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How brand oriented are museums and galleries? An exploratory investigation across three countries

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Abstract
Museums are an important segment of the creative industries arena and are the context for this research study. The museum sector primarily comprises art galleries, historic and heritage properties, social history and science museums. The landscape within which museums operate is becoming more competitive and museum operators are striving to achieve their own ambitions and meet the expectations of multiple stakeholders. While academics and arts practitioners refer to museums as iconic cultural bastions, few academic studies explicitly discuss museums as institutional or corporate brands. This paper’s primary contribution is to provide a conceptualization of brand orientation within the museum context. In-depth interviews with leading museums across the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia validate the applicability of brand orientation to museums and the greater creative industries arena. The interviews also identify how brand orientation manifests itself in this context, as a precursor to future empirical works.

Keywords
Branding, brand orientation, museums.

Introduction
First and foremost, museums and galleries operate with an institutional orientation where the priority is excellence in scholarship through the collection, preservation and study of objects (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002). With the rise of the term ‘creative industries’, museums and galleries have been forced to review their economic potential and performance and become more
business and marketing oriented (Gainer and Padanyi, 2002). Although creative industry institutions have been said to distrust marketing (Lee, 2005), many are now recognizing that it is necessary in order to improve their competitive positioning and subsequent performance. This exploratory study builds upon previous brand orientation literature in the retailing and not-for-profit sectors (Bridson and Evans, 2004; Ewing and Napoli, 2005; Hankinson, 2002), in addition to creative industries and arts marketing literature (Scott, 2000; Rentschler, 2002). This study explores the adoption of branding practices by museums and galleries and the extent to which museums and galleries can be considered brand oriented.

**Brand Orientation**

While the term ‘brand’ has traditionally been associated with products and services, it has also been extended to corporate entities. At the heart of a corporate brand is the role of the organisation itself including its mission, culture, structure, people and processes (Hatch and Schultz, 2003; Ind, 1998; Urde, 2003). More recently the term brand has been extended from corporate entities to organizational orientations (Bridson and Evans, 2004; Ewing and Napoli, 2005; Hankinson, 2001; Hankinson, 2002; Urde, 1999). Hooley and Broderick (1998) contend that business orientations are fundamental organizational capabilities; they set the firm’s direction and activities to ensure that resources are fully exploited. In this sense, the brand acts as a compass for institution-wide decision-making. We define brand orientation in this sector as the degree to which the institution values brands and its practices are oriented towards building brand capabilities (Bridson and Evans, 2004). We contend that not all museums manage themselves as brands in the same way, to the same degree or with the same success. While numerous institutions, such as the Guggenheim Museum and British Museum, are clearly identifiable to their market as brands and are considered to reflect the characteristics of brands, others may not experience the same positioning or recognition (Caldwell, 2000; Colbert, 2003; Scott, 2000). This study builds upon previous brand orientation literature in the retailing and not-for-profit sectors (Bridson and Evans, 2004; Ewing and Napoli, 2005; Hankinson, 2002).

While existing definitions of brand orientation lack common conceptualization, all are either grounded in a philosophical or behavioral perspective (Avlonitis and Gounaris, 1999). The philosophical perspective is based on the premise that an orientation is entrenched in the organization’s thinking and reflected in its values and beliefs. Hankinson (2001), in her research of non-profit institutions, adopted this view and defines brand orientation as “the extent to which organizations regard themselves as brands and an indication of how much (or how little) the organization accepts the theory and practice of branding” (p.231). In contrast, Urde (1999) offers the following definition: “an approach in which the processes of the organization revolve around the creation, development and protection of brand identity in an ongoing interaction with target customers with the aim of achieving lasting competitive advantages in the form of brands” (p.117). This definition concentrates on the orientation as implemented behaviors and activities. Ewing and Napoli (2005), again within the non-profit arena, define brand orientation as “the organizational wide process of generating and sustaining a shared sense of brand meaning that provides superior value to stakeholders and superior performance to the organization” (p.842). The inclusion of process and a shared sense of the brand overcome previous definitional limitations by embracing the philosophical and behavioral aspects of the construct. We argue, however, that the focus on brand meaning confounds the true nature of the brand as an orientation. Deshpande and Webster (1989) suggest that for a firm to be market oriented, it must place the customer at the centre of the firm’s strategic thinking and operations. Similarly, for an organization or museum, in this case, to be brand oriented it must prioritize the brand and use it as a compass for decision-making. Thus, the definition proposed in this study combines the philosophical and behavioral perspectives with the focus on firm values and practices. We also
apply the brand orientation literature further through the inclusion of brand capabilities within the museum context.

