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Engagement with broader consumer markets at museums.

Abstract

Museums form a significant proportion of the cultural tourism offering in many destinations and have a broad range of objectives and measures of effectiveness. Organisations that have previously been focused on more custodial matters, now face new challenges and opportunities in appealing to visitor groups. Many museums have introduced measures that not only encourage re-engagement with the traditional audience, but also develop the core product and service as a means of targeting potential visitor groups. This paper aims to develop a deeper understanding of how museums are developing and expanding their core product as a means of attracting potential visitor groups through gaining a fuller appreciation of their respective needs and expectations, whilst balancing the need for authenticity and care of the integrity of the cultural heritage resources.

Introduction

Museums form a significant proportion of the cultural tourism offering in many destinations. They “serve the functions of collection, research and exhibition, as well as education and recreation” (Sheng & Chen, 2011:53) meaning that they have and have a broad range of objectives and measures of effectiveness (Leask, 2010). With increasing financial pressure and effectiveness measures being imposed on these predominantly publicly-funded institutions (Lovett, 2010), there has been identified an emphasis upon increasing attendance numbers through re-engagement with traditional markets and engagement with new consumer groups with a view, in the process, to enhancing their financial sustainability (Jaffry&Apostolakis, 2011). This has created new challenges and opportunities for organisations that have previously been focused on custodial matters, and achieving identified visitor numbers will become an increasingly important issue for the management of museums. As a means of addressing this issue, many museums have introduced measures that not only encourage re-engagement with the traditional audience, but also develop the core product and service as a means of targeting potential visitor groups that may have hitherto been ignored. Potential visitor groups – such as Generation Y (Muskat et al, 2013), Baby Boomers (Yeoman, 2013) and Matures (Toepoel, 2013) – have been found to possess specific characteristics that require to be taken into account when developing the core offering with the objective of engaging with such consumers. This paper aims to develop a deeper understanding of how museums across Europe are developing and expanding their core product as a means of attracting such potential visitor groups through gaining a fuller appreciation of their respective needs and expectations (Muskat et al, 2013; Alcalde& Rueda, 2007), whilst balancing the need for authenticity and care of the integrity of the cultural heritage resources (Mencarelli et al, 2010).

Understanding and Meeting Audiences’ Needs and Expectations

Lin (2006) established that audience groups who reported having little or no interest in museums perceived such institutions to be places for learning rather than leisure. Kooijman (2002) suggests that the concept of what is and is not culture is evolving, with some sectors reacting more clearly to changes in audience expectations (Divall, 2010). Gurel and Kavak (2010) found that there is sometimes a tendency for museum management to misjudge which aspects of their sometimes extensive collections will be of most interest and relevance to both their current audience(s), and especially to potential new audiences. Mencarelli et al (2010:343) established that there is often some discrepancy between the rather unqualified beliefs of museum personnel regarding audience expectations of a museum visit and what audiences themselves prioritise in this respect. Mencarelli and colleagues found that museum management sometimes feel pressured to make some degree of change to their core offering in response to their own misperceptions, resulting in what the authors refer to as an unnecessary ‘complexification’ of the core offering by management. Gen Y, Baby Boomer, Matures and Child Audience Segments

New audiences such as the Gen Y audience segment (those born between 1980 -1994) create both opportunities and issues for museums (Leask& Barron, 2012). Gen Y, for example, has very different characteristics from preceding generational groups such as Baby Boomers and Matures with respect to their particular mindset, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs (Valentine and Powers, 2013). As such, it is essential that museum management views the entire visit

experience offered at their institution from the perspective of the relevant audience segment in order to identify what issues need to be addressed and opportunities that can be developed (giving due consideration to any associated management implications) in order to offer an experience that meets their expectations and fits with their values (Muskat et al, 2013). Late night festivals and events are increasingly being adopted as a tried and tested method of attracting younger adult audiences such as Gen Y to cultural institutions through their provision of attractive experiences, some of which may differ markedly from the institution's usual core offerings (Evans et al, 2007). Collaboration between institutions and businesses within a defined locality can create a package of complementary events, activities, products and services intended to attract specific, perhaps hard-to-reach, audience segments like Gen Y (Weidenfeld et al, 2011.) Leech (2011) found that, for some hard-to-reach audience groups such as the under 40s, unique outreach approaches such as street art displays around the locality were employed in the US to bring a museum and what it has to offer to the attention of this particular group.

