

“Museums Communication: What do they really offer? The power of preserving intangibles”

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Abstract

In the last 30 years museums have understood the importance of adopting different communication and marketing techniques in an overcrowded market to stand out. However, as non-profit institutions, museums offer intangibles that surround the objects which are displayed in those buildings. This intangibles need to be gathered together - usually through collaboration of different groups in society- in order to create an 'experience' which will help visitors to have a holistic approach to what they are gazing at in an exhibition. This way museums will become social arenas where understanding, representation and enrichment of cultures happen. The case study in this paper shows how some Spanish museums manage their Communication and Marketing Departments in order to promote those tangibles from an emotional perspective to appeal their stakeholders' interest.

Keywords

Communication, Museums, Intangibles, Marketing, Non-profits, Visitors

Introduction

For-profits and non-profits organisations need to adopt different communication strategies to promote their goods or services. According to the bibliography, lots of renowned British and American authors understand that Communication and its different tools as strategic planning or public relations are implied in a bigger jumble which is Marketing. This way of managing is normally undertaken by British and American museums because it makes the work in the department of Marketing and Communication easier. In this paper marketing will be understood by the author from a wider perspective where strategic communication is implied.

As Kotler and Andreasen explain (1996: 26) there is a big difference between selling soap and selling brotherhood. Museums promote experiences, education and learning, interpretation of the collection, information or services (McLean 1997: 107-128) but all of them are intangibles and need specific marketing techniques due to their characteristics.

The main aim of this paper is to show why for-profit and non-profit organisations need to develop different marketing strategies to promote what they offer. The first part of the assignment focuses on the development of marketing for museums in the last 30 years and how they have adopted it as a useful tool in the spare-time market. The second part of this essay researches the characteristics of non-profit organisations to demonstrate the differences between them and for-profits, and shows also the differences between tangible items and intangible services. The third part of this essay demonstrates why museums as non-profit organisations have to use marketing and communication not only as another department but as an institutional philosophy which

will guide different departments and collaborate with management. Besides this paper offers a case study based on the experience of two Communication Departments in two major museums in the city of Madrid, Spain: the Reina Sofía and the Thyssen-Bornemisza museums¹. These interviews maintained with the Communication Managers in the two institutions show an example of how Spanish Museums are working for the improvement of their way of communicating intangibles to their visitors. Finally, some conclusions are offered as a closing point for the paper.

As some authors state (Navajas 2008: 2; Ballart 2007: 38) in the last decades of the 20th century and since the appearance of the ‘New Museology’ movement, museums realized that the society where they had been developing their role was changing. Museums are institutions in a constant changing process. In the last twenty years men and women have had to work really hard to be able to earn their livings to maintain their way of life. According to that, weekends seem to be special days to spend with their families and to enjoy their spare time. Nowadays, they can find a huge amount of different options to choose like theatres, cinemas, shopping centres, sport centres or restaurants which have become a fierce competition for museums (Runyard and French 1999 2; Kotler and Kotler 2001: 20; Ballart 2007: 218).

After the birth of the modern museum during the French Revolution in 1793, visitors were not considered as important as they are nowadays (Hernández, 1994: 23). Museums were places exclusive for experts in the subjects contained in those temples such as scholars, painters or the upper classes who had received an specific education. They were the only ones allowed to enter and enjoy their time gazing at those works of

¹ These interviews are part of a present work in progress undertaken by the author.

art exposed there (Moore 1998: 44; Ballart and i Tresserras 2001: 49; Ballart 2007: 184; Kotler and Kotler 2001: 63). Museums didn't strive to attract visitors. Some authors like Alexander (1996: 6) established a parallelism between those organizations and cemeteries:

“Museums, cemeteries! Identical truly in the sinister promiscuousness of so many objects unknown to each other. Public dormitories, where one is forever slumbering beside hated and unknown beings. Reciprocal ferocity of painters and sculptors murdering each other with blows of form and colour in the same museum”.