Existing literature suggests that institutions need to develop critical capabilities based on the distinctive roles that brands play. We propose that brand orientation encapsulates four critical capabilities: (1) distinctive, (2) functional, (3) value adding, and (4) symbolic (Bridson and Evans, 2004). One important indicator of how highly an institution values its brand is the development of distinctive capabilities. A brand oriented museum recognizes the brand as a distinct asset, beyond the value of the collection it represents. The brand is an identifiable logo, symbol or word that differentiates the institution from competitors and, therefore, acts as a decision-making heuristic for visitors. A brand oriented institution must also utilize its brand as a means of satisfying consumers’ basic needs (Park, Jaworski, and MacInnis, 1986). This capability is termed functional and relates to the degree to which the brand communicates to audiences that the museum will provide superior utilitarian benefits. Such benefits in a museum context refer to practical issues including relevance of the experience and accessibility of the collection. Value adding capabilities refer to the critical beliefs and practices the museum employs to augment the rudimentary functional benefits communicated by the brand. A brand oriented museum may exhibit this through the addition of service and quality features to enhance the museum experience. Brands can also be distinctive enough to be extended to other venues, merchandise, exhibitions and even retail stores. These value-adding activities are viewed as an investment in the long-term future of the brand and are directed by a desire to communicate a superior brand image. Museums must also determine how their brand will be used to reflect the visitor’s current view of themselves and the manner in which it can enhance their aspirational self-identity. In this way symbolic capabilities establish the brand as a distinctive cultural icon. The existing brand orientation construct and dimensions provide a helpful theoretical framework for investigating the museum branding landscape. The central research question addressed in this study is:

ROI: Are museums brand oriented and how are the four critical brand capabilities manifested?

Methodology
The need to gain a better understanding of the museum branding landscape naturally led to an exploratory research approach. A growing contingent of brand researchers is applying qualitative approaches and case studies (de Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1998a; Ewing and Napoli, 2005; Merrilees and Miller, 2008). To undertake this exploration a multiple case study design was utilized and consisted of key informant interviews using a semi-structured interview protocol, site observations and analysis of institutional documents. Data were collected from 18 leading American, British, and Australian Museums (Table I). The study is geographically diverse with similar philanthropic government policies towards the arts evident in two of the three countries (Australia and the United Kingdom). The United States of America provides a comparative context where arts funding is not driven by government and, hence, museums rely more on private sources of funding. The criterion for sample selection within each country was to canvass a spectrum of museums with a range of galleries of art and museums with historical, science and social history works. It was also important to select instrumental cases where branding was apparent (Stake, 1995). In each case, the director nominated by each institution as having overall responsibility for marketing or commercial operations was interviewed. These were the most appropriate informed sample able to discuss branding and brand orientation. The museums in this study were all open to the public with permanent collections. The names of all museums participating in the study remain undisclosed as a condition of participation.

All case study interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with an average length of approximately 90 minutes. Subsequent interviews of a less formal nature included opportunistic, casual, phone and email correspondence which were not recorded and transcribed at the time but
were field-noted and coded. These latter types of interviews were frequently used to clarify particular aspects of the analysis as they arose. In accordance with Patton (2002), data integrity was assured through triangulation. This was achieved by the investigators comparing insights and interpretations, as well as across methods (semi-structured interviews, site observations and analysis of institutional documents). Conceptual ordering (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) was conducted whereby the data was organized into discrete categories according to their properties and dimensions, and then using description to clarify those categories. Employing the constant comparative method (Strauss and Corbin 1998), data was collected, coded and analyzed concurrently for similarities, differences, general patterns and relationships. Through this analysis the key issues were identified and modeled.

