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ORIENTATION AND IMPACT OF NONPROFIT MUSEUM WEB SITES

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Track: Online Marketing

Abstract

Museums face increasing pressure to attract wider audiences. This requires an understanding of visitor expectations and motivations for visiting the ‘real’ museum. Websites can act as an attracting mechanism for ‘real’ museum visits. However, for the most part, museums have concentrated their efforts on attracting visitors to promotional efforts and collecting statistical data on the demographic profiles of visitors. Museum websites as a means of attracting audiences have been ignored in the research literature. This paper researches the role of museum websites in developing audiences with special attention to the attracting power of the websites for visitors. Content analysis of 40 Australian museum websites was conducted using a structured tool, WebNPattract, designed and tested specifically for the purpose. Content analysis results can be used for the purpose of strategic positioning of the museum and cultural tourism. The paper outlines five aspects of museums—museum offer; corporate governance; finding the museum; characteristics; and governance communication—and two approaches to museum websites: the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘services’ perspectives. Marketing implications can be deduced from website orientation.

Introduction

At a time when the collections sector in Australia is being reviewed, with increasing attention paid to similarities and commonalities between the four domains of the sector, a review of museum websites is timely. In this paper, museum is taken to include art museum, museum, library, archive. Museums include zoos and aquaria. While this group may seem diverse, and the sample size for this pilot project is small, the data sought can nonetheless help in audience development and enrichment.

The growth and unique capabilities of websites present opportunities for museums to develop audiences directly from Internet users who are like their target visitors. Web site visitors are likely to be highly involved and active in acquiring information, well educated and on a professional income (Perry and Bodkin 2000). This is indeed like museum visitors themselves who have repeatedly been shown to be well-educated, professionals (DiMaggio, Useem and Brown 1978;). While the potential to develop audiences is evident, museums have been slow adopters of web sites for audience development purposes, using them initially for educational and informational purposes to display and promote collections. In short, they have been conceived from a product point of view, rather than a marketing one. This is beginning to change. Some museums may not use the full range of marketing communications on their web sites due to the perceived costs, people expertise and maintenance requirements. As a result of the time and effort required to establish and maintain a museum web site, for organisations which are cash poor at the best of times, this research sought to find out what purposes museum web sites are serving.
Marketing Orientation

Marketing orientation has been well covered in the marketing literature (Kohli & Jaworski 1990; Slater & Narver 1994 a/b; Deshpande & Farley 1998), but has received scant attention in the nonprofit arts literature. One exception to this omission is the recent paper by Sorjonen and Uusitalo (2003) which looks at the nonprofit performing arts. There is often caution expressed in the arts marketing literature about the degree of marketing orientation applicable to the nonprofit arts. For example, Kotler and Scheff (1996) set the tone: a purely market centre philosophy is anathema to the artistic concept. In summary, there is a dearth of art marketing orientation literature, much of it is conceptual rather than empirical (with the exception of Sorjonen and Uusitalo 2003) and is centred on U.S. nonprofit arts organisations.

The term marketing orientation often is used to mean the implementation of the marketing concept (see, for example, Kohli & Jaworski 1990). In essence, the marketing literature indicates how large companies interrelate as a formal system. However, this literature ignores the nonprofit organisation. The entrepreneurship literature discusses a pro-active rather than formal structured connections with the market (Geursen & Conduit 2000). This latter publication has been expanded into nonprofit museums.

Literature clearly shows that small non-profit organisations, of which museums are a part, have been slow to adopt web-based technology per se (Fillis et al 2002; Rentschler 2002), let alone for audience development purposes. Deloitte Touche Tomatsu (2001) reports that the arts in Victoria are not strategic in their adoption of digital media (including web design and usage). This suggests that arts organisations, which are all small, are grappling with harnessing technology as a communication tool, especially for audience attraction.

Arts organisations today need information on their audiences more than ever before. The Saatchi & Saatchi/Australia Council National Study (2000) likens most of the Australian public to a sleeping giant: ‘neither for the arts nor against the arts. This means they have enormous potential to be influenced in either a positive or negative direction if given new information, encouragement and options related to the arts’ (p. 20). The Saatchi & Saatchi study goes on to say that while arts audiences are largely Internet savvy, very few are actually visiting the websites of arts organisations. This indicates that the website is a significant medium which has large distribution potential but is yet to be fully exploited by museums. Websites have the potential to allow the visitor access to the museum’s products and services quickly and effectively. They can also provide immediate solutions to visitor queries. The tool provided by this study will be a resource that can be used to develop a greater understanding of how the design and orientation of a website can attract audiences and meet organisational aims.