Nevertheless, in the 20th Century and specially in the decades of the eighties and nineties British museums decided to internalize marketing and strategic communication as very useful tools for them in order to focus their attention in a wider number of stakeholders. Marketing also helped museums to research the role that those organizations played in the society were they had been installed (Chinchilla 2006: 20; Roper and Beard 2005: 58-59). Museums realized that visitors needed to be considered as an audience; they had to be attracted to the building. Professionals decided to research their visitors and establish different target groups. Besides they worked very hard in order to find what made their museum special (Kotler and Kotler 2001: 54). Strategic communication yielded wonderful results to those English museums which used it and in a short period of time, directors of these institutions realized how useful management and marketing techniques could be.

Marketing is used by the majority of institutions nowadays not only to offer their products but also to research about their target audiences. This science has become a useful tool for enterprises to understand what their visitors want and to adopt their products to people's needs (Kotler and Kotler 2001: 413). Nevertheless, other institutions in society don't sell products but they offer and promote services. Those organisations are known as Non-profits and museums are one of them (ICOM Statutes, 2007) . Products versus services. Do they share the same characteristics?

The beginning of marketing techniques in museums

Museums had to adopt to different social, political and economical changes during their history that affected to society and also to the environment where they were installed (Navajas 2008: 2; Ballart 2007: 38). In 1970 the appearance of the 'New Museology' movement changed the way museums had been understood. These institutions started to worry about their publics and adopted a new way of understanding their mission in society becoming more visitor-oriented places.

As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill states (1994: 3), the first investigations in visitors to museums started at the end of the 60's. One of the most famous researchers in that period was Pierre Bourdieu who published his work 'For the love of art²' (1969). However, Graham Black (2005: 9) assures that the visitor surveys taken by David Abbey and Duncan Cameron at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada in 1950 were the first ones undertaken and related to museum visitor behaviour. Anyway, the interest in studying the audience kept on while new methodology was discovered and made that process easier.

² Cfr. Bourdieu, Pierre. *L'amour de l'art: Les musées et leur public*. (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1969).

In the decades of the 80s and 90s American and British museum professionals realized about the importance of marketing and decided to introduce it into the organization (McLean 1997: 42; Kotler and Andreasen 1996: 5). Those professionals discovered how useful marketing was in order to research their audience and also to know what their visitors wanted from museums (Chinchilla 2006: 20; Roper and Beard, 2005: 58-59; Kotler and Kotler 2001: 54). Nowadays, museums have become another option for people who want to do something in their spare-time. As McLean explains (1997: 48):

“The political, economic and market situations have changed in museums, however, necessitating a competitive orientation. Economic realities and demands from founders, exacerbated by the expansion and developments in the leisure industries, have created a competitive environment to which museums must respond”.

This vision of museums having to compete against other institutions which offer different alternatives to enjoy spare-time has been supported by other authors (Runyard and French 1999: 2; Kotler and Kotler 2001: 20; Ballart 2007: 218). Marketing appears then as useful tool to investigate and understand the market, research the audience, and produce services or products suitable for those communities surrounding the museum. Unfortunately, there are some professionals in the arts who still relate marketing to an economic point of view due to some examples of astronomical prices achieved by some

authors and works of art like, for example, Damien Hirst's skull³ (Bradshaw and Kerrigan 2010: 5).

Museums and their social role

As Carmen Valdés assures (2008: 64) the definition of museum that the ICOM rewrote in 2007 specifies two essential pillars which support the museum: the collection and the society who benefits from it. This is the reason that justifies the different functions of the museum which will always tend to make that collection understandable to visitors due to the fact that this kind of institution is a valuable cultural tool to with a deep anthropological meaning (Grau, 2009: 28). Museums play an important role in society because they are considered by people as necessary tools to understand their past and their heritage. As Luis Grau states (2009: 30):

"El museo [es] un espacio que encierra un tiempo, un tipo de monumento conformado por la agrupación de una serie de objetos cuya selección artificial y ordenamiento, cuya presentación (...) construye un universo a escala que pretende representar a la sociedad que lo concibe (...). Los museos son (...) la perpetuación de una perspectiva colectiva, la congelación de una mirada de grupo, de una forma de ver la realidad que caracterizó a una comunidad".