Wu et al (2010) found that children within a family group are highly influential when decisions are being made regarding whether or not the family's shared leisure time should centre around particular cultural activities and events. Given the significance of their influence and in order to tap into the family audience sector, the authors suggest that it is imperative that museums utilise their core offerings and/or peripheral features wisely to offer appealing family-friendly interactive experiences. Kang (2010) reminds us that children will constitute the audiences of the future and that an early introduction to any cultural institution offering positive, enjoyable and memorable experiences is likely to benefit the institution from repeat visitation whilst hopefully also laying the foundations of a lasting long-term relationship between the institution and the child through their future adulthood.

In his analysis of likely future consumption patterns, Yeoman (2013:p255) surmises that in the third decade of the 21st century, one of the prevailing shifts will be towards that of an 'ageless society' where age will no longer be a barrier to participation choice. In particular, Yeoman suggests that it will become the norm for the Baby Boomer generation to choose to participate in the types of activities that are currently considered to have appeal only to younger audience groups such as Gen Y. Toepoel (2013) also discusses prevailing issues relating to the Matures segment of the population such as increasing numbers of older people within communities combined with the need to address correspondingly growing issues of social isolation amongst members of this age group. Toepoel proposes that the current status quo presents cultural institutions with an opportunity to attract this older audience group by capitalising on recognised patterns of interest and behaviours amongst Matures and also their inter/intra generational relationships by creating suitable opportunities for meaningful active engagement and social interaction for Matures.

Izquierdo and Samaniego (2011) observed that many museums feel that the way forward for them in audience development and growth terms is through the provision of comprehensive programmes of learning and leisure opportunities that are largely geared towards attracting various sections of their local community in order to widen their audience base, whilst also assuming that their basic core offering is sufficient to meet the needs and expectations of non-local audiences. These authors feel that the likelihood of museums being successful in their efforts to better serve their local community will be dependent on whether or not they can meld learning and social leisure experiences. As suggested by Mencarelli et al (2010), museum management should consider, rather than adapting their core offering, what adaptive potential is there amongst the various peripheral features around the core.

Audience Categorisation and Experiences

Many past researchers have proposed a variety of different ways in which to understand and classify museum audience groups which can be confusing for future researchers looking for a suitable system of museum audience group classification or categorisation. Gurel and Kavek (2010:52) illustrate the dilemma by referring to the proposals of Hood (2000) who proposes a triple categorisation of frequent, occasional and non-frequent visitors, and Strang and Gutman (1980) who suggest classification as either enthusiasts, 'the interested', and non-attendees. Jaffry and Apostolakis (2011) feel that the standard approach used to profile visitors into distinct audience segments on the basis of socio demographics is inappropriate today. These authors suggest that the nature of audience members would be better to use information on why and in what way(s) they are motivated to visit museums to formulate a visitation spectrum.

Dirsehan and Yalcin (2011) propose yet another approach to defining museum audience segments based on how appealing experiences are felt to be and to who they appeal. These authors suggest the two categories of holistic audiences, who expect a fully-rounded multi-dimensional visit experience, and utilitarian audiences, who have fewer but very particular needs that are likely to be focused only on specific aspects of the visit experience at a museum. This suggested categorisation pairing bears some relationship to the marketing perspective findings of Cova and Cova (2002) regarding tribes and segments. The limited scope of interest and inherent depth of focus pertaining to Dirsehan and Yalcin's utilitarian audience is indicative of their likely status as members of a tribe whose constituent members typically have a particular shared passion, whereas their holistic audience is likely to be part of a what has come to be recognised as a traditional audience segment which possesses more general interests.

