

# Brandwatch

## Museum or mausoleum? A question of branding

**Our Brandwatch series continues with a review of promotional literature for some of the biggest guns in the museums battleground. As ever, these observations can be traced to Locum's resident brand guru, Non-Executive Director, Tony Hodges.**

Niall Fitzgerald knows more than most about brands and branding. He should. He is the chief executive of Unilever and so stands in direct line of succession from William Lever, who first cut bars of soap into uniform pieces, wrapped them up and added the brand name Sunlight. In a classic recent treatise on the subject, Fitzgerald nominates the prime causes of 'brandicide', the wilful ending of brands' existence, as 'arrogance, greed, complacency, inconsistency and myopia'. (Before the more commercially aware readers of this column point out that Mr Fitzgerald should know more about the death of brands than most, since he is in the process of divesting, transmuting or terminating a large number of Unilever's smaller brands at this very moment, we should allow him the defence that such actions are in the interests of Unilever's core brands and merely perpetuate the survival of the fittest. As any good Lion King would.)

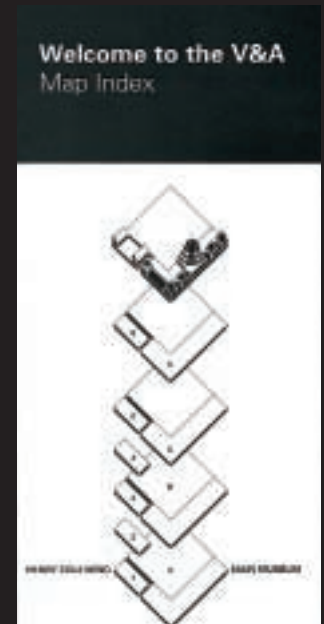
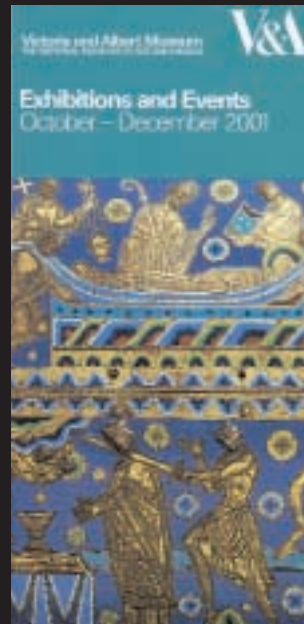
Whilst the William Levers and William Proctors of this world were carving soap, some other eminent Victorians were carving stone in the brave new world of Kensington, to create wondrous museums, totemic mansions of knowledge. Little did these benefactors know that one day those museums too would be regarded as brands, but that is what has happened. They and their successors were certainly not guilty of Niall Fitzgerald's 'brand sins', least of all myopia, and the continued strength and relevance of many great Victorian museums bear witness to foresight and good stewardship.

Of course, great national museums have been supported, from time to time, by generous governments, but their stewards should know better than to rely implicitly on ministers bearing gifts. Great museums need to behave as strong brands in any market and regard any benefits handed out by philanthropic Chancellors of the Exchequer as happy accidents, thank you very much, providing breathing space while new brand weaponry is developed and honed. As Niall Fitzgerald propounds, when it comes to valuing brands 'cash flow remains a trusty and constant yardstick', and he would not include government subsidy within that basis of valuation.

### Return to free entry

This is why today is an apposite time to consider the health of our great, national museum brands. Because today, or December 1st to be more precise, is the day that most of our great, national museums are paid, by that benevolent person in the soup kitchen of Number 11, Downing Street, to invite visitors to enjoy their collections and exhibitions free. How will they cope with this largesse? With great caution, one suspects, secure in the knowledge that this period of munificence represents but an evening (or three) in the life of a great, national museum. What these brands do today with their windfalls, their breathing space, will help determine their health when the gravy runs out and no further bowls can be ladled.

On either side of Exhibition Road, London SW7, stand two contrasting cases of brand health. To the west, The Natural History Museum. To the east, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the V&A. Now it could be argued that the differences in health of these venerable institutions owe more to curatorial policy or patronage or subject



matter than to brand management. A case can be made, however, that the visible differences in the strength of their branding bear witness to different standards of brand vision, brand stewardship and brand health. The tools betray the craftsman.

## The V&A

We have read much of the V&A's management problems, fiscal stresses and visitor confusion, but, if we read the museum's branded literature, can we see a light shining? I fear not. At the heart of the V&A's challenges, there lies a brand truth displayed here in glorious technicolour: the V&A knows not what it is, or, if it does, it knows not how to tell us. Its brochures covering individual events call it both 'Victoria and Albert Museum' and 'V&A'. Its Friends brochure leads with 'V&A'. The first brochure trumpets 'THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ART AND DESIGN'. The brochure for loyal friends does not. Here, it is 'THE WORLD'S GREATEST MUSEUM OF DECORATIVE ARTS'. Do make your mind up, old thing. Was it not you that opened the acclaimed exposition on brands and branding, Brand New, only a year ago? What irony. Experts on brands fail to brand their own institution effectively. Perhaps the curators and managers are finding communication difficult. Ladies and gentlemen, it is difficult. You have to practise. (Carnegie Hall revisited.)