Grau contemplates the museum as an space created in the interest of a community where its members can find different pieces of tangible and intangible heritage that help them to build their own personality. In other words, the museum turns into a "discursive space of 'structure' or connection between the local and the global;

³ This work of art was sold to a consortium for £38 million while Damien Hirst retained a 24% share, which produced a net evaluation of £50 million.

past and present; individual and group" (Golding 2009: 199). Richard Kurin (2004: 7) argues that the items acquired and displayed by museums ('tangible cultural heritage') become part of the collection but sometimes those objects lose their authority due to the influence they receive from their 'intangible cultural heritage'.

UNESCO defined 'Intangible Cultural Heritage' in 2003, during its 32nd General Conference as (UNESCO, 2003):

"The practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills -as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces associated therewith- that communities, groups and in some cases individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and it provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity"

Museum professionals are not trained for the deep research that knowing and understanding the 'intangible cultural heritage' of all those communities represented in a museum requires and so, this lack of information affects the exhibition. Dawnhee Yim (2004: 10) defends the importance of this kind of 'intangible heritage' that museums preserve in order to increase the signification of those objects on display:

"The concept of intangible cultural heritage may be unfamiliar to some cultural policy professionals. Many nations, in fact, do not have an intangible heritage

conservation policy. However, the importance of intangible cultural heritage in defining the cultural identity of a people or group cannot be overemphasised. And if no particular conservation policy is implemented in this age of globalisation, the danger of cultural extinction is a real one".

As Yim explains the conservation of the intangible cultural heritage of a community is vital for its survival. Nevertheless, museums find very hard to obtain this information that, very often, haven't been transcribed or recorded in any tangible way (Matsuzono 2004: 13). That's the reason why Kurin (2004: 7-8) contemplates dialogue as an "extensive, fully engaged, substantive" way of obtaining that information for those communities that hold that kind of heritage. This dialogue is the basis not only for the discovery of the intangible cultural heritage of a community but it's also the solution that can fight against the social exclusion that some groups in society have reported (Galloway and Stanley 2004: 136). Richard Sandell also supports this idea and justifies the social role of the museum through the dialogue between different members in a community and the institution (Sandell 2003: 45):

"Museums can contribute towards social inclusion at individual, community and societal levels. At an individual or personal level, engagement with museums can deliver positive outcomes such as enhanced self-esteem, confidence and creativity. At a community level, museums can act as a catalyst for social regeneration, empowering communities to increase their self-determination (...) Lastly, museums through the representation of inclusive communities within collections and displays have the potential to promote tolerance, inter-community respect and to challenge stereotypes".

This collaboration between museums and community members brings positive effects in two different ways that affect the human being individually but which also affect society. On the one hand, lots of intangibles from specific communities are explained by their members to museum professionals and act as a guide in order to represent their culture and contextualise the object, the tangible material shown in an exhibition. On the other hand and after entering the building, visitors from that community understand different anthropological remains from their own culture and those who come from different social groups can establish a dialogue which will promote understanding and cohesion between different people. This dialogical level turns the museum into an "unusual 'mass media' which accumulates an excessive credibility. Meanwhile the rest of media suffer from a tremendous discredit the museum keeps exempt from critics" (Grau 2009-2010: 31). As Do Nascimento states (2008: 25):

La continuidad y el futuro se construyen con la participación de la comunidad, del barrio o del movimiento social, transformando el museo en una herramienta de inclusión de la comunidad en la ciudad, presentando al conjunto de la población contenidos en los que puedan reconocerse (...) Es un espacio de convivencia, que invita al ciudadano y que, simultáneamente, reflexiona sobre el ciudadano y le hace reflexionar sobre su ciudad. Sólo así podremos hablar de políticas públicas de cultura, que tengan en cuenta la diversidad y las diferencias y que no refuercen las desigualdades"

Do Nascimento sums up the opinions of the previous authors who see museums as social arenas where dialogue, understanding and enrichment of cultures is possible.

