d.1	An example product life cycle	89
5d.2	An example positioning map	96
6.1	A billboard from the Natural History Museum's "Come to life" campaign	132
6.2	Posters from the Natural History Museum's "Come to life" campaign	132
7.1	The logo of the Museum of East Anglian Life	142
7.2	The logo of the Food Museum	143

Tables

1.1	How the Natural History Museum's mission and vision statements have changed between 2009 and 2023	14
5a.1	Comparing a museum's offer with competitors	64
5a.2	An example STEEPLE analysis	66
5a.3	An example SWOT analysis	67
5b.1	Examples of goals, objectives, and KPIs	73
5c.1	Factors affecting the choice of target audiences	77
5d.1	An example TOWS analysis	87
5d.2	An example product/audience grid	88
5d.3	An example Ansoff Matrix	91
5d.4	An example Dual Bottom Line Matrix	93
5g.1	Example outputs and outcomes	115
6.1	The stages, channels, and KPIs of an example sales funnel	129
9.1	A template example audience journey grid	164

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Introduction

Marketing and museums have many similarities. They are multilayered and complex, serving different stakeholders and purposes. They have uncomfortable elements in parts of their histories. They make significant contributions to the economy. They are dynamic and evolve proactively, as well as reactively out of necessity as society and their environment changes. They can provoke strong responses – both have their devotees and critics – but they also face ambivalence and misunderstanding. Combine the two marketing and museums, and we have the basis of what I hope will be an interesting and valuable book.

The aims of this book

This book is a practical guide to developing and delivering museum marketing. It aims to demystify marketing and advocate for its fundamental role in museum practice, supporting a museum's overall purpose and organisational goals, and building mutually beneficial relationships between museums and their audiences. The book explores how museums can position and market themselves successfully to stand out in a crowded marketplace and how they can identify, reach, and connect with audiences. It breaks down key marketing models, showing how they can be applied to museums in an accessible and meaningful way, alongside examples from a broad range of museums.

I hope this book will support museums to become more strategic and proactive in their marketing and ultimately, as a result, more relevant and sustainable. I hope it will boost the confidence of those responsible for planning and delivering marketing activities, enabling them to make effective decisions on how to use limited resources. And I hope it will help people enjoy the process. This book answers questions I am frequently asked as a consultant and trainer, including:

- How can marketing most effectively support our museum's overall mission?
- How do we write a marketing strategy?
- What's the best way of planning a marketing campaign?
- How do we decide which audiences to target?

2 *Introduction*

- How can I advocate for the role of marketing within our museum to senior managers and trustees?
- How do we decide which communication channels to use?
- How can we ensure that our marketing is in line with our museum's values?

This book is not a magic wand that will deliver effortless wins overnight, and since technology and communication platforms evolve so quickly, this book is also not the best place to provide a detailed breakdown of how to use them – the latest guidance and best practice can be found online. Instead, the book proposes principles, ideas, frameworks, and practical inspiring examples, which I hope will encourage museums to reflect and develop marketing more strategically, cohesively, and ethically, to support their relevance and viability in the long term.

Who is this book for?

I've written this book for anyone working in, studying, or simply interested in learning more about museum marketing and the role it plays within and for museums. This includes staff, trustees, and volunteers, with varying levels of involvement in, experience of, and responsibility for marketing. Whilst marketing budgets, skills, and capacity vary enormously between museums, the processes and principles set out in the book have broad relevance and tailored to different museums' needs. The book's mix of content may introduce you to some topics and boost your existing knowledge of others; it may develop or reframe your thinking around marketing; and it could provide broader perspectives and ideas.

Using this book

This book is intended as a digestible reference guide that can frequently be dipped into, as well as a book that can be read from cover to cover. I'd love for this book to act as your companion, guiding you as you undertake or study museum marketing; as a source of encouragement, inspiring you with a broad range of case studies from museums across the globe; as a prompt, opening your eyes to different marketing tools and models you can apply; and as accountability, providing you with cues to keep questioning, exploring, experimenting, and refining what you do.

This is not an encyclopaedic guide to museum marketing, but my thoughts, experiences, and perspectives to contribute to the conversation. Whilst there's not a one-size-fits-all solution, principles and frameworks presented can be scaled up or down depending on the scope, budget, and resources you have available. Although the book focuses on museums, much of its content is also applicable to other heritage and cultural organisations, such as galleries and heritage sites.

I present some core marketing models that are relevant and valuable to museums, as well as approaches and exercises that I have developed and used over the years. I take a holistic and strategic view of marketing, far beyond

how marketing has often been pigeonholed as a tactical – not strategic – activity within museums, synonymous with publicity. There may also be elements of the book that you feel veer into audience development, income generation, visitor experience, or other fields, depending on your view of those functions and how marketing sits alongside them within your museum.

Part I features three core chapters that provide context – on museums, marketing, and audiences, which the rest of the book builds on. These chapters help define and anchor these terms, touching on their evolution and how they interrelate.

