

Commercialising culture

Anna Brown considers the role of retail and catering in cultural destinations – looking particularly at national and international museums – and argues that a popular commercial offer strengthens the business plan, promotes the brand and contributes to success in the destination marketplace.

The opening of the Tate Modern, the British Museum's Great Court Project and the Science Museum's Wellcome Wing Extension all rank high among this summer's events, not just for museum professionals but for the ever-expanding mass of people who plan to visit these august institutions. With more than 80 million visits to UK museums per annum, it is no longer possible for the museum to ignore the marketplace. In fact, the most successful museums – big and small, at home and abroad – are embracing the demands of the market and emerging as 'cultural destinations' with a range of products, services, facilities and experiences to offer their visitors.

The number of visits to museums in the UK has grown by 15% in the last ten years: impressive, until you take into account the growing number of museums among which those visits are being distributed. Competition is tough, and getting tougher. Given the spate of new

developments fuelled by the Millennium Commission, Heritage Lottery Fund, et al., the Millennium year sees a record number of new or newly redeveloped cultural destinations clamouring for the attention of the media and, ultimately, the market.

Meanwhile, as Millennium Commission and HLF-funded developments open to the public one by one, national museums, landmark Millennium projects, cultural venues and heritage attractions up and down the country are facing the same question: how to generate sufficient revenue to make the capital project sustainable?

Increasing competition for leisure time and money puts museums at the sharp edge of the destination marketplace. Business plans written in the heady days of the twentieth century often neglected to take into account that this would not be the only new museum in the market for visitors, for sponsorship, for grant aid. As young organisations are struggling to turn overly optimistic visitor

The seventh-floor café at Tate Modern
Photo: Marcus Leith



forecasts into sustainable revenue streams, the penny is beginning to drop.

Beyond admissions income

Strikingly, a number of high-profile attractions whose business plans depend heavily on *admissions* revenue (such as the Millennium Dome, Royal Armouries in Leeds and the Sheffield Popular Music Centre) have been unable to meet their projections. The smart money is on destinations that can encourage longer dwell-time and higher on-site spend.

Retail and catering can generate revenues of between 5% and 15% of the core operating budget for major museums with well-resourced trading operations. Maximising the revenue potential of commercial operations is clearly a priority for museums following a major capital project. The Tate Modern has a total of three retail and three catering outlets. The revamped Centre Pompidou focuses visitors' first impressions inside the building on the design shop and café on opposing mezzanines, and on the bookshop encased in glass below the café. Both the Tate and the Pompidou have given the best views of their respective cities to top-floor restaurant patrons. Similarly, the British



'Le Printemps' design shop on foyer mezzanine in the Pompidou Centre

Museum's Great Court project will focus visitors' attention on expanded shops and a wider range of catering on two levels, around the circumference of the Reading Room.

American museums have led the way in establishing that commercial activity on-site is not just part of a visit to the museum, it can motivate a visit in its own right. San Francisco MoMA's design shop and café are open to the street, on either side of the

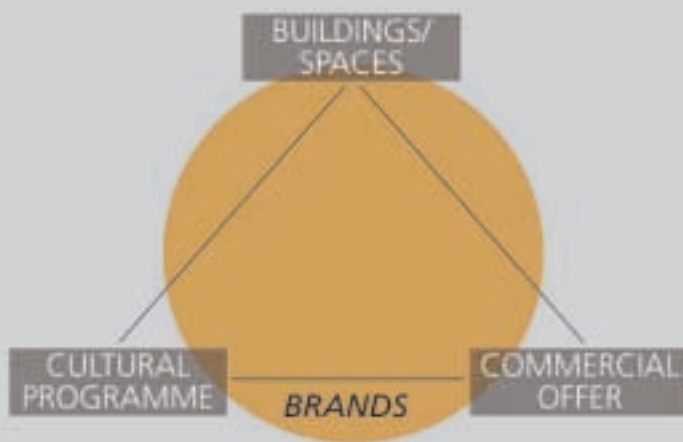
museum foyer, facing Yerba Buena Gardens in the city's busy South of Market district. This constitutes a public-facing commercial offer easily detached from a visit to the museum (which in the case of SF MoMA means paying a relatively high ticket price). In New York, MoMA presents shoppers on 57th Street with a large and bustling design shop, opposite and down the block from the museum's entrance. The London Transport Museum has



found a steady income stream in poster sales, the majority of them to shop-only visitors. Exploiting its location on London's South Bank, facing St Paul's across the river, the Tate Modern will, without question, attract customers to the catering offer on both Level 2 and Level 7 who have no intention of visiting the galleries that day.