Table I: Sample Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australia Museum</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>United Kingdom Museum</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>United States of America Museum</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Director of Marketing</td>
<td>7 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Head of Communications</td>
<td>13 Historical</td>
<td>Vice-President Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Science &amp; Social Hist</td>
<td>Director of Operations</td>
<td>8 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Head of Marketing</td>
<td>14 Historical</td>
<td>President and CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Historical</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>9 Science</td>
<td>Business Development Manager</td>
<td>15 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Director of Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Director of Marketing</td>
<td>10 Social History</td>
<td>Marketing &amp; Retail Manager</td>
<td>16 Art &amp; Social History</td>
<td>Director of Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Science, Art &amp; Design</td>
<td>Marketing Manager</td>
<td>11 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Head of Gallery</td>
<td>17 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Associate Director Marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Art Gallery</td>
<td>General Mgr Marketing</td>
<td>12 Historical</td>
<td>Head of Marketing &amp; PR</td>
<td>18 Art Gallery</td>
<td>Director Marketing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results
In response to ROI (Are museums brand oriented and how are the four critical brand capabilities manifested?), the findings summarized in Table II, which includes indicative case evidence; suggest that all museums in the study can be considered brand oriented to some degree. Caldwell (2000), Scott (2000) and Colbert (2000) all found that numerous institutions, such as the Guggenheim Museum and British Museum, are clearly identifiable to their market as brands and are considered to reflect the characteristics of brands. Our findings support their contentions. We also expand their research as it was evident through our indicative cases that not all museums experience the same brand recognition or subsequent rewards. For a museum to be brand oriented it must prioritize the brand and use it as a compass for decision-making (Deshpande and Webster, 1989). In all cases respondents noted that branding activities and the brand in general had been elevated in the institution’s list of priorities (Case 5). Many respondents viewed this new focus on the brand as part of a cultural revolution within the institution (Case 1). This highlights the recognition within the sector that the brand is more than a marketing tool and that it has significant implications for organizational culture (Case 7). As a business orientation, the brand does act as a compass for decision making in many institutions. In fact, the brand’s ability to guide the strategic direction of the institution was almost universally acknowledged.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand Orientation</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>United Kingdom</th>
<th>United States of America</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand as a culture</strong></td>
<td>…we have a political opportunity here to change the culture of an organisation steeped with a lot of tradition and baggage. (Case 1)</td>
<td>I mean it’s strategic. It’s not about advertising, it’s about defining what you are as an organisation and I think that has to be done with the blessing of people internally and in fact it has to grow out of the people internally. (Case 7)</td>
<td>It’s not just the marketing department being the branding police; everyone has signed up to what we are and what we’re about. (Case 12)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>It’s so much at the heart of what we do and of what we’re about that you can’t ignore it. It permeates the offer, the commercial offer, it permeates the institution, so the whole, it runs all the way through. (Case 9)</td>
<td>There are two parts to branding. The first part is the group therapy that needs to happen where we all get on the same page and figure out who we are…It’s not just marketing against curatorial, it’s really having a balanced discussion about what we’re here for and how we achieve our goals. (Case 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brand as a compass</strong></td>
<td>I mean it is the offer itself so why shouldn’t it define the offer and I think it does to a point. (Case 1)</td>
<td>What there’s never been is a sense of common purpose or a common goal and actually I think that that’s kind of what we’ve now started to put in place…We kept calling it a tool kit for decision-making and that’s exactly what it is. (Case 7)</td>
<td>Elements of that brand should be reflected throughout everything we do and I think everyone is very much signed up to it and whenever anything is agreed at a strategic level by the Director and the senior management team, in this branch, they’re always revisiting that brand statement and thinking about how it impacts on that and whether that’s relevant. (Case 12)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>It’s critically important. You can see that from the last three strategic plans have been on how our brand has been elevated structurally and how it’s positioned and also about construction. So you don’t just have a brand structure here and an exhibition structure here. (Case 5)</td>
<td></td>
<td>We needed something more specific to drive the property decisions and the curatorial decisions. it’s really truly a mantra here. (Case 16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Distinctive capabilities</strong></td>
<td>But the key thing really was establishing that XYZ stood for [gallery full name]. (Case 1)</td>
<td>It sets you up and sets you apart. (Case 9)</td>
<td>The purpose of branding is to most efficiently project the perception of the museum in the mind of many diverse publics. (Case 13)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| | Well uniqueness, being able to define your uniqueness, to differentiate yourself from the | The brand is the museum’s identity succinctly encapsulated in a logo or statement…Unique, innovative, challenging, pushing the boundaries of the monument. it’s in the | Again we don’t own the monument. it’s in the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Market</th>
<th>More traditional museum, the X brand to a certain extent is also characterised by the building itself which is a major landmark in M. (Case 10)</th>
<th>Public domain, so the only thing we own is our logo, so the name is everything because it is our logo. (Case 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functional capabilities</td>
<td>I think it’s about evidence really and just to be able to in a snapshot in an instant to communicate the kind of experience that the X can provide. (Case 1) ...drawing those brand discussions back to it’s not about marketing, it’s not about the logo. it’s about the core experience of our core visitors. (Case 5)</td>
<td>It’s got a big brand. You can know what to expect especially if they’ve never been there before...I think on one hand it’s a seal of quality and so people who come know what they’re going to get basically. (Case 8) From a visitor perspective it’s a museum that’s going to be good for their kids. (Case 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-adding capabilities</td>
<td>...the value of this unique brand could be incredible. So you’ve got to know how to define and value add. (Case 5) Our attributes ...welcoming, energetic, inspiring, engaging, vital..., are embodied in the feel when you come into the building. That’s how you sense it. That it’s an active place and that it’s constantly changing, constantly evolving, we’re constantly introducing new ideas. (Case 6)</td>
<td>What I then want to go on and do is say right, if we’re engaging people in the experience of the collection, forget marketing and design that’s taken care of itself now, we’ve got guidelines so fine, let’s look at all the other stuff, let’s look at exhibitions, let’s look at the education program, let’s look at families, let’s look at the shop...(Case 7) In many ways museums are no different from consumer products, a successful brand can be expanded upon. The Tate now has 4 sites and the Guggenheim has expanded outside of the US. (Case 10) The brand is made manifest through exhibitions, public programs, publications, school programs, marketing materials, the Museum’s website, its collections, its policies in regard to all of the above, and its advertising and press. (Case 13) I think the store; it’s extending the brand. I think it’s giving people a chance to take part of the museum home with them (Case 17) We’re adding, it’s called the Director’s Pick this summer...This permanent collection and commentary on the architecture will eventually be available in multiple languages (Case 18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic capabilities</td>
<td>We want to go towards something like ‘It’s my XYZ’. (Case 1) I suppose to the tourists the place is patriotic and passion. (Case 3) I think the Australian story is one of the key kind of</td>
<td>I think XY has had a large effect on X in particular because it’s almost bigger than the art. (Case 8) I want it to be something that people think that if it’s a Sunday, what shall I do – that would be a nice, warm, comforting thing to do...It’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>We have the freedom to talk about who we are as an institution and encourage people to take the ride, because it doesn’t matter anymore what’s in our galleries, they are trusting us as the vehicle to take them on this. (Case 15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>propositions. (Case 4)</td>
<td>more being able to immerse yourself in something that you feel familiar with… (Case 11)</td>
<td>…a dynamic place where there’s always something new to see and do, a place to kind of get away from the hustle and bustle of everyday life, but also is a place to go for excitement and to be with friends. I’d like for people to see it as something that really helps round out and fulfil them. (Case 17)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The difference in the degree to which museums have embraced brand orientation relates to the range of decisions that are brand-led. In the social history and science museums the brand was an all-encompassing guide for decisions ranging from store design and program development to acquisitions and exhibitions (Case 12). In contrast, some art galleries (Cases 1 and 16) had progressed to a point where curatorial decisions were made with the brand as a strong reference point. However, for many Marketing Directors in art galleries this was still an aspiration and something that they were still working towards (Case 7). It is important to note that using the brand as a compass for decision-making does not equate to the Marketing function dictating major collection and exhibition decisions. Rather, such decisions are guided by a clear sense of who the museum is and what it stands for (Case 12).