Part II looks at marketing strategy in practice: managing and implementing marketing in a museum and what marketing functions can look like; a step-by-step process on how to develop a marketing strategy, with individual chapters on each step; and a chapter on developing marketing campaigns, with examples throughout and several key marketing models explained.

Part III covers a more in-depth look at some of the topics featured in Parts I and II, allowing a deeper dive into these fundamental areas. They cover branding, pricing, communication channels, messaging, accessible and inclusive marketing, and ethical marketing. These standalone chapters can be read in any order depending on your interests and priorities.

By providing workshop ideas and questions throughout, I hope the book will encourage critical thinking and reflection. At the end of each chapter or theme, I suggest a few texts for readers who would like to delve into the subject in more detail. Beyond that, chapter reference lists and the bibliography at the end of the book contain a wealth of additional sources to explore, including many that are free to access.

This book draws on my 20 years of experience working in marketing, PR, and audience development across in-house, agency, and consultancy roles, including 15 years in the museums, heritage, and culture sectors. Spending the last 10 years as a consultant has given me an interesting perspective as a part-outsider and part-cross-pollinator, training representatives from hundreds of organisations, discovering the similarities and nuances of the challenges and opportunities they face, and absorbing and sharing lessons from them.

Most of the research I draw on – in particular around the history of museums and on audiences – is from Europe and the USA for brevity and because of the volume of available data that I could access freely and in English. But I have included examples and case studies from a range of museums (in terms of subjects, ownership, governance, location, budgets) from across the world. Whilst you will undoubtedly have heard of some of them, it was important to me to ensure that examples didn't just come from the usual suspects and household names. So many other museums are also doing excellent marketing, with insights that deserve to be shared. A huge and heartfelt thank you to everyone who took the time to share their experiences and work so generously with me, whether as part of background research or for inclusion in the book. Our conversations were a highlight of my research, and these contributions have unquestionably enriched both my practice and this book.



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Part I

Marketing as a bridge



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1 Museums

Introduction

Museum is an umbrella term that covers a huge variety of organisations, with vastly different funding sources and levels, governance, purposes, locations, facilities, programming, audiences, and more. They may be founded or run by national, regional, or local governments or universities; be independent, run by a charitable trust, or privately owned; and there are differences in the proportion of each type of museum in different countries across the world. Subject matters cover a rich spectrum – to give just a few examples to show the breadth, museums may:

- Have national collections such as the National Museum of Slovenia.
- Cover local areas or regions such as the Museum of Brisbane, Australia.
- Share the story of one person like Museo Frida Kahlo, Mexico.
- Be narrative-based, such as the Apartheid Museum in South Africa.
- Be community-centred, as is, for example, Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History, USA.
- Operate as multisite organisations like Tate (Tate Modern and Tate Britain in London, Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives in the UK).
- Be quirky or on a specialist subject like The Museum of Miniature Books, Azerbaijan.
- Be outdoor museums such as the Estonian Open Air Museum.
- Be set by historic sites like the Petra Museum in Jordan.
- Be activist museums such as The Vagina Museum, UK.

More recent incarnations include digital-only museums such as Sweden's Internet Museum, and the Museum of Broken Relationships, a global crowd-sourced project that started as a temporary travelling exhibition and now also has permanent homes in Zagreb, Croatia, and Los Angeles, USA.

At one end of the spectrum, national museums often have enormous name recognition, multimillion-pound funding, hundreds of staff members, millions of visitors, and feature in top 10 lists of countries' visitor attractions. They have hero star objects, stage high-profile sold-out blockbuster exhibitions, provide

access to extensive and professional digital collections, sell huge ranges of merchandise, and have several catering outfits. At the other end of the spectrum, there are small, lesser-known museums run by passionate and knowledgeable volunteers, operating on tiny budgets, open only a few hours a week and closed during their winter season. They need *more* visitors as opposed to needing to consider crowd-control measures. And of course, there are countless museums that lie somewhere in between.

Whilst all museums are unique, many face similar challenges, such as attracting funding; balancing their many roles; increasing visitor numbers; broadening access; staying (or becoming) relevant; making decisions on repatriation and restitution; making choices about contemporary collecting; and satisfying and communicating with a huge range of stakeholders such as staff, volunteers, trustees, donors, visitors, funding bodies, national government, local government, local business organisations, tourist boards, and media.

This chapter begins with perceptions and definitions of museums, touching on their history and evolving purpose. It also looks at museum products, examines mission and vision statements, and finishes by summarising the implications of these discussions for museum marketing.

Perceptions of museums

There can be a difference between how people *in* the sector view and value museums compared with those *outside* of it – whether they are politicians, philanthropists, schoolchildren, the local community, or tourists. For example, members of the public are unlikely to know as much about the differences between an accredited and a non-accredited museum. Many of the issues that occupy the sector – and we tie ourselves in knots over – never reach public consciousness (with some exceptions, such as high-profile repatriation debates and sponsorship controversies). Some people may be ambivalent towards museums while for others, visiting is a regular and positive experience.

