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Toward the construction of a museum brand: the case of the Museo Nazionale Della Scienza e della Tecnologia Leonardo Da Vinci of Milan

Publication Summary

In the last years much attention has been devoted to the importance of the brand in different sectors. Since the spread of the industrial production, the strategy of branding has been used to name and differentiate products and services, however its application to the cultural sector is more recent. Nevertheless, in the last years marketing and branding strategies have become more and more important for museums, galleries and heritage attractions. Currently, museums must compete for visitors' attention, not only with fellow cultural institutions, but also with many other leisure venues, ranging from theme parks to concert halls. Thus, it has become all the more important for museums to communicate if they are a traditional art museum or a contemporary art museum, a historic house or a history museum, a scientific museum or a simple exhibition. Indeed, the increased interest in museums as cultural destinations has triggered the need to differentiate them, so that each institution must differentiate itself from the others. Since the main aim of a brand is to differentiate a product or a service from the competitors, the importance of branding the cultural institutions has become evident. Inside a museum, branding is be a challenge, not only for the marketing department (if it exists), but also for curators, collections managers and everyone responsible for maintaining a relevant, memorable place in a cultural and economic sector.

Furthermore the progressive diminution of public (i.e. from the State or other institutions) funds available to maintain and improve the collections encourages museum's branding. Cultural institutions have to search (and find) private sponsors to sustain their activity, They have to create an identity and to facilitate the recognition through a brand is both a challenge and a necessity for a museum adopting a business strategy.

That process is particularly relevant for those scientific museums that have acquired an important role on the cultural scene. Indeed, the contemporary scientific museums can not afford to show simply dusty cases containing scientific specimens and instruments. They have to prepare specific exhibitions and "hands-on" laboratories in which visitors are invited to touch and to experiment.

The aim of the paper is to demonstrate that the National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo da Vinci, which is the largest science and technology museum in Italy, has reached the status of a brand.

The applied methodology is a descriptive case study that requires comparing the characteristics and empirical findings from the case to the template of a previously sketched theory. Thus the Aaker model of brand equity has been applied to the Museum, to identify to what extent it is possible to recognize the Museum as a brand.

Key words: museum, brand, branding strategies.

1. Introduction

In the last years the brand and the branding activities have become essential to survive in an always more competitive context. Having a powerful brand means having an asset able to insure the survival of a product or even a corporation on the market, for a long time. The brand and its tools of branding were born and developed in the realm of consumer products (Aaker, 1991, 1996, Kapferer, 1992, Keller 1993), have been applied to the corporation (corporate branding, Hatch, Schultz, 2001, 2003), and in recent years, thanks to the increasing competitive environment, have been applied also to the cultural sector. Museums, galleries, heritage attractions and other cultural institutions have begun to examine their economic potential and performance and thus became more and more business and marketing oriented (Gainer, Padanyi, 2002). To compete with the ample word of leisure activities like participating in sport, eating out, going to the movies or to the theater (McLean, 1997), museums have to apply marketing strategies (Baumgarth, 2009). Moreover, cultural institutions are traditionally been dependent from public grants, that are progressively less responsible for the survival of these institutions; according to The Institute of Museum and Library Services report (2008), in the USA, the government support ranged, in 2006, between 7% and 33% of the total of funds needed by museums and recent research has highlighted the critical role of private and foundation philanthropy as well as the role of merchandising as critical to the financial survival of museums (Mottner, Ford, 2004). In Italy, since the 90s, following the progressive decreasing of public founding, cultural institutions have begun to search new ways to support their activities. In 2008, according to Federculture (2009), only 22 % of Milan's Museo della Scienza e della Tecnologia foundation and 37% of Milan's La Triennale resources come from governmental institutions. In such a complex environment, the survival of a museum is more and more dependent from its ability to attract visitors, transform them in loyal customers and create advocacy for the institutions. In order to accomplish these goals, the museum has to build up its name and its identity, becoming a brand as suggested from many authors (Hankinson, P., 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002, Scott, 2000, Napoli, 2006).

2. How to evaluate the museum's brand equity

Once the strategic importance of the concept of brand is accepted, it is necessary to understand what a brand means in the museum context.