Museums play a social role in society due to the fact that they are cultural institutions where everyone can learn but besides, because inside them we can find different technological and communicational tools which have been created at the service of society. The only way for museums to complete their task in society is communicating that intangible heritage surrounding objects and making it understandable to society. "Without an effective communication museums don't have any purpose" (Middleton 1990: 13 in Valdés 2008: 68).

Museums as non-profits: What do they offer?

According to the definition given by the ICOM⁴ and by the United Kingdom Museums Association⁵, museums are non-profit institutions. But what does this concept mean? As Sargeant defines (2009: 8) a non-profit organisation is:

“One that exists to provide for the general betterment of society, through the marshalling of appropriate resources and/or the provision of physical goods and services. Such organizations do not exist to provide for personal profit or gain and do not, as a result, distribute profits or surpluses to shareholders or members. They may, however, employ staff and engage in revenue-generating activities designed to assist them in fulfilling their mission”.

Museums are really concerned about the betterment of society and those communities that visit them (Watson 2007, Montañés 2006, Golding 2010). According to Yoshida (2004: 108-112) there exist lots of different ways of collaboration between museums and communities:

⁴ Cfr. <http://icom.museum/who-we-are/the-vision/museum-definition.html> (accessed on 25/03/2011)

⁵ Cfr. <http://www.museumsassociation.org/about/frequently-asked-questions> (accessed on 25/03/2011)

"As a place to store and develop intangible cultural heritage, the museum can function as an arena where people meet and develop their pride and identity, learn about their tradition and hand it down to the next generation, and make an appeal to the world."

Nevertheless, one of the main differences with other profit institutions arises in what museums offer to their publics. Instead of creating material products to use, they create intangibles as education, experiences, emotions, that are hard to measure (Kotler and Andreasen 1996: 26-28; Sargeant 2009: 8; Pinna 2003: 3). As some authors explain (McLean 1997: 53; Sargeant 2009: 41)⁶, the majority of non-profits offer services rather than physical goods. Marketing theory establishes the difference between goods and services using 4 key points: intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability.

Intangibility refers to the materiality of what is promoted by the organisation; its appearance which is really useful for the consumer to confirm the properties of what he is going to receive. Goods are tangible meanwhile services are intangibles. ***Inseparability*** focuses on the production and consumption of the good or service. Goods are produced and sold while services are promoted and then created. ***Heterogeneity*** refers to the difficulty of monitoring a service because of its intangibility. Finally, ***perishability*** focuses on the difficulty of storing services. Normally, when a service is cancelled it has been lost forever.

⁶ Both of them quote Zeithaml, V.A., Parasuraman, A. and Berry, L.L. 'Problems and Strategies in Service Marketing' in *Journal of Marketing*, American Marketing Association, 49 (2), 33-46. (1985).

For Theodore Levitt (1981: 94), tangibles and intangibles have differences, but they also present some commonalities that are inherent in both. Intangibles are always based on something tangible (Levitt 1981: 101; Matsuzono 2004: 13; Yanes 2007: 77). In a museum context, those intangibles that the institution offer to its public are based on a building, on a staff, and also on a collection, which are tangible goods that help the audience to internalize and understand those intangibles promoted (McLean 1995: 105). This means that although museums promote intangibles as education, research, or interpretation as their core services they are based on tangibles, material objects that can be touched and seen. Nevertheless, as Kotler and Andreasen state (1996: 26), there is a huge difference between selling intangibles and tangibles. Museums promote experiences, education and learning, interpretation of the collection, information or services (McLean 1997: 107-128) which are intangibles and need specific marketing techniques due to their own characteristics.

