



Public Relations and Cultural Heritage: Identifying publics and managing communication in museums in Tarragona

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The principal aim of this work is to study how museums communicate with their local community, analysing, on one hand, how people in the local community evaluate and inform themselves about the museums in their city, and studying, in the other hand, how museums identify their specific publics within the local community and communicate with them.

Results show that museums and exhibition centres have a narrow conception of publics, limiting them to the final user and the local schools. About the communicative actions developed by museums to establish relationships with publics, Public Relations activities are considered the most important ones to get involved with them.

KEY WORDS: public relations, museums and exhibition centres, publics, cultural heritage.

PALABRAS CLAVE: relaciones públicas, museos y centros de exposiciones, públicos, patrimonio cultural.

Public relations may be viewed as an important tool for museums and exhibition centres to establish a long-term relationship with their publics. From the public relations perspective, some interesting questions arise that motivate a research study on museums and exhibition centres: How do these organisations define their publics in the local environment? What type of publics do they communicate with? Do they use public relations techniques and tools to communicate and engage in dialogue with their publics?

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with them. The results show that these institutions have a very narrow view of their publics, which is focused basically on their users/visitors, and that they are familiar with and use public relations tools and techniques (although with a tactical perspective).

Theoretical Background

Traditionally, the main mission of museums has been the acquisition, conservation, research and exposition of objects (Stephen, 2001), oriented towards a small group of people highly concerned with pedagogic activities (Brown, 2006). They were closed entities, which focused on the objects and were isolated from their environment. From this perspective (focused on the “management of objects”) public relations does not play a relevant role for museums and exhibition centres, since communication and relationships with their publics is not a priority for them.

However, in the last 30 years, due to the changes in the social (new social demands), political (new guidelines for culture management, less governmental and more private funding, and demands for the professional management of entities) and cultural (growing competence in the field of culture and leisure) environment (Guinsbourg & Mairesse, 1997; Tobelem, 1997; Prentice, 2001; Stephen, 2001; Mc Pherson, 2006; Alcalde & Rueda, 2007), the mission of museums has significantly changed: they have become entities of knowledge and leisure (Kotler & Kotler, 2000; Bradbourne, 2001; Kotler, 2001). Within the leisure environment, the need for a museum to be favourably differentiated from other museums and other leisure actors is one of the key points which have emerged in the world of museums (Vaughan, 2001). Museums and exhibition centres have a new commitment to society, and they need to try to broaden their audiences (Dubinsky, 2007) and contribute to community advancement (Stephen, 2001). In this way, they are key actors in the so-called “democratization of culture” (Alcalde & Rueda, 2007). But this openness to a broad range of people and the democratization of content is highly conditioned by a significant cultural barrier: the public’s negative attitude towards museums based on the image of museums and exhibition centres as closed and elitist organisations (Prentice [et al.], 1997; Lin, 2006).

In this new context, public relations can decisively contribute to the development of the new mission of museums and exhibition centres through managing the relationships between these institutions and the different publics, and by helping them to change their publics’ attitudes to improve their reputation.

While at level of practical application public relations has been obtaining a growing importance in the field of museums and exhibition centres over the last few decades (Runyard & French, 1999), this relevance has not been reflected in the field of academic and theoretical research in public relations. A pio-



neering publication in the museum field was D. Adams' book (Museum Public Relations, American Association for State and Local History, 1983). However, over the last 20 years, there have not been significant works in the international academic literature on public relations (such as *Public Relations Review*, *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *Journal of Communication Management*). In fact, only one short communication can be found (Banning & Schoen, 2007) dedicated to the study of the organization–public relationship to measure member perceptions of an art museum. Only one new book could be found (Runyard & French: *Marketing and Public Relations Handbook for Museums, Galleries & Heritage Attractions*, Altamira Press, 1999), but it has a practitioner perspective and treats public relations from a marketing point of view. In Spanish, only one book (Mateos Rusillo, 2008) specifically deals with the communication of museums and exhibition centres. In it, Capriotti (2008) applies public relations planning processes to the communication planning of cultural heritage. So, specific theoretical background in the field of public relations is quite limited.

The majority of research in the field of museums and exhibition centres is done from a marketing perspective, basically from the management of cultural products and services (Kotler & Kotler, 1998; Kotler & Kotler, 2000; Piscitelli & Anderson, 2001; Kotler, 2001; Rentschler & Hede, 2007; Cole, 2008), but also from a tourist marketing focus (Bhattacharya [et al.], 1995; Tien [et al.], 1996; Jansen-Berbecke & Van Rekom, 1996; Prentice, 2001; Nowacki, 2005). They focus on researching users/visitors, on defining cultural products/services and on marketing them to obtain more users/visitors (Kotler & Kotler, 1998; Kawashima, 1998; Coffee, 2007).

