

Through its Standards & Best Practices initiative, UMAC seeks to articulate topics and issues, provide professional development opportunities, and afford access to reference materials for its members. With this issue, UMAC launches *Communiqué*, a continuing series of bulletins providing both experienced and inexperienced members with information and expertise on areas of concern to university museums and collections. We welcome your comments and insights. *Marta C. Lourenço, Chair*



BRANDING: BEST PRACTICES FOR UNIVERSITY MUSEUMS

“With a brand, academic museums grow up...its an asset to your college or university. You validate them.” (Wallace, 275)

“Branding” is a concept from the business world that many museums have resisted because museums do not want to be seen as being too commercial—too businesslike. This is especially true in university museums.

Many people think of branding as simply a recognizable logo, like:



Branding experts tell us that whether we like it or not, we all have a brand. Why not recognize it, embrace it, and shape it so that it represents our university museum in a way that we control? Why not make our “brand” something we create in a positive way? ***Why not create a brand that tells the world about your university museum?***

A *brand* is the embodiment of the university museum and all it does. A brand is the perception of the museum. Branding is the strategy to create that perception. One aspect is a unique visual identity or symbol such as a logo or colors that allow the museum to engage with audiences and promote a consistent image of the museum. An example of a distinctive university museum logo is the GW Museum and Textile Museum, The George Washington University.



Creating a Brand for a University Museum

A brand provides a framework for a university museum. It aligns with the museum’s vision, and energizes and inspires the museum personnel. It is the “voice” of collections, preservation, research, education, exhibitions, audience, and communications. It reflects the museum’s commitment to education. A university museum brand promises an experience. It is timeless and ownable.

Branding is the process of giving meaning to a specific university museum by shaping a clear, consistent message and image that is instantly recognizable in constituents’ minds. It is a fundamental strategy for the museum to think about what it stands for, manage its identity, communicate its purpose, and establish a differentiated recognition of what the museum does. By engaging in qualitative research to test stakeholder and constituent opinions, the university museum can develop a brand that considers the museum from the outside rather than from the inside. And by shaping the museum’s brand in this way, visitors will anticipate the kind of experience you want them to have at the university museum.

A brand should become part of the culture and personality of the university museum, ingrained in all it represents and all it does. Therefore, the process of establishing a brand should be considered as important as the university museum’s mission statement and a strategic plan.

Branding facilitates decision-making:

- Administration
- Operations and facility management
- Policies and procedures
- Collections and preservation
- Research initiatives
- Educational opportunities
- Exhibitions and Interpretation
- Program content and format
- Staff and professional development
- Fundraising and membership
- University and community partnerships
- Special events and outreach programs

Branding facilitates communication:

- Clear expectations for the audience
- Enhance reputation with all constituents
- Front-of-house staff and security
- Website design and content
- Brochures, catalogues, gallery guides
- Exterior and interior signage
- Advertising and marketing
- Social Media
- Merchandise in store

Learn through the branding process:

- How is the museum viewed by internal and external constituencies? Is the university museum viewed as vital and energetic, sleepy and inactive, or even invisible?
- Assess the competition (hint: it is not other museums);
- Identify stakeholders (students, faculty, alumni, scholars, community);
- Define current and desired relationships with stakeholders;
- Define brand fabric—the things you can't or do not want to change about who you are;
- Define the museum's current brand personality, how people perceive the museum;
- Define the museum's desired brand personality — how you want people to see the museum;
- Define their museum's brand truth—what do you stand for, how are you going to make a difference in the world ?

When do university museums usually engage in a branding process?

- New leadership
- New facility
- New collections
- New status
- New sources of operating income
- Loss of reputation
- Change in mission and direction
- When taken for granted
- When they feel the need to refresh themselves with the public
- When they feel trapped or stuck in place

Collaborate with the university:

1. Share the ways the museum's mission supports the university's mission and serves its constituencies.
2. It is to the university's advantage to know how both the museum and the university will benefit from branding.
2. Try to involve a person from the university's communications area in the process. It will help you in the implementation stage.
3. Incorporate the university administration in the process so they will understand that this is not a challenge to their authority or a threat to the university, but a compliment to both the university and the museum.
4. Talk to the administration about how the process of understanding the university museum's brand will help with making management decisions.

Selected Reference:

Margo Wallace, *Museum Branding: How to Create and Maintain Image, Loyalty, and Support*, 2nd edition, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2016.



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