Chapter 16
Museum Communication:
Towards a Framework for Resource-Holder Relations Management

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ABSTRACT

The focus of museum communication has shifted from visitors to a variety of key stakeholders and new emphasis is being placed on museum-audience relationships. The literature on this topic has quite neglected to consider the evolution of museum communication activities up to date, and studies have not proceeded to identify stakeholder groups which may relate to museum in different ways. This chapter aims to fill this gap by providing a museum-specific framework for communication-management. The latter intends to be a practical tool to help in managing relations with stakeholder groups. Key concepts of corporate communication are contextualized to museums, starting with the depiction of museum personality, identity, image, and the process of development of museum reputation is explained. The latter may be considered as a multifaceted process; to understand the evolution of museum reputation and guide its correct development. Focus is given to information and communication technologies, which have changed the way people interact with museums.

INTRODUCTION: BACKGROUND, ISSUES AND PROBLEMS[1]

Scholars and museum operatives (Silverstone, 1992; Hooper-Greenhill, 1991a, 1991b, 1999) emphasize the role of museum for educational purposes. Museum as "educator" is built on three main concepts: education, interpretation and communication. Communication approach, in particular, can be understood as "a cultural process of negotiating meaning, which produces reality through symbolic systems such as texts, objects, artworks, maps, models and museums" (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, p. 17). Museum communication represents one of the tasks characterizing the cultural and social mission of museums; indeed,

the main purposes of museum communication are to provide information, increase awareness about museum and promote general public's participation and engagement.

Communication within museum potentially encompasses all of an institution's practices which make meaning (Ravelli, 2006, p. 1).

The process of museum reputation development is explained through a contextualization of key concepts of corporate communication to museum context. As any organization, museums have to communicate efficiently with their environment and focus its activities on continuous relations with its audiences, widely regarded as critical for organizations' survival and development. Indeed, one of the primary aspect of museum communication regards the interaction with different resource-holders (employees, visitors, partners, investors, government institutions, media and community); museum needs to create synergic relationships with each resource-holder in order to obtain assets which may be essential for museum survival and development. The communication flows assume the purpose to send targeted information to convey museum identity, strengths and positioning, to obtain eventually resource-holder consensus.

In the museum context, the communication expert or museum communicator is one of the key professional figures, engaged in the promotion of museum's activities and in the creation and the maintenance of relations with different resource-holder group, such as media, visitors, cultural organizations, etc. Although essential, the role of museum communicator is not always available in museums, in particular in case of Institutions of small dimensions. On the contrary, the giant national museums have often an information and communication department, which takes care of museum communication development over time. This evidence led to highlight the neces-

sity to create specific competences related to this particular professional role, and the consequent need of specific tools in order to give to museum staff the skills needed for developing effective communication flows.

Through a literature of the existing models on museum communication, and with support from marketing and communication contributions, the purpose of this chapter is to draw a framework for resource-holder relations management. The framework proposed intends to enable museums to communicate effectively with its audiences, through the use of museum-specific and non-specific communication resources, to obtain strategic assets, and to collect relevant information from its audiences. The proper use of communication techniques and means may lead to generate stable bonds between museum and its key resource-holders.

Furthermore, in recent years, museums have attempted to establish a new relationship with the public, developing specific tools to create new experiential attractions for the cultural consumers. In this sense, online technologies have a leading role in the process of communicative renewal deployed by museums. As explained in the foregoing sections, cultural and art works may become more accessible through digital means, allowing a wider public to approach to culture.

This chapter is organized as follows: in the next section, the existing literature is reviewed; this review helps us to identify specific elements that can be used to develop our framework for resource-holder relations management. Eventually, the chapter presents some practical implications that strengthen the arguments made in support of the idea that museum communication should be viewed with regard to specific resource-holder groups.

The results of this study enable to elaborate a specific communication-mix for museums, usable by museum managers to develop relations with their resource-holders, which support the

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