According to the literature (Scott, 2000), the brand of a museum is a value brand, i.e. a brand that differs from corporate brands and product brands for its ability to create connections with others marketing sectors sharing the same values. Furthermore, a value brand is meant to last in the future because of the loyalty-based relationships with its customers. The stability and firmness of the brand do not prevent the possibility to extend it into areas sharing the same values. From Caldwell's analysis of two of the most worldwide well known museums, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of New York and the British Museum of London (Caldwell, 2000), which are commonly recognised as brands, emerges that one of the key elements is the name. Indeed the name is fundamental for the brand identity (Aaker, 1991). The name Guggenheim has been used like an umbrella brand for a series of museums: there is a Guggenheim in Venice (Italy), one in Bilbao (Spain) and one in Berlin (Germany). The brand name British Museum is differently used, but not less well-known. It is the second most visited museum of the world with 5.9 million visitors (Lee, 2009). Its name arouses many positive associations in the consumer's mind (for instance there is no admittance fee).

Caldwell compares the value of the British Museum brand name with the value of Coca Cola or Marlboro brands into the market of the fast moving consumer goods, implying the possibility to apply the same models to measure the equity of the brands (Aaker, 1991, Keller, Busacca Ostillio, 2005). Thus, applying Aaker's model (1991), visitor satisfaction, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations and other proprietary assets should be evaluated to measure the brand equity.

To satisfy their customers, museums have to know them. Profiling customers allow museums to offer, besides their "permanent collection", some special exhibition that satisfy peculiar targets of visitors. Furthermore, some institutions offer hands-on laboratories that allow the younger customers to have an interactive experience.

A museum whose name has a good awareness is more likely to be visited. Advertising plays a meaningful role building name awareness, even if for cultural institutions the word of mouth (Harrison, Shaw, 2004) has been defined as a key promotional tool.

The perception of quality is the results of long time strategies; according to Aaker (1991) the perceived quality is the most important element of brand equity and can be defined as the customer's perception of the quality of a product or a service. Therefore, it can be different

from the actual quality, objectively defined. Perceived quality is related both to visitor satisfaction and to the idea that potential visitors have of the institution.

According to Keller (1993), brand associations ought to be unique, favourable, and strong to foster the correct recall of the brand. The positive associations linked to a museum are built through time, starting from the institution's reputation.

Finally, the other proprietary brand assets include, for cultural institutions, the location. The building plays a meaningful role (i.e. one of the most relevant assets for the Guggenheim in Bilbao is indeed the Geary building), but also the Louvre's pyramid has become one of the key element of recognition.

The quality of the collections is another proprietary asset: thus Guggenheim is the name for modern and contemporary art, British Museum hosts one of the most ample collections of archaeological findings of the world (including such masterpieces as the Parthenon sculptures and the Rosetta stone), and the Smithsonian represents the world's largest museum complex and research organization, composed of 19 museums, 9 research centres, and the National Zoo.

The aim of the following paragraph is to demonstrate that the national Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo da Vinci has reached the status of a brand.

The applied methodology is a descriptive case study (Eisenhardt, 1989, Yin, 1994); indeed, according to Yin, the descriptive case history requires comparing the characteristics and empirical findings from the case to the template of a previously sketched theory. Thus the Aaker (1991) model of brand equity has been applied to the Museum, to identify to what extent it is possible to recognize the Museum as a brand.

The evidences used to build the case come from different sources: several informal interviews with the Museum's head of Corporate Communication and with the Marketing and Fundraising director, internal documents, press realises and direct observations.

3. The National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo Da Vinci of Milan.

The museum was founded in 1953. Now it is the largest science and technology museum in Italy and is housed in an early 16th century Olivetan monastery in the historical center of Milan, near St. Ambrogio church.

The permanent collection includes objects, machinery and documents that represent the key steps of scientific and technological evolution. Over the last 50 years the Museum has enriched its collection with over 10,000 objects related to the history of science, technology and industry. Half of them are exhibited in the galleries, while the other half is kept in internal

and external storage areas. Most of the objects have been donated by companies, foundations and institutions (mostly Italian). Some of them are donations made by important personalities of the scientific and technological Italian panorama, or by their heirs (for instance Guglielmo Marconi's heirs).

Originally the collections were arranged in 28 thematic sections, which included simple and complex objects of very different nature, size, material and construction technique. Currently active areas (i.e. labs) endorse exhibitions allowing visitors, individual, families and school-children to discover scientific and technological processes. Traditionally the European benchmark and model for this kind of museums is the Deutsches Museum of Munich, founded in 1903 and still one the world's largest museum of technology and science. The Deutsches Museum represents the first cultural institution that fostered an interactive approach, encouraging visitors to touch, to pull or to push something, instead of letting them only watch (often from some distance). Nowadays many institutions all over the world (e.g. the Science Museum of London) have adopted a similar style to expose objects encouraging at the same time interaction (Goulding, 2000, Camarero-Izquierdo et al., 2009). Moreover, the shift to a more experiential museum (Falk, Dierking, 1992) follows the change from a traditional management styles (focused on custodial preservation) to a more updated one (focused on the education and entertainment of the public) (Gilmore, Rentschler, 2002, Gainer, Padanyi, 2002).