Perhaps the V&A has never truly recovered from the inspired superficiality of Saatchi's 'ace caff' proposition. When Mr Mark Jones, the new Director, raises a new banner for the V&A - or for whatsoever it will be branded - let us hope it crystallises, in simple motivating terms, what this rich but fraying old friend has to offer.

And let us hope that then he will insist on higher, uniform standards of design in the branded literature handed out. Again, irony. The National Museum of Art and Design fails to design simple brochures satisfactorily. Consider the grim but supposedly welcoming map and map index. Consider the ways in which sponsors' identifications both vary and conflict with the museum's branding. Contrast these with the standards at, say, the British Museum. Down on the Cromwell Road there is work to be done. The V&A will need to spend its subsidies wisely if this once great brand is not to suffer even more. Here, the brand managers have not done service to their inheritance.

## The Natural History Museum

On the other side of Exhibition Road, however, stands a bright, shiny brand just 120 years young. The Natural History Museum has no god-given right to look healthy but it does. Its brand stewards have earned that right. You just know full well that if anyone is going to make good use of its subsidy, then it will be this bunch of brand activists.

Consider the imagination and aggression with which they have promoted their Predators exhibition. Very few families with 'pre-tweenies' will be unaware that this is The Year of the Predator. From the event's livery upwards - consistently, dangerously red - the branding weapons are sharp. Remember the TV coverage for T-rex? This team knows the value of effective media relations. Have you seen the tube cards and press advertising? ('If you haven't spotted the alligator by now, you're dead!') It may not win advertising awards - perhaps its proposition is too clear for obscurantist jurors - but it



understands its visitors. Even the Predators events and activities brochure displays care. Read it. 'Fun is not an option at The Natural History Museum - it's a must!' (Pity about the exclamation mark but the sentiment is right. Dead right.)

Remember when 'museum' meant cold, grey, boring days on the road with teachers or parents? When 'museum' and 'mausoleum' gave rise to forgivable confusion? These are the people who helped lead the revolution. From the day that the scaffolding left the facade of The Natural History Museum, one knew that there would be more colour inside as well. Here, there seems more harmony between content and projection than at the V&A. There is a unity of purpose behind the strong central plant symbol. And behind the unchanging definition. This is The Natural History Museum. Knowing that simple central truth, we can then explore its implications, and, with these brand managers, exploring is easy and fun.

Within the museum, The Guide is clear, helpful, ergonomically exemplary. Outside the museum, its messages reach out and smack you between the eyes. Its Myths & Monsters jump out and bite you in the middle of Bluewater; a masterstroke of partnering. Its logo leaps out from the 'tree of life' catalogue; six charities benefit but only one brand wins ('gifts that don't cost the earth' is a proposition made in heaven for this brand). And then its banner proclaims, yet again, that the museum is playing host to those other dumb animals from the fashion industry. Implausible? Not for this brand. Its strength allows it to make fortunes from glamorous banquets, as millions are lavished on fine food and wine, all under the skeleton of a prehistoric predator.

If any brand can handle the switchback ride of government policy on museum charges and subsidies, it is The Natural History Museum. Yet, even here, nervous sounds are faintly detectable. In *Nature First*, the typically well-branded magazine for its members, the museum

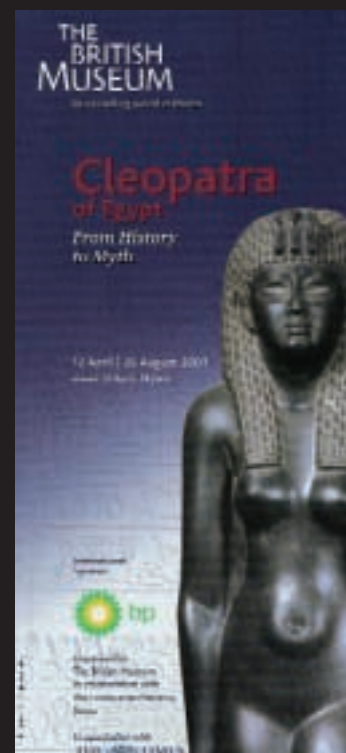
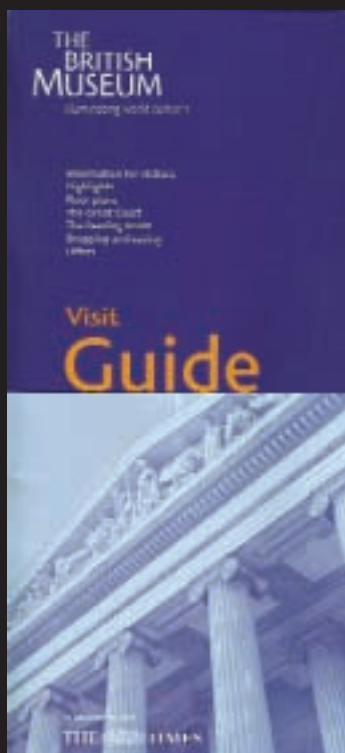
allows its Director, Sir Neil Chalmers, to protest a little too much that 'being a Member of the Museum is not just about gaining free entry...! Of course not, Sir Neil. Just let your brand managers focus on what new value membership will offer.

