

An Initial Classification of Branding Strategy in Australian Arts Organisations

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Abstract

This research examined the corporate branding approaches and strategies adopted by six prominent Australian arts and cultural organisations. The aim of this exploration was to identify patterns in branding across different arts and cultural organisations, and attempt to provide an initial classification for understanding how these organisations approach branding strategy. We found that three factors influenced branding strategy in the surveyed organisations, viz., the focus of branding process, the degree of consistency in branding communication, and the required level of customers' involvement in the branded products. The organisations studied were then plotted on a continuum that considered each of these factors.

Introduction

Over the last twenty years the role of brands has been widely examined, and there has been substantial interest among academics and practitioners in understanding the importance of the brand management process. The strategic importance of brands – defined as “a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers” (American Marketing Association, 2008) – is widely recognised in the marketing literature (Aaker, 1991, 1992; De Chernatony and McDonald, 2003; Kapferer, 1994; Keller, 1998). Branding is a powerful means of differentiation and can help to develop competitive advantages for firms (Aaker, 1991).

Despite the importance of branding being duly recognised in the business sector, “the efficacy of brand management in nonprofit organizations has received only scant attention” (Ewing and Napoli, 2005 p. 841), and in the arts and cultural sector has been argued to be a “new phenomenon” (Colbert, 2005, p. 67). This reluctance to apply the concept of branding to the arts sector may be a consequence of the traditional idiosyncrasy and aversion of arts and cultural organisations to marketing and a market orientation (Diggle, 1976; Kolb, 2000; Colbert, 2000). Traditionally, the management of arts organisations had been considered as “safely separate, and distinct from other types of business organisations”, since “it was assumed that different rules would apply to the management of these organisations, just as different rules applied to artists” (Kolb, 2000, p. 15). Nevertheless, even if cultural and arts organisations have resisted the application of typical marketing approaches (Diggle, 1976), we suggest that it may be useful for them to recognise the importance of brands (O'Reilly, 2005) in order to build a strong and trustworthy reputation (Colbert, 2003).

Since little research has been conducted into branding approaches and strategies in arts and cultural organisations (Colbert, 2005; O'Reilly, 2005), this research sought to explore how these organisations approach and relate to branding, and to examine, at a corporate level, patterns in branding across different arts and cultural organisations, and attempt to provide an initial means for understanding how these organisations approach branding. This research did not seek to examine consumer responses to brands, beyond the insight provided by managers, as this project was focused upon a corporate response to branding, and builds upon previous work in the broader field (e.g., Bridson and Evans 2007).

Research Approach

In order to explore the adoption and management of brands by Australian arts and cultural organisations, a qualitative research approach was adopted. The qualitative approach, based on in-depth interviews, was chosen as the most appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research (Goodyear, 1990). In-depth interviews allow researchers to extrapolate managers' views "within their frames of reference, without imposing any of the researchers' 'preconceptions'" (Chernatony and Dall'Olmo Riley, 1997, p. 94). Six organisations were selected on the basis of advice provided by an arts marketing experts' panel, consisting of one arts bureaucrat, two arts management academics, and four arts managers located in five states of Australia. Data were collected through long interviews – approximately one and a half hours long – with general managers and marketing managers of arts and cultural organisations including museums, galleries, theatres and festivals, with a total of 10 different people being interviewed for the research. These managers represented the following arts and cultural institutions (referred to as Org. 1, Org 2, etc.), Org. 1, a large¹ networked organisation, incorporating five different museums; Org. 2, a large visual arts museum established in 1861; Org. 3, a medium² sized performing arts organisation, founded in 1984, and one of Australia's most respected and celebrated theatre companies; Org. 4, a large organisation, founded in 1962, and one of Australia's flagship arts companies; Org. 5, a medium sized theatre company presenting contemporary theatre, and Org. 6, a medium sized biannual festival based in Melbourne and presenting "genre-busting" new work by Australian artists. All organisations were partly funded through government grants, with all receiving at least 50 per cent of their income from government. The researchers were also provided with visual identity materials from brand designers, as well as access to annual reports, marketing reports (including previous marketing strategies), strategic planning documents, and previous marketing materials, such as posters, websites, and programs. Collected data were analysed through discussion with the research team and the expert panel in order to plot the organisations along a continuum representing the diverse brand orientations and features of arts organisations in Australia.

Key Findings

Through the analysis of the data collected, three initial dimensions emerged when seeking to classify the branding paradigms of the organizations: 1) the focus of the branding process, 2) the degree of consistency in branding strategies and 3) the required level of customers' involvement in the brand and the organisation. Each of these elements is now examined in more detail to provide a framework to branding in cultural organisations.