In terms of the dimensions of brand orientation, all four brand capabilities are evident in the museum sector. This is in line with existing research of the four brand capabilities within the fashion retail sector (Bridson and Evans, 2004). At a fundamental level, the value of a distinctive logo is unanimously endorsed. All of the museums were devoting resources to establishing immediately recognizable brands (Case 1). For many, the distinctiveness of the brand and the logo itself were closely related to the institution’s architecture (Case 10). The primary manifestation of this capability was the deployment of resources to communicate the uniqueness of the brand as a source of differentiation (Case 5). Of great concern to many respondents is that the brand needs to symbolize the core experience (Case 1). This functional capability focused on the brand’s ability to manage audience expectations. In particular, this capability was manifested through the brand’s ability to communicate two key functional benefits: relevance and accessibility (Cases 9 and 15). Many respondents also referred to a range of strategy decisions that are seen as part of the long-term investment in building a superior brand image (Case 5). Value-adding activities, such as brand extensions, website improvements, virtual exhibitions, new programs and the museum shop were viewed as critical initiatives to enhance the relevance and dynamic aspect of the brand (Case 6). Finally, the symbolic capability of the brand is something to which all respondents aspired. The brand’s ability to embody more than the collection and exhibitions it represented was a clear manifestation of symbolic capability (Case 8). When discussing the attributes of their brand, many respondents used quite emotive language that suggested a strong personal connection between the brand and the visitor (Cases 3, 11, 17). In general, respondents wanted visitors to feel a sense of ownership of the brand (Cases 1 and 17).