To what extent it is possible to define the Leonardo da Vinci Museum as a brand?

Applying the Aaker model (1991), we discover that the Museum has adapted its expositions in order to satisfy the need of different visitors. As a result there are seven departments devoted to the most relevant areas covered by the Museum's collections.

The Materials Department collects evidences of the origin and the different usage of everyday materials like metal, plastic and rubber. The connected laboratories let the visitors understand the physical, chemical and technological properties of materials and experiment the processing techniques.

The Transport Department covers more than six thousand years of the history of transport, since the invention of the wheel. It is divided in four thematic areas: land transport, rail transport, air transport and naval transport. Among the exposed objects there are helicopters and the Toti military submarine.

The Energy Department offers an overview of the different kinds of available energy source, from steam engines to technologies related to the quest for renewable source of energy with a

focus on the environmental issues. The aim of this section is to display the up-to-date energy scenario, featuring sources and technologies available.

The Communication Department allows visitors to run through all the phases of communication development, from the introduction of printing up to digital communication.

The Leonardo Art and Science Department represents at best the Museum's aim to connect technological-scientific and artistic culture, showing that there is continuity between the different expressions of human creativity as the genius of Leonardo testifies. The first exhibition on Leonardo was held in 1953 and since then the Museum received important donations of artworks, objects of applied art, antique watch and even the workshop of a lute maker.

The New Frontiers Department allows visitors to improve their knowledge on genetics, biotechnologies, robotics, nutrition and nanotechnologies.

The newest Science for Young Children Department is committed to pre-school children (3-6 years old). The main goal of this section is to stimulate curiosity towards science and to experience interactive situations. This department offers a high level of interactivity: children are guided in their explorations by a tutor and are allowed to play with different materials from water to food.

Thus, to satisfy a multiform audience ranging from casual tourists to school teachers and to introduce children to the scientific and technological world, the Museum has changed from a simple container of objects to a place in which learning-through-doing is fostered and encouraged. Many authors underline the link between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty (Hallowell, 1996, Bowen, Chen 2001): loyal customers are usually satisfied, but satisfied customers do not become automatically loyal customers too (Oliver, 1999, Homburg, Giering, 2001). To improve the loyalty of their satisfied customers, corporations have engaged in loyalty programs (Sharp, Sharp, 1997) and scholars have investigated their efficacy (Dowling, Uncles, 1997), their effect on the value of the brand (Yi, Jeon, 2003) and the influence of brand loyalty on the economic performances (Chaudhuri, Holbrook, 2001). To improve the loyalty of its visitors, the Museum has implemented membership programs toward different targets of customers (single visitors, families, students and sustainers members), encouraging multiple admissions to the collections and promoting special events.

Apart for the word-of-mouth communication, which allows the Museum to be well known, recently the Museum launched two advertising campaign to maintain and increase its name awareness. The first one, as a crisis management tool, is aiming at communicating that, despite the renovation process, the Museum is open, though some departments are partially

unfit. The renovation was meant to last 18 months, but the Museum’s staff decided for a three months closure (during the summer of 2008), mainly for security reasons. During the remaining months, the Museum remained open, to warrantee loyal customers (like the schools that periodically pay a visit to the Museum) the possibility to continue to patronize the institution.

Such advertising campaign was but one of the communication tools aimed at internal and external stakeholders to manage the difficulties during the renovation’s months and to change the work-in-progress perception from a nuisance to an opportunity to get a better Museum.

The advertising’s concept “con che faccia teniamo aperto” (*with what face we remain open*, Fig. 1) was aimed at visitors. Furthermore it wanted to involve and motivate employees, sections’ curators, scientific animators and front line operators who are responsible of the Museum “face” every day.

Fig.1- “With what face we remain open” campaign.



The aim of the second advertising campaign was to encourage visitors to enter the Museum. “Vieni al Museo e fatti gli affari tuoi” (*come to the Museum and mind your own business*, Fig. 2) was the headline; the double meaning (in Italian) is clarified by the body copy: who cares about science and technology cares about his life, too.

Fig. 2 – “Come to the Museum and mind your own business” campaign.



As to the perception of quality, the Museum participates to many regional, national and international projects with different roles (coordinator, promoter and partner). The collaborations with other museums, science centres, training institutions, teachers and students is aimed at broadening the boundaries of the Museum and at improving the research quality and, consequently, the perceived quality of the Museum.