Online shopping widens the museum's market to include those who may never visit in person. The British Museum has developed both e-commerce and a shop in Heathrow Terminal 4 – appealing equally to those who've been and those who wish they had. In the US, the Smithsonian and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have been expanding the reach of their brand through catalogue shopping, cultural holidays, etc., for decades.

Building a brand proposition
The Components of a Cultural Destination Brand



The challenge of managing the destination, especially during a redevelopment project, is threefold: managing the buildings, the cultural programme and the definition of the commercial offer, all three embedded in the brand.

Well-conceived and implemented commercial activity expands and strengthens a museum's brand. However, the challenge is to get the mix of commercial activity right - to popularise without undercutting the promise of quality embodied in the brand, to democratise without endangering the vision of a world-class cultural institution.

Museums present themselves as cultural destinations through their programming: exhibitions, lectures, conferences, education and outreach. Commercial activity should also be conceived of as part of the 'programme'. This applies equally to branded retail and

catering on-site and to the brand's reach beyond the physical space (web presence, etc.). It is programming, in this inclusive sense, which will create the 'cultural experience' which a museum offers its visitors. The scope, quality and values of its combined cultural and commercial programme also, crucially, define the brand proposition.

The cultural and artistic fit of retail and catering activity – whether on-site or associated with the brand online – must be ensured. The commercial offer should present visitors with a 'way in' to cultural life, never presenting a barrier or deflecting focus from the core cultural products of the museum.

The importance of being integrated

Just as visitor attractions have borrowed ideas and techniques from the retail and catering sectors to increase sales and commerciality, retail outlets have borrowed from the world of museums to increase footfall. Witness, for example, the corporate brand centres such as Niketown, the World of Coca Cola, and Sony Wonderlab, which display 'historical artefacts' as a way of communicating brand values and encouraging sales. Themed restaurants like Planet Hollywood and Hard Rock Café are famous for attempting to provide such unique visitor experiences by acting as *ersatz* museums of film and music memorabilia.



Cafeteria Loggia, Getty Centre, LA

Museums and other cultural destinations are now beginning to imitate more innovative retail strategies for reaching out to the market. The new Getty Center in Los Angeles

hosts Friday night talks and performance evenings in the café, and family daytime activities in both English and Spanish on Sundays, operating more on the model of Borders or Waterstone's than like the academic institute that it is.

The importance of integrating the commercial offer with the cultural programme cannot be underestimated when focusing on a museum as a visitor destination. A vibrant commercial offer should further the following strands of a museum's mission:

- breaking down the barriers to entry for a wider audience: perceived elitism, fear of being made to feel unwelcome;
- animating the destination's central public spaces, making the foyer or central courtyard a lively and stimulating place to spend time;
- encouraging the lengthening of visitor dwell time around the site, whether for cultural or commercial reasons;
- providing visitors to the destination with a memorable 'cultural experience', appropriately branded, which introduces the cultural programme even if it does not include a visit to an exhibition.

Commercialisation is not just a fad, it is a financial necessity for the museums and attractions which now have to think of themselves as cultural destinations competing with retail and leisure destinations for the weekend outing. No consumer wants to feel intimidated and excluded; every consumer wants to participate in creating a memorable, individual experience. What

better way to create a personal experience than by indulging in an impulse purchase or an upmarket meal? Perhaps inevitably, the psychology of the consumer marketplace is highly relevant to the country's most impressive cultural destinations: success, in publicity and financial terms, depends on it.

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