The communication of museums and exhibition centres has mainly been studied from a marketing perspective. Kotler & Kotler (1998) consider public relations as a significant communication tool to establish dialogue with the local community. In this context, public relations are considered as a marketing tool to promote cultural products/services, to obtain a defined positioning, and to influence people to become new visitors (Kotler & Kotler, 1998; Runyard & French; 1999). Thus, public relations is reduced to a tactical dimension, with a stereotypic and prototypic focus: a group of communication tools and techniques whose purpose is to provide better information for potential visitors so that they frequent the museum (Tobelem, 1997), and also to manage information in a potential crisis (Adams, 1983; Kotler & Kotler, 1998; Runyard & French; 1999).

However, by applying public relations, museums and exhibition centres can gain a valuable asset to manage communication and the relationship of these institutions with their publics. So, from a public relations perspective, research is needed on several key issues: Who are their main publics? What is the role of public relations tools and techniques in communication between these entities and their publics?

Methodology

The main objectives of this work is to study how museums and exhibition centres communicate with their publics, analysing how museums identify their specific publics and communicate with them.

The subject of this study includes all museums and exhibition centres in Tarragona. The selected sample includes all of these organisations in the town: seven museums and seven exhibition centres. These organisations were selected because they are the most relevant ones in developing cultural activities. Local art galleries were excluded, since they do not offer activities throughout the year. The entire sample of institutions analysed is shown in table 1.

Table 1

Museums	Exhibition centres
Museo de Historia de Tarragona (MHT)	Centro Cultural La Caixa
Museo Nacional de Arqueología de Tarragona (MNAT)	Centro Cultural Caixa Tarragona
Museo de Arte Moderno de Tarragona (MAMT)	Antiguo Ayuntamiento
Museo del Puerto	Antigua Audiencia
Museo de las Armas	Tinglados del Puerto
Museo Bíblico	Colegio de Arquitectos de Catalunya (COAC)
Museo Diocesano	Centro de Arte URV

The general aim of the study was set out in two research questions:

RQ1: What are the main specific publics identified by the museums and exhibition centres?

RQ2: What are the principal means of communication used by museums and exhibition centres to communicate with their publics?

To answer the Research Questions, qualitative research was conducted using semi-structured personal in-depth interviews with museum directors or the communication managers of the museums and exhibition centres. A reference guide was designed to do the in-depth interviews. This general guide was divided into two main sections: the publics identified and the communication activities carried out by the museums and exhibition centres. In the first part, the interviewees were asked to identify the main publics of the local environment. In the second part, we asked for information about the different communication techniques and tools used to inform and engage in dialogue with the local publics. Thirteen interviews were done, representing 93% of the museums and exhibition centres in Tarragona.

The reference guide for the interviews was developed and tested during the month of October 2007. The data collection process got underway during the month of November 2007. The information obtained has been codified in Excel codification forms and was analysed with SPSS software. This paper only contains results linked to the research questions set out previously.



Findings

The results for RQ1 (table 2) show that the majority of museums and exhibition centres identify among two and three publics. Only two museums registered a higher number of publics: the MNAT (5) and the Museo del Puerto (4).

Table 2

Museums & exhibition centres	Nº of publics
MNAT	5
Museo del Puerto	4
MHT	3
MAMT	3
Tinglados del Puerto	3
Museo de las Armas	2
Museo Bíblico	2
Centro Cultural La Caixa	2
Centro Cultural Caixa Tarragona	2
Antiguo Ayuntamiento	2
Antigua Audiencia	2
COAC	2
Centro de Arte URV	1

We can identify one very relevant public and another two important publics for the museums and exhibition centres (table 3). For most of the entities, their publics are basically local citizens (probably the most frequent users/visitors) and schools. An important number of entities also consider tourists to be a public (something quite relevant in a tourist city like Tarragona). However, local mass media, social organisations and governmental institutions are little recognised as publics (only two entities, 15%, identify these groups as publics), and employees and opinion leaders are not recognised in any case as publics of these organisations.

Table 3

Publics	N	%
Visitors & citizens	13	100
Schools	9	69.2
Tourists	5	38.5
Mass media	2	15.4
Governmental institutions	2	15.4
Social entities	2	15.4
Employees	0	0
Opinion leaders	0	0

The museums and exhibition centres are principally focused on their external publics, and more specifically, on their current and potential users/visitors at the individual or group level (people from the local community) or at institutional level (local schools).