So, from December 1st both the V&A and The Natural History Museum will benefit from compensation for revenue lost in free admissions. May both use the subsidy and the breathing space wisely. (In the case of the latter there is confidence abroad. In the case of the former, there is hope, affection, even prayer, but rather less confidence. Let the V&A's branding aim higher, just as its stunning new British Galleries have done.)

## The British Museum

Yet a world away from the bright young things of Kensington, in serious, brooding Bloomsbury, there is another institution, another great, national museum (arguably the greatest of them all) which will not be tucking in at the soup kitchen come December 1st. The V&A will be receiving an extra £2.2 million per annum for the next three years. The Natural History Museum will receive an extra £6.6 million per annum, similarly in addition to its grant-in-aid. The British Museum, however, will not benefit from this philanthropy in Downing Street. It will miss out on some £8 million because it never charged for admission and thus cannot be compensated for loss of revenue.

Its outgoing managing director, Suzanna Taverne (who seems to be respected more than she is loved, as brilliant outsiders are, alas) is right to complain about this short straw. A simple adjustment to the British Museum's grant-in-aid might have eased the pain but this has remained at under £37 million per annum for the last decade



(eroding in value by virtually 30 per cent over that time) so it clearly ought not to change overnight. Heavens no, everyone will want another bowl if the government is not careful.

To consider the brighter side, however, Ms Taverne may wish to take strength from the health of the brand whose steward she has been. No museum in the world has proved its brand strengths with more visitors over more years than this. (After all, it was established in 1753 and spawned The Natural History Museum over a century later. Truly it is the grandfather of great, national museums.) If it is true that consumers determine whether brands live and grow famous or die and are forgotten – and it is – then The British Museum is a great brand. And it shows.

The set of brochures which explain the grand old man's offer are a symphony of classical design. From the central Visit Guide for the whole museum (30 pages rich) to the folded A3 brochure for a temporary exhibition (albeit the 'minor' Cleopatra event), a consistent vision is at work. The designer's hand gently leads you through its cornucopia of collections, events, galleries, offers, features, promotions, sponsors, news, architecture, so clearly that what should be unmanageable is manageable. This literature should be standard reading not just for managers of museums across the country, big and small, but also for the marketing-savvy sophisticates of the private sector. (Madame Tussauds, so cruelly appraised in the last *Review's* Brandwatch comparison with Disney: please note, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest. This is how to brand a visitor attraction.) Study the handling of sponsors' credits; even vouchers for *The Times* fail to disturb the spirit of place. Typography is always apt. Colour coding connects and separates. Layout is ergonomically defined.

Above all, read what the museum's copywriters have to say about their brand. Here is authority rendered accessible. The key is

simplicity. On Organising Your Visit: 'There is no right or wrong way to visit the British Museum. Every time you visit, you will discover something new.' (Perfect. Not a word out of place.) On The Reading Room: 'Here for almost 150 years scholars and revolutionaries, writers, poets and musicians, students and copyists, and a sprinkling of eccentrics came to consult the greatest library in the world.' (Congratulate the creative director for allowing the copywriter to 'sprinkle his eccentrics.' That way lies access.)

More important than any other copy, travelling across each and every item of brand literature, there is the museum's very own proposition: 'illuminating world cultures'. It is clear; it says what the museum does. It has distinction; no other museum could say this as convincingly and so it is truly competitive (without ever needing to be comparative). It conveys authority without pomp; more even than sharing or offering access, it gives light. There is even a joyful echo of Victorian ideals in the idea of 'illumination'. Was it not Matthew Arnold who coupled culture with 'sweetness and light'? This is a fine statement for a fine institution but it is also a great proposition for a great brand.

Now when the belts have been tightened at the British Museum and the subsidies have been spent elsewhere, which brand will be the strongest of them all? Whose visitors will return, whose cafe will be full, whose gifts will be prized, whose subscriptions maintained? One fears for the V&A and wishes its new leader well. One admires its westerly neighbour, not least for pulling off a fashion show with dinosaurs. For the British Museum, however, one has few real fears, only respect. It may be suffering fiscal wounds today but, as Niall Fitzgerald might agree, this brand is unlikely to roll over and die. This, the loyal visitor and faithful steward alike will not allow.