Marketing in the museum context

As it has been shown in the previous section, tangibles and intangibles don't share the same characteristics. Museums promote intangibles (although they are associated to some tangibles) and, as McLean states (1997: 106), "the museum product could legitimately be considered as the 'experience' of the museum". According to Carnegie (2010: 233) museums promote raw culture, an intangible whose meaning is created through the interpretation of those symbols and signs exclusives from different societies. As Seok-yeong explains (2004: 34): "museums should strive to transform intangible cultural heritage into tangible resources through documentation, interpretation, and transcription of the underlying data".

Marketing for non-profits are different from marketing for for-profits due to several points (Knox and Gruar 2006: 115; Sargeant 2010: 39). Firstly, and as it has been discussed previously, non-profits usually offer services which are intangible instead of material items. Secondly, there is a difference between non-profits and for-profits related to the “resource attraction” and “resource allocation”. Very often people who donate funds to non-profits are different from those who benefit from the services those institutions offer. Thirdly, non-profits set non-financial objectives which are quite difficult to monitor due to the intangibility of those services provided. Non-profits are more concerned with human and social interests and behaviours so, their results always happen outside the organization. And finally, non-profits are influenced by public scrutiny to demonstrate that their mission still fits with those services they provide.

According to these characteristics, non-profit organisations must be really aware of what their visitors want; they must know what is happening in the political, social, education environment to adopt their objectives, and they must establish a holistic marketing view (Knox and Gruar 2006: 115-117). As Sargeant assures (2010: 34), marketing and communication can be seen as concepts or as functions for organisations. The differences are simple: on the one hand, as a functional level marketing is another department into an organisation which researches, designs new strategies and promotes those products or services to the consumer. On the other hand, and from a conceptual point of view, marketing and strategic communication can be taken as a philosophy related to the management function that places the customer at the centre of the organisation.

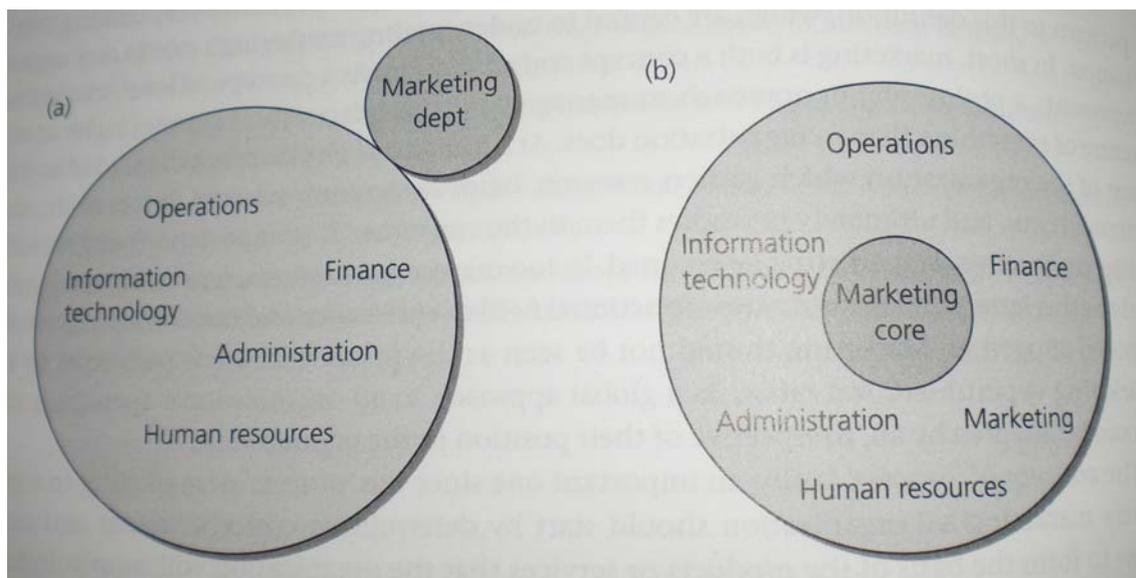


Figure 1. A) Marketing in a functional level. B) Marketing as a conceptual level.