Slatten et al (2011) recommends that museum management must create a variety of opportunities for audiences segments of a holistic nature which allows them to actively and/or passively interact and engage with other visitors who are already familiar or are perhaps as yet unknown to them. Bringing the work of Debenedetti (2003) into the discussion, it can be surmised that from a companionship perspective, utilitarian audiences' motives for visiting museums are about realising self-fulfilment whereas holistic audiences' motives are geared towards socialising and bonding with others. Experiences sought by holistic audiences appear to have many intangible aspects to them which contribute towards making it exciting, enjoyable and most importantly, memorable (Rageh et al, 2013). These types of fully-rounded experiences could therefore be characterised as being hedonic in nature (Otto and Ritchie, 1996). Many museums feel pressurised to offer a total experience – Frey (1998) feels that this is particularly true of those museums that he terms as the 'superstar museums'. The packaging together of a series of activities and/or events by museum management in order to create a hedonic experience for holistic audiences does, however, raise issues about the degree of authenticity able to be encapsulated within such a manufactured package, and whether or not this matters to the package recipients (Ardley et al, 2012).

Initiatives to Attract New Audiences to Museums

Liu (2014) investigated what types of events and activities had the greatest appeal for local communities. Liu established that local communities showed a preference for spending the majority of their leisure time within their immediate locality and that outdoor, mass audience events with no admission charge were likely to attract the largest audiences.

Some museums have sought to engage more fully with their local communities by employing online social media through which members of the public can contribute material and collaborate on the development of local social history archives. Sveum (2010) gives example of community projects undertaken in Scandinavia and the USA, whilst Kidd (2011) identifies a number of institutions in the UK where such initiatives have been undertaken, each with varying degrees of success. Tedd (2011:334) reported on the Peoples Collection Wales (Casgliad y Bobl), a collaborative digital archive development project that combines contributed institutional, community, and individual heritage resources. Tedd (2011) gives particular examples of how the combined contents of the archive have been employed creatively by both Welsh cultural institutions and local groups alike to develop innovative interactive trails around historic sites and along heritage walking routes across the country. These trails are intended to be used by local communities and tourist alike to create their own personal visit experience of a place. The author maintains that the beneficiaries of this innovative project span the entire age spectrum, ranging from members of the 'mature' and 'baby boomer' generations in particular through to students at all educational levels.

Colomb (2011:p84-85) explored the place revitalisation approach adopted in Roubaix, France involving multi-purpose superstar centres termed 'MaisonsFolie'. These centres rely heavily on an appetite amongst audiences for its various hybridised cultural and artistic offerings whilst also, at the other extreme, serving as local hubs that support day-to-day community life and engagement. The formula would appear to have achieved a significant degree of success in that Colomb reports that the multifarious programmes offered resulted in visitor numbers doubling between 2004 and 2005. Mencarelli et al (2010:336) illustrate the growing trend at many museums whereby different forms of cultural media are being combined to create new forms of events and activities that diverge from rather than converge with the museum's core offerings and purpose. These authors give the examples of music and art combinations at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York and the Kamazawa Museum in Japan, and other similarly divergent creations that have been offered at the British Museum where music and dance based experiences have been created. The Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool is another example given where theatrics have been taken a stage further to offer visitors the experience of emigration to the USA in the mid-19th century. Mencarelli and Pulh (2012:148) reported on the hybridisation of cultural and leisure offerings where museums transform themselves and subsequently become indistinguishable from entertainment parks, whilst acknowledging that the possibility (or not) of their doing so is significantly determined by the inherent nature of a museum's core purpose. The authors give examples of such hybrid operations that have been established in France (Nausicaa and Vulcana), in Switzerland (Kindercity and Technorama) and in Canada (Montreal Science Centre and the Montreal Biosphere). The authors recognise that there is a need to reconcile how managers of these operations perceive the visit experience being offered with the perceptions of visitors themselves in order to ascertain to what extent the underlying core purpose of the site is being realised (or not as the case may be) as a result of any overlying theatrics implemented.