The Museum has also tried to define unique, favourable, and strong brand association developing sponsorship projects with well know corporations. For example, in 2004, the interactive laboratory dedicated to the study of colors has been totally renewed thanks to the contribution of Basf. SHARP, Siemens, STMicroelectronics and TDK are among the sponsors. They have contributed with various kind of equipment (in-kind sponsorship).

Among other proprietary assets, besides the already mentioned collections and some excellent master pieces like the submarine Toti, it is worth to stress the main building of the Museum: a 16th century monastery including cloisters, frescoes, and beautiful outdoor spaces, hosting events like scientific conferences, congresses and presentations.

Furthermore, in the Museum's bookshop it is possible to buy books on the themes of the historical collections and interactive laboratories, science games, multimedia CDs, clothing for children and adults and stationery items. The revenue of the merchandising sustains the Museum's projects.

From the above analysis emerges that the Museum can be defined as a brand and has been recognised as such in the Italian context since 2005, when it was the only museum institution ranked in the classification Topbrands Business to Business

(<http://www.superbrands.com/italy>). The success of a brand can be defined only if the brand is credible, if it achieves a legitimacy (based on the temporal permanence in the market) and if it is able to develop an emotional relationship with the consumer (Semprini, 1993). To verify these conditions, further empirical research on actual and prospective visitors as well as on internal stakeholder are necessary. Further research is indeed compulsory to check to what extent the branding strategies have contributed to solve the problems faced by the Museum.

4. Conclusive remarks

The competitive context in which galleries and museums struggle for survival in a saturated market (Colbert, 2009) suggests strongly the need to gain a defined identity and a distinctive positioning (Scott, 2000, Baumgarth, 2009). To become a well known brand seems an answer to some of the problems faced in contemporary environment, such as the progressive reduction of public grants. Indeed, a brand allows museums to attract visitors, sponsor and sustainers; to sell merchandising; to become self sustaining and capable of progressing in the long run.

The case history of The National Museum of Science and Technology Leonardo Da Vinci of Milan is a good benchmark for other cultural institutions trying to reach the status of a brand in the Italian context. Further research is necessary to integrate brand orientation with other types of strategies.

Obviously, as always happen when applying managerial tools to the cultural sectors, there are some caveats to take into account: 1. some authors underline that the mission of a cultural institution, like a museum, may not be compatible with the demands of the market and that satisfying visitors and gaining popularity may thus be contradictory to its basic mission and therefore affect its reputation (Liao et al., 2001); 2. any change regarding the strategic orientation should take into account “the first museums’ mission: preserving the culture and the heritage by holding, researching, and fostering the interest in the culture and education. A museum cannot change the “product” to fit the marketplace” (Camarero, Garrido, 2009, p. 848). These caveats are specially relevant to avoid judgements like the one expressed by Jean Clair (Clair, 2008). The author recalls what happened after the news, released on the 7th of March 2007, as to the agreement between the Louvre’s Direction and Abu Dhabi’s Emirate. The French Museum allowed the use of the Louvre’s name like a brand to build a new museum in Abu Dhabi, and authorized the selling of part of the museum’s collection. After the publication of an opinion piece appeared in *Le Monde* titled “Museum are not for sale”, deprecating the commercialization of culture, Clair suggested that something in the art world

is changing. Indeed, in February 2008, Thomas Kren, director of the Guggenheim Foundation, resigned office. Among the reasons for the end of an almost twenty years tenure there was the criticism of the sponsors as to the international activity, like the opening of the Guggenheim in Bilbao and its expense, and the scepticism from the art world about the applying of cultural marketing strategies (Minutillo, 2008). Clair criticizes the diffused custom to commercialize the museum's collections and the spreading of the tendency to transform culture in entertainment and museums in commercial malls.

Despite the criticism aroused by the applying of managerial and marketing tools to the cultural sector, the real problem concerning museums' difficulties seems to be the creation of a demand in an infertile ground. According to Colbert (2009), the entire cultural sector is currently facing a surplus of supply with respect to demand and is facing a consumer generally looking for entertainment even when choosing a cultural venue. Moreover, the polarization between highbrow and lowbrow culture (Levine, 1988), popular art and learned culture, is meaningful only for a small part of cultural consumers; most of them are generally choosing among an ample choice of leisure products: museums are just one more option available. Gaining a precise positioning in an overcrowded market (Brunet et al., 2008), a positioning that require the existence of a brand, is compulsory. Nowadays, despite the already described fears and doubts (Clair, 2008), the customisation of the offer, the customer service, the existence membership programs (Colbert, 2009) are decisive in the survival of a cultural institution. Thus, to become a successful brand is necessary for the survival of the museums, but to achieve that without compromising the mission is a further - and probably a more difficult - challenge.

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