The RQ2 results (table 4) demonstrate that the communication techniques and tools most implemented by museums and exhibition centres are institutional, educational and/or informative publications (100%) and outdoor communication campaigns (posters, flyers, street flags, etc.) (92%). There is also a great use of media relations activities (press conferences, press releases, etc.), interpersonal relations (meetings, personal or group presentations, etc.) and direct marketing actions (mailings or emails to databases or massive mailings) (85% of the entities). On the second level (activities carried out by 60% and 70% of entities), there is another group of communication tools and techniques. In this group we can find events (70%), websites (70%), guided visits (60%) and traditional advertising pieces (60%). The last level includes employee communication, with a low percentage of use (only 30%).

Table 4

Communication activities	N	%
Publications	13	100.0
Outdoor communication	12	92.3
Interpersonal relations	11	84.6
Direct marketing	11	84.6
Media relations	11	84.6
Events	9	69.2
Websites	9	69.2
Guided visits	8	61.5
Advertising	8	61.5
Employee communication	4	30.8

Thus, we can see that the majority of museums and exhibition centres are primarily implementing low-budget communication tools and techniques that let them reach a great number of people in their local environment. Almost all the communication activities carried out by these entities are oriented towards external publics, and internal communication tools are practically nonexistent (this situation may be due to the fact that the museums and exhibition centres have very few employees).

It is remarkable that almost 40% of the museums and exhibition centres do not offer guided visits to their visitors as this is one of the most common (and well known) activities in these kind of organisations. It is also relevant that a great number of entities (60%) advertise, which requires significant financial investment. The explanation for this is that most ads are taken out in local



media, and the museums and exhibition centres frequently have governmental support and funding for this purpose. Another important factor of note is that only 70% of the entities say that they use websites as a means of communication, which can be considered a low level of usage.

Finally, if we analyse the results by museums and exhibition centres (table 5), it is apparent that most of these entities combine a great number of the communication tools and techniques studied: 10 of 13 entities (77%) use at least seven communication resources. Another two entities combine four and five tools, and only one museum (Museo de las Armas) applies only two techniques.

Table 5

Museums & exhibition centres	Nº of activities
Centro Cultural La Caixa	10
MNAT	10
MHT	9
MAMT	9
COAC	9
Antiguo Ayuntamiento	8
Museo Bíblico	8
Tinglados del Puerto	8
Centro Cultural Caixa Tarragona	7
Museo del Puerto	7
Antigua Audiencia	5
Centro de Arte URV	4
Museo de las Armas	2

Conclusions and further research

From the results obtained, we can conclude that public relations are a relevant communication resource for museums and exhibition centres to communicate and engage in dialogue with their publics. However, its use is not fully developed and not systematic enough.

Our results show that museums and exhibition centres have a narrow conception of publics, limiting them to local citizens and local schools. That is, these organisations consider that “the public” is basically the local final user/visitor of the museums. Furthermore, tourists are considered a public by only the 40% of the entities studied. This is a low rate in a city like Tarragona, where tourism is a very relevant economic activity. In general, museums and exhibition centres are mainly focused on external publics, and employees are not identified as a public of these institutions in any case.



This could have a direct influence on the selection and implementation of the different communication tools and techniques, which are clearly oriented towards external communication. So it is seen as consistent that employee communication is the lesser used communication tool, since employees are not identified as a public by the museums and exhibition centres. Another factor to take into account is that the mass media are not recognised as a public, but the entities do a lot of their publicity with them. This demonstrates that the mass media are considered basically to be merely a channel of communication, informing the publics about the activities and events of the museums and exhibition centres through publicity.

The communicative actions developed by museums and exhibition centres to communicate and establish relationships with their publics combine several techniques and tools, in order to optimise their budget and impact. Public relations activities can be considered among the most important for increasing involvement with their publics. Publications, personal and group meetings and presentations, and mass media relations are among the five most relevant activities. The majority of museums and exhibition centres also implement below-the-line communication tools (like direct marketing and outdoor communication). None of these activities require a great investment of money and they let the entities reach a significant number of people at a local level.

Finally, we would like to look at the contributions and limitations of this study. The study was focused on a small number of organisations. This work also presents a specific methodology suitable for analysing the communication of museums and exhibition centres of any kind. From an academic point of view, this work can help improve our understanding of how museums and exhibition centres communicate with their publics. Hence it can be used by other researchers in other cities, regions or countries to analyse these kind of organisations, and to promote the comparison of results. From a practitioner perspective, the results of this study can contribute towards identifying some of the strengths and weaknesses of communication policies and activities of the museums and exhibition centres and help to improve their communication management, and to make entities more open and publics-oriented.

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