Methodology

The aim of this research is to evaluate stage 1 of the WebNPAttract tool, designed by Rentschler, to measure the effectiveness of museum websites. WebNPAttract consists of two parts: a website content analysis tool and a survey instrument. To evaluate the tool, this project compiled an on-line expert panel to validate the components of the tool, and then obtained preliminary results by analysing the websites of 40 Australian museums. A principle
The aim of the project is to prepare the tool for immediate use. This requires evaluation of pilot test results obtained from the 40 museum web sites. WebNPAtrract modifies tools developed by museum and e-marketing experts (Adam & Deans 1999; Berry et al 2002; Di Blas et al 2002; Dyson and Moran 2000). The WebNPAtrract tool is unique in its approach as it combines the observational focus of website analysis with the institutional focus of the museum marketing managers and audiences surveyed. This approach enables researchers to evaluate an organisation’s website marketing focus and to place this evaluation alongside the organisational and audience perceptions of the on-line marketing function. The aim of WebNPAtrract is to extend beyond previous tools to provide the framework for evaluation of the audience-orientation of websites for museums. Literature suggests that it is not necessarily technology itself that provides strategic advantage for an organisation, but rather the way it is utilised in relation to customer needs and expectations (Adam & Deans 1999; Adam et al 2002).

This is the first stage in the three-stage triangulation study. Stage two will survey museum marketing managers to determine their perceptions of their museum web site. Stage three will survey museum audiences’ perceptions of the museum website.

The principle goals of this research are to:

- Test the WebNPAtrract tool in order to assess how effectively it serves its intended purpose; and
- Facilitate any changes to the tool that may be necessary in order for it to provide optimum results.

**Results**

Both qualitative and quantitative data are analysed in this project. Qualitative analysis of the websites provided the researchers with the following information:

There is a distinct difference in the ‘look’ and ‘feel’ of art museum, museum, zoo and aquarium web sites. Art museum web sites are more conservative, more static, with focus being on collections, exhibitions and education. Museums focus more on events, as well as the other categories. The better museum sites feature a degree of interactivity for children, such as at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. Zoos and aquaria have a busy, ‘living’ focus in their sites, but also heavily focused on attracting visitors. Some institutions, such as the National Library, are focusing on online involvement as well as attracting a real audience. Other sites directly petition online visitors to make a real visit to the museum. For example, the Art Gallery of South Australia director Ron Radford states: ‘I trust you will enjoy using our website and encourage you to make a real visit…’. The Melbourne Aquarium uses the imperative mood to invite the online viewer to ‘prepare to be astounded … visit the sea dragons … view the billabong from above or below…’.

The WebNPAtrract tool proved to be useful for the analysis of the Australian web nonprofit websites (see Table 1). The data produced permitted the researchers to consider four aspects of these organisations: the museum offer; the reference for finding the museum; web site and usage characteristics; and communication of managerial corporate governance. Overall, there was a focus in web sites on the museum offer web characteristics and on informing people on where to find the museum. There was limited interest in managerial and corporate governance.
Museum offer

In the museum offer there was an emphasis on “practicability” with characteristics relating to what is available and with (characteristics 1-8) all scoring above 80% across the agreement scales. Fewer respondents registered less than 10% on the disagreement (the balance being those whose rating was neutral). Characteristics 11-18 had a mixed presence although security of online purchasing was not well addressed. While there appears to be a measure of disability provisions on some sites, the tool in its present form did not enable us to measure the levels of disability provisions.

Table 1: Analysis of nonprofit museum websites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Ability to find</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std</th>
<th>1-3</th>
<th>5-7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Location and street address</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Map or town and project</td>
<td>5.15</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Transport options</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Facility information</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Online booking</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. International search</td>
<td>6.80</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Easy to use</td>
<td>6.78</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Multiple search facilities</td>
<td>6.54</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Own domain name</td>
<td>6.41</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Email contact</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Searchable catalogue of collections</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. General design</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Rich information</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Accessibility</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Facilitate access to information</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Seize online shopping</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Searchable catalogue of collections</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Disability provisions</td>
<td>6.90</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ability to find Museum

Web sites generally addressed these aspects well with all achieving above 63% positive ratings.

Web site Characteristics

Not surprisingly, museums treated web sites seriously. All museum web sites are easy to find and navigate, with links to well known search engines and site maps. However, differences are noted in the richness of information provided—a characteristic which can be used to judge effectiveness for benchmarking purposes.
There was a high emphasis on the structuring so that search engines would find them in ways and easy to understand language (23-26) and all the characteristics that enhanced usability (27-35). The characteristics which dealt with the more sophisticated aspects of web sites were less well supported (36-48) suggesting that there was emphasis on keeping websites as down to earth as possible.

Managerial corporate governance
Of all the characteristics examined those relating to this area were the least well supported. All ratings were less than 60% support levels. There was some interest in membership details, history and media releases. Given the strong support for a number of characteristics it is interesting that overall satisfaction was so low.