© Sargeant, Adrian. *Marketing Management for Nonprofit Organizations*. (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2009 (Third Edition), p. 34.

If a non-profit organisation decides to adopt the 'A model', only members of the board in the institution will take decisions about their services. From a strategic point of view, management will have problems creating an overall mission known by the whole staff. However, if an institution decides to adopt the 'B model' marketing will be seen as a philosophy which will help management to drive the non-profit (Ryan, Fenton and Sangiorgi 2010: 221)

Case Study: Communication Department in Spanish Museums

During the months of April and May 2011 several interviews were held with two different Communication Managers in two of the main and most representatives museums in Spain, the Thyssen-Bornemisza, and the Reina Sofía museums in Madrid. In the first one the person in charge of this department is José María Goicoechea. In the second one, the manager of this department is Concha Iglesias. The authors decided to focus on these two institutions due to the vast number of visitors every year, their

educational programmes and the visibility that their exhibitions have in Spanish mass media. These interviews were held in Spanish and in the offices of the managers in each museum during a working day and in the morning. The material included in this article was obtained during these meetings for a subsequent analysis comparing the differences between the two museums.

According to what has been explained at the beginning of this paper, in spite of the fact that most part of the British and American authors read for this article talk about Marketing as a general compartment where communication and public relations are implied, in Spain Marketing and Communication and Public Relations are usually taken as two different departments.

The purpose of the questionnaire used for the interview tried to discover and understand the way these Communication Departments are managed and work in Spain. It also tried to understand the way two major museums in this country offer their services to society. The questions which appeared in the case study were:

Organisation

1. Where is the Marketing Department placed in the organisation-chart?
2. Who appoints the head of the department? How does he/she obtain the job?
3. What kind of relationship does the Communication Department has with the rest of areas in the museum?
4. Could you explain how are decisions taken in the department?
5. Is the head of he Communication Department consulted every time that the Direction takes a decision?

Communication Department

6. Does the Communication Department follow any kind of action policy that drives its mission?

7. Does the Department have any kind of institutional code of conduct to guide the work done by those professionals working in it?
8. Does the Department have any kind of personal code of conduct to guide the work done by those professionals working in it?
9. How many workers does the Communication Department have?
10. Which are the different roles of those workers in the Department?
11. Which are the necessary studies and skills to work in it, depending on the role?
12. How does the professionals access to their works? What is the promotion process procedure in the Department?
13. Do you have programmes in order to stimulate permanent training in your workers?

Activity

14. How do you plan/coordinate the work? (short term/medium term plans)
15. How are the meetings structured?
16. Could you explain the decision-taking process in the Department?
17. How and when the Communication Department does set its agenda?
18. Could you explain how these activities are organised in the Department?
 - Institutional Media (Web, newsletter...)
 - Media Relations (press)
 - Events
 - Campaigns
 - Sponsorship
 - Speech writing
 - Engagement with publics
 - Visitor services
19. Do you have any evaluation plan? How do you measure efficiency and efficacy?
20. Do you hire external services in the Department? For what kind of activities?
21. Could you explain your relationship with other areas and how you communicate with them?
22. What is the budget of the Communication Department?

Results:

1. There exist a Communication Department in both institutions which develops activities such as visitor studies, media relations, press office and strategic communication. The number of people working as staff in these departments is quite small compared to the size of the museums. The number varies between 4 and 6 workers with different positions as communication manager, communication assistant or officer. They all have a degree in communications or art history and they all had previous experience working in this kind of departments.