When researching formal and informal education provision at the British Museum in London, Chou (2013) found that the requirement for the museum to demonstrate the breadth and reach of the formal education programme it offers has resulted in informal education provision at

the museum for family audiences being neglected to some extent. Chou established that the majority of the museum's existing child visitors fell into the 'early years' primary school age group whilst family provision on offer was predominantly catering for older children. The author concluded that this imbalance in formal-versus-informal provision has arisen largely because of stringent conditions associated with financial support received from central government which prioritises formal education provision. As already highlighted elsewhere, children are influential in determining how family groups spend their leisure time - offering children positive experiences of museums in their early years can serve to build some degree of loyalty amongst them, which can potentially continue into and throughout adulthood. Chou therefore suggests that the British Museum should urgently take steps to fill the identified age-specific gap in their informal education provision appropriately.

Opening museums at night has now become a commonplace approach employed as a means of attracting new audiences. Corbos and Popescu (2012) studied the effects of night time opening at the National Museum of Art in Romania (NMAR) which is otherwise very traditional in its approach to serving its core audience base, that is, its local community. Corbos and Popescu established that because museum visitors' expectations of a visit experience have evolved significantly in recent years, no museum can simply rely on its reputational standing to attract visitors from either the local community or the visiting tourist community. Fundamental issues identified by the authors that need to be addressed at the NMAR included: negligible marketing and promotional efforts which restricts the museum's ability to extend its reach to new potential audience bases; an outdated approach to interpreting the museum's collections; no multi-language provision for foreign visitors; an inadequate online presence; and a lack catering and retail spaces which are important as resources for both socialisation and income generation. The findings of Kent (2010) regarding the relevance for many visitors of retail facilities at museums being recreational destinations in their own right adds weight to the suggestion that provision of attractive catering and retail facilities should be treated as a priority. Corbos and Popescu also lamented that the museum's failure to capitalise on marketing and promotional opportunities presented by significant initiatives such as the recent completion of major restoration work at the site was a missed opportunity. Boosting a museum's online presence as suggested by Corbos and Popescu in an attempt to extend its reach to new audiences with a view to increasing actual footfall at the site can be a double-edged sword though. Hume and Mills (2011) uncovered in their study of the online presences of museums in various countries that, in some instances, the museums had become a victim of their own online success, so to speak. Hume and Mills found that for some of the museums they studied, for example at the London Science Museum and also the Museum of London, there was some evidence that online visitation increased whilst at the same time actual footfall decreased.

Using two other London-based institutions as case studies, Slater and Hee (2010) found that museum management often significantly underestimate the extent to which visitation at their site does not include any engagement with the museum's core offerings. The authors concluded that the catering and retail facilities at the Tate Modern in London often served as social hubs for non-visiting members of local communities. However, the presence of non-museum visitors onsite does present management with opportunities to convert them into actual visitors by introducing 'tasters' of the museum's core offerings to enhance the surroundings of the onsite catering and retail facilities which may then entice this group into the museum itself. Jafari et al (2013) identified that such a failure to capitalise was still evident at the Kelvingrove Museum and Art Gallery in Glasgow several years after the museum had undergone a multi-million pound redesign and re-presentation project which was completed in 2006.

Alcalde and Rueda (2007) discuss how, across the world, there has been an increase in the number of museums and also the numbers of visitor they are receiving, but at the same time it is still difficult to say if the profile and/ or the characteristics of those visitors has either broadened or diversified in response to the no-doubt laudable intentions and efforts being made by those museums.

Conclusions

As this paper has demonstrated, new and broader audiences are potentially attractive markets for museums to engage with further, in that their characteristics and needs as consumers can often be met by adapting the existing museum offering. As noted by Burton, Louviere and Young (2009:31) “museums can respond to visitor demand by packaging and repackaging their core purpose of experience, education, and social activity to meets needs either as a single entity or in collaboration with other providers”. However, it is important for museums to determine whether or not they want to engage with some or all markets, or if resources would be better focussed elsewhere. If a market is of interest, then museums managers should actively involve staff and teams within their own setting to establish what resources, products and themes would be best suited for development and aim to appeal to the characteristics of the market.

Key features in appealing and encouraging broader audience engagement appear to be based on developing innovative product offerings, flexibility of visit and experience choice, and the use of new forms of communications such as social media to communicate with target audiences. Some of these are not all traditionally priority aspects of museum management but are certainly within their means to package existing resources into products that appeal to individual market groups.

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