**Conclusion**

This study provides a foundation for brand research in the creative industries arena. The evolution of museums towards brand orientation is a growing sign of the power of brands in today’s society; not merely as an identifiable logo for visitors and audiences, but as a compass for organizational-wide decision making and coordination. Museums exist as houses of objects and
collections (McLean, 1995). They therefore, must operate with a curatorial orientation where the priority is excellence in scholarship through the collection, preservation, research and study of objects (Gilmore and Rentschler, 2002; Kotler and Kotler, 2000). While for decades collections were a key dimension predicting museum performance, the emphasis is now shifting to visitor needs and satisfaction (Rentschler and Gilmore, 2002). Museums’ second imperative is, therefore, a commercial orientation (Gainer and Padanyi, 2002), whereby the priority is the institution’s audience, its direct and indirect competitors and increasingly the pursuit of market relevance and increased funding. The relationship between the curatorial and commercial imperatives is often referred to as a tension in professional bureaucracies within the institutions. The tension is between the professional, peer controlled needs and managerial or organizational needs (Rentschler and Gilmore, 2002). A museum that develops and displays its collection in isolation of a commercial orientation may find they fail to achieve market relevance and accessibility. Similarly, creating bigger, brighter and better audience experiences are dependent on excellence in curatorial oriented activities, as without their collections, the museum would cease to exist. Moreover, increasing environmental pressures necessitate a more proactive approach to alternative funding sources. Museums must also be distinctive and, hopefully, clearly differentiated from their competitors in audiences’ and stakeholders’ minds. Using the brand as a compass for decision making provides the museum with a high level of consistency. This consistency results from a shared understanding of what the brand stands for and how the brand’s identity is manifested through the day-to-day values and practices of the institution. Such uniformity in understanding and consistency across functions should facilitate a focused allocation of finite resources to brand-building activities. In this way, brand orientation acts as a bridge between curatorial and commercial imperatives. This enables them to invest in curatorial priorities and simultaneously achieve interest and relevance to audiences.

The research findings demonstrate that museums are pursuing brand orientation and it is reflected in their organizational philosophies and behaviors. In achieving this objective a number of potential limitations need to be highlighted, which also present a number of avenues for future research. We deliberately chose to investigate the research question from the perspective of those responsible for marketing or commercial operations. We do not consider this to be a limitation of the study given the role these people play within museums. However, given the significance of the curators and other strategic areas of museums, future qualitative research with these parties would provide a useful extension. Our research suggests that a multiple stakeholder perspective is vital in understanding the complexities of museum branding in practice. Future research could also investigate this phenomenon in other creative industry sectors. Another limitation of this study is that it focused on English speaking countries that have been shown to have a more receptive attitude to adopting branding notions than those in continental Europe. Further research will provide a platform for comparing and contrasting the more advanced Anglophone tradition with the European tradition, providing rich data on museum branding in the next stage of the study.
References