From Customer/Audience Orientation to Content/Product Orientation

Perhaps the most prominent element emerging from the interviews was an orientational dilemma (Andreasen, 1985; Lee, 2005) of the arts organisations in the focus of their branding communication. Some organisations had an explicit and managed branding strategy that focused on customer/audience access, allowing branding (and marketing) precedence over content. Thus, in these contexts, the content was viewed as a function of marketing, managed by the marketing group, and utilised to attract different types of audiences and stakeholders. For example, Org. 1 stated, "*We are an audience oriented organisation – we're very audience focused and we would see our audiences as our broad community, our stakeholders, the international community, our visitors through the door – so a very broad audience and through that our reputation and brand are absolutely essential,*" and, "... we will always

¹ Large: audience size > 500,000 per annum; Turnover > \$5M

² Medium: audience = 200,000-500,000; Turnover, = \$500K - \$5M

consider the audience for our products when we are planning exhibitions.” Similarly, Org. 2 explained that they used marketing tools to explicitly target different audiences, “What we have done is the segmentation of the audience, so I guess you’ve got a sort of demographic spec, but we’ve also, in the last year, done this segmentation work, so if we take two continua, we take, people here for the art itself if you like, per se versus for the event. But our focus is on the audience – it has to be.”

Other cultural organisations, however, strongly refuted the idea that marketing, with its focus on the audience (or customer), could take precedence over artistic content. These organisations sought to challenge the audience to understand the artistic message and content, rather than simplifying the message to attract a larger audience. According to Org. 3, the content must inform the brand: *“It has to be content first and I think that the sorts of people who come to us as audience members are people who want to be seeing that content [...] It’s that the work has attracted the audience and we’re now looking after them.”*

Moreover, according to Org. 5, the content must be the starting point for branding, *“We like to do our darndest to build people into becoming theatre goers, but, I mean, that’s not something you can achieve with branding [...] The programming drives the perception of the brand. [...] Let the rest happen – let culture decide.”*

In addition, the branding of Org. 6 purposefully set out to challenge their audience, even when it came to branding strategy. Expressly difficult and dynamic - the shape and content are continually redefined in an interactive and mutual relationship between the artist and the organisation.

Thus, it is arguable that the brand management process in organisations such as Org. 1, 2, and, 4, is focused on audience first, content second (although this is not to suggest that content is not an important consideration). However, organisations such as 3, 5 and 6, tend to refute the idea that marketing and explicit branding strategies should guide their image and philosophy, and emphasise the artistic content as a means of communicating the brand, rather than approaching it as a marketing exercise *per se*, i.e., the content is created *by* the artist, rather than *for* an audience. This orientational dilemma in branding is a reflection of the tension embedded in the concept of arts marketing. Indeed, the “major difficulty” in transferring marketing to the arts is “the central marketing notion that products are created to suit customers” (Bhrádaigh, 1997, p. 208), and premised predominantly on a rational and instrumental worldview (Saul 1999).

From Low Brand Involvement to High Involvement

The nature of consumer involvement can vary in the process of brand value creation. In an age characterized by loss of commitment (Firat and Shultz, 1997) and disaffection, the real challenge for branding is to build a strong and lasting bond to customers, and an “interactive relationship and experience based approach to brand building” (Klaus and Maklan, 2007, p. 115). Australian arts and cultural organisations seem to have a diverse approach toward customers’ involvement in the organisation and its brand.

Organisations such as 3, 5, and 6, stated that they sought to have their audiences expend effort in terms of comprehension and emotional attachment. Org. 6 was very clear that their strategy was to make their audience “*work*” to understand their brand. Similarly, in the case of Org. 5, the content functioned as a *post-hoc* segmentation tool, “I don’t want a conservative audience to come in and hate it”, was an indicative comment.

Alternatively, audience focused organisations, such as 1, 2, and 4, attempted to make their brand communications simple, highly understandable and recognisable, focusing on a circumscribed value set, and on consistent visual and content brand assets in order to attract a

larger audience. As such, these organisations did not ask for a great effort from their target markets in relation to comprehension or brand involvement. Indeed, the fact that these organisations consider other leisure time activities, e.g. going to the shopping mall, to the cinema and sport, to be their direct competitors, suggests that consumption of their product could be interpreted as a low involvement activity. As Org. 4 admitted, *“Our direct competition is... it’s basically how people spend their leisure dollar. And so, we need to work out how we can turn them around to actually try and commit for three or four times a year. And one of the biggest things is people’s lack of commitment”*.

The comparison between leisure time and art time is also evident for Org. 2. The main objective of branding is to make the art experience an ordinary experience, *“We recognise if we are going to get regular visits, then that’s [turning it into an ordinary experience] a key way to do it and that’s a very efficient way to do it”*.

Thus, these organisations sought to make the art experience an easy, routine-like, low involvement experience, similar to going to a sporting event or to the cinema. In these organisations, the experience of art is presented to its audience as a more casual, rather than serious, activity (Stebbing, 1982).

From Consistency to Inconsistency

Contemporary branding literature suggests that brands should be managed according to a logic of consistency (Aaker, 1996; Balmer and Gray, 2003; Kay, 2006). Although some continuity is essential to the construction and development of the brand over time (Kapferer, 1995), and to guarantee recognisability and awareness to brands. Nevertheless, a degree of flexibility in branding could be useful so that consumers are able to develop a strong commitment to products and brands, rather than a “momentary attachment” (Firat and Shultz, 1997, p. 195).