Trust in museums by members of the public tends to be very high: the 2021 Museums and Trust survey by the American Alliance of Museums found that museums ranked second only to friends and family on trust, making them more trustworthy than researchers and scientists, nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) generally, local and national news organisations, the government, corporations and business, and social media (2021, p. 9). The top three reasons cited are that museums are fact-based, present real/authentic/original objects, and are research-oriented (2021, p. 12). Similarly, a 2021 poll on trust in professions in Britain found that museum curators were joint fourth out of a list of 30 professions (behind nurses, librarians, and doctors), with 86% of respondents saying they would trust museum curators to tell the truth (Ipsos, 2021).

However, it's important to recognise that to others, the word *museum* can also provoke strong adverse feelings for a multitude of reasons. That could be because of a previous negative visit that now defines how they view all museums (perhaps lack of an accessible toilet or their child being told off), or

a museum displaying sacred and ceremonial objects from their community of origin, despite repeated pleas from the community not to. And for the many people who never or rarely enter a museum, where do they get their references around museums from? Walking past an imposing building? Seeing simplified (or outdated) depictions of museums or curators in films and TV programmes? Even in searches for a graphic icon to represent a museum on common computer software, you'll typically find traditional images – such as a neo-classical building with pillars and steps, glass cabinets, or a rope screening off an area – which do not do justice to the breadth of work that museums do today.

Defining a museum

On the surface, “museum” is one of those words I imagine most people will use and never give much thought to. Dictionaries keep to straightforward and traditional definitions of museums, centred around preserving, studying, and displaying objects in a building. For example, the Collins Dictionary says a museum “is a building where a large number of interesting and valuable objects, such as works of art or historical items, are kept, studied, and displayed to the public” (no date).

Museums have existed throughout our lives, and we might walk, drive, or cycle past them; visit them with our school; see them in the news or promoted on posters at a bus stop or on the underground; see them in popular culture – the Paddington film (The Natural History Museum, London), as the backdrop for celebrities at the Met Gala (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), or in a music video by Beyoncé and Jay-Z (The Louvre). Scratch a bit deeper, however, and you have opened a can of worms. I want to give an overview of some of the issues that arise when trying to pin down a definition and purpose of museums, and why these matter to marketing. ‘Museum’ is not a protected word, so there is nothing stopping organisations from calling themselves that. And there is nothing forcing them to sign up to a code of conduct or accreditation scheme (although there are incentives such as being able to tap into some funding streams). The range of names used can also be confusing – how is a museum different from a gallery, and an art gallery different from an art museum? And not only can museums mean different things to different audiences and potential audiences, but also *within* the museums sector there isn't always agreement on what a museum is or should be.

Today the demands, goals, and expectations of museums are enormous, varied, and sometimes conflicting. From preserving collections to minimising their impact on the climate; from being educational to being entertaining; from increasing visitors to improving the visitor experience; and from growing income to opening up access. Museums are complex, heterogeneous entities, and their purpose has evolved. The time taken to develop a new definition of museums by ICOM (the International Council of Museums) between 2019 and 2022 – and the surrounding controversy – highlights this.

The discussion is not just about semantics – many national governments use ICOM’s definition to determine their own definitions of museums and, therefore, which organisations are eligible for funding, so there can be significant implications of changes to the wording.

Lehmannová sets out ICOM’s earlier iterations of its definition of museums including the first from 1946: “The word ‘museum’ includes all collections, open to the public, of artistic, technical, scientific, historical or archaeological material, including zoos and botanical gardens, but excluding libraries, except in so far as they maintain permanent exhibition rooms” (2020, pp. 2–3). When the time came to revise the definition in 2019 (following revisions in 1974 and 2007), ICOM received 269 proposals from members (ICOM, 2019). Its resulting proposal was put to members, and a heated debate with a split between more progressive and traditional wings ensued. The vote was postponed, and after a long period of further consultation, the following definition was approved at the ICOM General Conference in 2022 by 92% of the participants: “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM, 2022). This is more encompassing and progressive than previous definitions, although for some stakeholders it didn’t go far enough.

The evolution of museums

The purpose of museums has evolved substantially since their inception. This chapter can’t cover a comprehensive or global history of the development of museums, but there are some elements I include because of their relevance to marketing and the context they provide. Many of the challenges that museums are confronting today can be traced back to their origins. Early iterations of museums began as private collections of art or natural objects owned by the wealthy elite, housed in palaces and large private homes. Many collectors were passionate about their collections, and learning from them but displaying them in cabinets of curiosities or ‘Wunderkammern’ was also about status and showing off, with exclusive and restricted access. The Enlightenment period saw the development of universal museums and the idea of museums as a public space, as places for self-improvement and education. However, early public museums were still exclusive. After opening in 1759, visitors initially had to apply for tickets to enter the British Museum during limited opening hours, which meant that “entry was restricted to well-connected visitors who were given personal tours of the collections by the museum’s Trustees and curators” (British Museum, no date).

How some of these objects were collected, structured, and displayed was problematic and racist, for example, objects that were looted or financed