2. The economic recession that Spain is struggling brings lots of problems to this professionals who had suffered from important cuts decided by the direction of these institutions. Both communication managers agree more people would be necessary in order to develop a faster and efficient work but this desire is not viable.

3. Both departments still find lots of problems in order to establish friendly and lively relationships with different offices in the museum. They don't have meetings with other managers from other departments very often in order to simplify and make easier the way they work. When they decide to organise a meeting with these managers they neither take the minutes nor record them. According to José María Gociechea, Communication manager at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum: "The way we communicate with other departments is quite amateur". Besides, communication departments are the one that spend their day phoning their colleagues in order to keep informed about what's going on in the organisation.

4. As far as communication tools used in these departments are concerned, they still use traditional ways of keeping in touch with their publics (press releases, different kinds of events, reports...). Both museums provide a 2.0 Press Office in the Internet where journalists can find a wide variety of information and material available in order to facilitate their work. Annual reports, press releases and high resolution images are available for professionals.

5. Both managers are very interested in web 2.0 and they find Social Networks as valuable and free tools through which they can discover and understand their different target groups. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that these tools are considered vital nowadays to communicate with your audience, both museums find it very difficult to develop without someone in charge of them. This work requires time and effort to manage the different profiles of the institution in several social networks as Facebook, Twitter, Vimeo, Youtube, Foursquare...

6. Community Managers would be necessary in these institutions but, due to the cuts in the budget, these heads of department can't hire a new professional specialized in this topic. This task is shared between several members of the staff who manage the presence of both museums in social networks meanwhile they develop their own work. This way departments don't make the most of communication 2.0.

7. Internal Communications are not as developed as they should or, at least, as communication managers would like them to be. It's quite impressive that some workers in these institutions still don't have an e-mail address through which keep informed

about the different news happening in the organisation. Descendant, ascendant, and horizontal communications aren't managed in the best way.

8. An astonishing revelation by these two communication managers is that both museums don't have an intranet to facilitate their work and the way all the staff could keep informed of different news. The lack of this kind of system slows down communication and turns it into something inefficient and ineffective. Nevertheless, both managers assure that they are working with different departments in the creation of an intranet where staff will be able to find lots of information concerning the museum and their different departments.

Conclusion

After researching about non-profits, differences between products and services, and characteristics of marketing for non-profits, we can conclude that:

1. Non-profit organisations need a marketing holistic approach which influences the whole institution. Strategic communication will be very useful in order to reach ordinary visitors, new stakeholders and staff.
2. As non-profit institutions, museums usually offer intangibles which usually affect to emotions and feelings and which are also very difficult to express. Nevertheless, intangibles are always linked to tangibles like the collection preserved in a museum, the building itself, the staff... These element help us to communicate those intangibles which usually address to the emotional part of the human being.
3. In an environment of economic recession museums need communication and marketing in order to establish long-lasting relationships with donors and partners interested in the social role of this kind of institution. Fund-raising is extremely important for self-financing but also to have resources to study the preferences of our stakeholders.
4. Intangible heritage is vital for museums. It's what builds the context in an exhibition. It must be researched, understood by curators and then communicated in the best way to the audience so that they can achieve a museological experience.
5. Collaboration between museums and communities is a must in order to establish profitable relationships to discover cultural heritage. These two parts are linked through a dialogue through which the museum obtains lots of information which enrich the exhibition and can be used for a better understanding of society.

6. Museums then turn into social arenas where representation, understanding and enrichment of cultures are possible. The exhibition is a mass media through which visitors can discover new attitudes, ways of living and habits from different cultures.

7. Communication Departments in Spanish museums are on the good way adopting different strategies to promote intangibles to their audience. In spite of the fact that the resources are limited (budgets, number of people working there, lack of professionals in charge of the Web...) they have discovered the potential of researching their audience and adopting different messages to them through different channels.

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