Discussion
The purpose of this research was to evaluate the WebNPAttract tool for the evaluation of museum web sites. The tool is generally thorough and easy to use. However, the testing process revealed a number of areas in which the tool could be improved. Firstly, there were several minor adjustments needed in the wording of some questions so that websites were not disadvantaged by restrictive wording in the questions. For example, a site may not have a ‘site map’ but may have an ‘index’. Some structural issues also emerged, with some questions being redundant or inappropriate and thus in need of deletion or allocation to stages two or three of the research. In certain sections of the tool, the choice of a likert scale may not be the most appropriate measure as a simple binary yes/no answer is adequate. Finally, some questions were hard to objectively measure or quantify. These were generally calling for a judgement as to the ‘richness’ or ‘attractiveness’ of a site, or how effectively a site utilised complex web applications yet avoided potential complications arising from this use. Thought needs to be given as to the best way to make these questions quantifiable. The inclusion of a comments section at the end of the tool provides an opportunity for the evaluator to make a valuable summary of the website overall.

The fact that the tool and method were able to uncover the aspects on the table above and the brief discussion that followed indicates that is an instrument of substance and is well suited to the purpose. There is qualitative evidence (not discussed in Table 1 results) that suggests that art museum web sites are ‘aesthetic’ in focus while websites for zoos, aquaria and libraries are more ‘services’ oriented. This finding relates to how museums perceive their mission. Whether it relates to managerial corporate governance issues (discussed above) would be interesting to tease out. Governance is not as issue well covered in the cultural literature and is deserving of further research.

Of particular interest is the lack of development of the governance section of museum web sites. One of the major social policy issues currently is governance. Recent events have made governance a leading issue for nonprofit arts organisations. In 2002, an article in Museums Journal cited the shortage of good trustees in museums as a ‘situation that was only likely to get worse’, with ‘very little literature on best practice governance’ in the museum sector (Pybus 2002 p. 30). In an increasingly complex regulatory environment, where accountability is demanded, governance needs to be carefully considered. However, the fact that it is rarely analysed in the museums literature is perhaps not so surprising, given that only 5.7 percent of articles in significant museums journals cover ‘administration’ issues, with governance not identified separately as a topic of interest. Of the 39 titles most cited in these museums publications as ‘influential works’, not one of them is on governance (Rounds 2001).
Although results are tentative from this pilot study, it is envisaged that we will provide a hierarchy of museum rankings for benchmarking purposes. In other words, we will be able to provide a small number of effective sites that might provide benchmarking possibilities. Part of the initial intention of this study was the testing of the websites over time. Once this has occurred and stages two and three of the study are complete, more comprehensive benchmarking data will emerge.

As mentioned above, each area within the collections sector may use their website for varying purposes. Over the testing process, certain websites emerged as displaying characteristics that successfully supported their intended function. Museum sites, for example, tended to be more focused on activities than the art gallery sites. Thus there was a high level of interactivity on the museum sites, plus a stronger focus on education and on appealing to a range of ages. Marked among museum sites was the Powerhouse Museum website (www.phm.gov.au). This site gives a strong and up to date indication of the exhibitions and activities happening at the ‘real’ museum, but also contains many online activities, some supporting existing exhibitions, some to support other focus areas. Basic information is easy to access, but the web visitor who wants to explore the site in more detail is given many interesting opportunities to do so. In this way the site supports the museum’s mission as a place to explore science and design, and also gives an impression of innovation and diversity that may influence a potential ‘real’ visitor.

Art gallery sites tended to be more static and limited in focus to the collections, exhibitions and activities of the gallery. There was not a great deal of variety in the categories presented on the various sites. What tended to vary was the ease of travelling around the site, the comprehensiveness of the information available and the level of visual content. The Art Gallery of New South Wales (www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au) is notable for its clean, strong aesthetic right from the home page. This is supported throughout by the provision of many images connected to its collections and exhibitions sections. Whether this actually influences a website visitor’s decision to make a ‘real’ visit to the gallery will hopefully be clearer after the third stage of this research is completed.

The data collected indicated a good profile of museum websites, which will be useful when triangulated with user and marketing manager data to determine the overall perception of websites and characteristic use. A particularly interesting piece of information is the low rating on satisfaction when there were such a large number of very strongly positive ratings. Is “overall satisfaction” a good “catch all” measure of a range of usage characteristics?

Future research entails conducting stages two and three of the project: the museum marketing managers’ perceptions of the web site and the audience perceptions of the web site. Once all three stages are complete, a triangulated pilot study will have been conducted, which provides museums with direction on orientation of museum web sites for greatest effectiveness.
References:
Sorjonen, H. and Uusitalo, L. 2003 ‘Market orientation and the programming of performing arts organisations’ AICAC 7th International Conference on Arts and Cultural Management, Milan, 29 June-2 July.