Audience focused organisations, such as 1, 2 and 4, tended to be highly consistent and controlling in their branding, both from a visual and content perspective, in order to achieve their brand awareness and recognisability goals. At Org.1, for example, consistency in branding – i.e. organizational values and visual identity - was fundamental, *“Our brand strategy is around being a family of brands. So it’s moving from the clutter to being a family. And it’s aim – our brand strategy simply aims to raise our profile by communicating in a consistent and coherent way.”*

As stated by the marketing director, the current concept of the Org. 1’s brand originates from the intention of management to both systematise and organise *“the clutter”* of their previous brand, to *“reduce the ambivalence and the confusion generated by the multitude of brands”*.

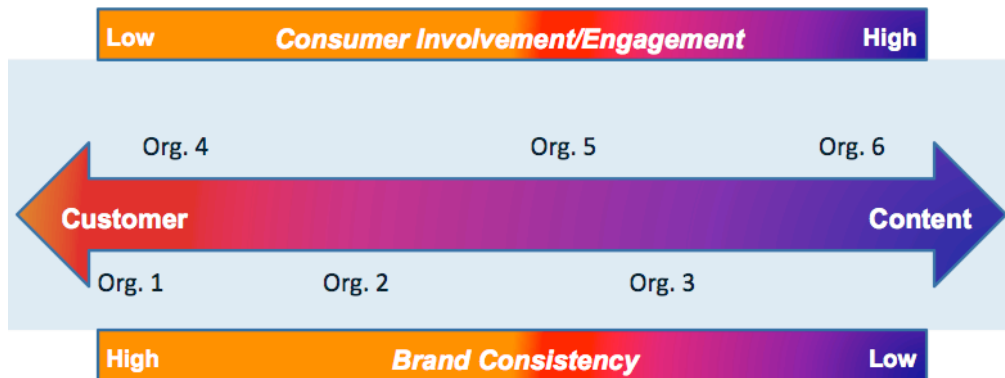
Alternatively, content focused organisations, such as 3 and 5, tended to relegate consistency to a secondary role, arguing that the artistic content was the focus of the entire organisation. Org. 3 suggested that content is the tangible part of the company’s branding, *“We actually don’t have a formal process [for branding]”*.

Discussion

In order to classify their branding strategies, organisations have been plotted along a continuum (Figure 1). On the continuum’s right are the organisations that allow the artistic content and the artwork to be the main driver of the branding process, and on the left are those organisations that mainly focus on marketing tools to manage their brands. Thus, on the left end the brand is interpreted a tool of access for audience (a mass audience) and stakeholders (including the Government), while on the right end, the brand functions as a tool for selection

(the target is limited and the brand aims to capture the attention of people who are interested in art as an exclusive experience). Furthermore, according to the continuum's polarisation, audience oriented organisations, e.g., 1 and 4, tend to be consistent and explicit in branding, and require a low involvement from customers. Org. 2 is predominantly audience oriented, but would like to preserve a certain degree of focus on the content in the definition of the branding strategy. Org. 6 explicitly focuses predominantly on artistic content as the brand driver. Therefore, it is placed at the right of the continuum. Whereas, Org. 3 and 5 are generally focused on the artistic product, their larger size (in terms of stakeholders, audience, and finances) can represent obstacles to being exclusively content oriented.

Figure 1.



The continuum approach is not meant to be an *aut aut* approach. What arises from the interviews is that branding can be inspired by two main drivers (audience and content) that are not contrasting. Focusing the brand management upon the content does not prevent organisations from a consideration of audience (e.g., Org. 3 admits, “*It’s content first. [...] It’s that the work has attracted the audience and we’re now looking after them.*”), but the whole image and philosophy that the organisation communicates is modulated according to the content as a driver. Alternatively, a customer oriented brand management does not preclude attention to the content, even if the content is not the starting point of the branding process. Clearly, the artwork is still the core product for every arts and cultural organisation of the sample, but the organisations’ brand management is driven predominantly by an emphasis upon the audience, first and foremost, and the development of content for that audience. Arguably, the approach to branding is an ongoing activity and it changes in time according to organisational changes and evolution, as Org. 1 stated, “*we used to be all about content, but we have been forced to think about our audience, by the commercial realities.*”

Thus, we argue that in the case of arts organisations, a defining feature of their approach to branding seems to be whether their focus is on customers or on content, even though the choice of one approach does not exclude the other. This focus, which is often influenced by organisational size (i.e., income, staffing, and audience size) and by the nature of the activity, will influence other elements of the branding strategy. Thus, it is arguable that “cultural brand management” is an ongoing activity and that changes in the structure or in the philosophy of cultural organisations can imply a movement along the continuum.

Limitations and future research

The analysis in this paper sought to be illustrative, rather than exhaustive or definitive. In addition, the researchers recognise that the data are only taken from a corporate perspective,

without taking into account consumer responses to the brand. It simply focuses on a small sample of organisations in order to explore their different approaches to branding. Future research will further examine corporate approaches in other international contexts, as well as examining the success or otherwise of these branding approaches, particularly in relation to audience, and other stakeholder, response.

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