

Are Ecomuseums and Marketing a Possible Combination?

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Abstract

This paper provides an insight into marketing of Ecomuseums. Ecomuseums are asset of the cultural and creative economy, recently recognized and rapidly evolving. Coined in France in the early seventies by de Varine (1978), the term Ecomuseum identifies a region characterized by environments of traditional life, from a historical, artistic and natural heritage that must be protected and preserved (Elliot, 2006). This paper provides an insight into marketing of Ecomuseum, and its boundaries. The study of the websites of ecomuseums mainly located in North America and Europe, has given meaningful information about features of marketing and marketing communication in Ecomuseums.

This paper is to be considered a new insight into this topic and it is useful for communities, managers and practitioners who want to go through innovation in managing marketing and marketing communication in Ecomuseums

Keywords

Ecomuseums; marketing; marketing communication

1. Ecomuseum and its vanishing boundaries

According to the 'Declaration of Intent of the Long Net Workshop, Trento (Italy), May 2004', an ecomuseum is a dynamic way in which communities preserve, interpret, and manage their heritage for a sustainable development, and it is based on a community agreement.

An ecomuseum is an opportunity to run with new ideas, it is foremost a community and an objective: the development of that community (De Varine, 1978).

An ecomuseum 'is a mirror in which the local population views itself to discover its own image, in which it seeks an explanation of the territory to which it is attached and of the populations that have preceded it, seen either as circumscribed in time or in terms of the continuity of generations. It is a mirror that the local population holds up to its visitors so that it may be better understood and so that its industry, customs and identity may command respect. [...] It is an expression of man and nature. [...] It is an expression of time [...] It is an interpretation of space [...] It is a conservation centre [...] It is a school [...]' (Rivière, 1985:182-3).

Elliot (2006) defines ecomuseums as a rescue mechanism for threatened landscape, and more recently Davis (2007:199) as 'a community-driven museum or heritage project that aids sustainable development'. In 2007, Davis published an article about ecomuseums and sustainable development, where he provided a concise definition of the ecomuseum as "a community driven heritage project that aids sustainable development." The main issue he raises here is about the philosophy and practice of the ecomuseum, which centres on the conviction that local people should play a central role in supporting heritage projects and activities that in response to their own particular situation.

An ecomuseum is a territory encompassing both tangible and intangible heritage, including the memories of the people who live there (Rivard, 1984, 1988), based on a community agreement. An ecomuseum is 'primarily a way of thinking, a holistic open system view of the world' (Heron, 1991:8).

Ecomuseums represent a heritage of identities and cultures, the *genius loci*, the 'sense of place', (Davis, 1999). They are instruments for promoting and preserving local identity, as well as developing forms of alternative and sustainable tourism. Ultimately, ecomuseums appear to defy an accepted definition (Davis, Corsane, 2014:119).

In fact, the concept 'ecomuseum' is the most challenging for contemporary museology: both a collection inside of a building and an open-air museum; both tangible and intangible heritage; both museum and non-museum where folklore and traditions are promoted thanks to events that are not simply exhibitions. Corsane et al. (2007) have highlighted 21 features, which characterize ecomuseums. They may occur both simultaneously or not. Furthermore connections with the community, where the ecomuseum is located, are unavoidable with a particular focus on cultural ethnic awareness.

Maggi (2002) describes a community 'taking care of a place': mountain, valley, park, forest, lake, sea, etc. so that the landscape is an essential dimension of the ecomuseum. Environmental protection, education and beautification are, as a consequence, essential activities in an ecomuseum. Davis (2007), provides a concise definition of the ecomuseum as 'a community driven heritage project that aids sustainable development'.

The engagement of the community is a binding commitment between the population and administrations. The engagement can consist of voluntarism, fundraising and any other activity in order to support the governance of the ecomuseum. The governance can be the community itself who shares responsibilities, in order to grant the sustainable development of the environment and the landscape where the ecomuseum is located. Communities collect ethnographic and material culture in ecomuseums. Ecomuseums are memories that cannot be destroyed and next generations must be committed to them. Ecomuseums are agents 'for

managing change that links education, culture, and power. It extends the mission of a museum to include responsibility for human dignity', (Fuller, 1992:328).

As a matter of fact, the 'ecomuseum definition' has vanishing boundaries. The intangible features deny traditional rooms, visual arts and they integrate open-air, landscape, folklore, traditions, mature engagement and awareness. The tangible features refer to memories of manufacturing and industrial supply-chains, agriculture and connections to the environment of the past that must be preserved. Are there boundaries? It is hard to limit 'cultural roots': they can be in the environmental specifics of a valley, a lake, a sea, a season; they can be in traditions that refer to material culture, creative skills, sports and any entertaining activity, history and melting of populations in foreign countries.

2. Marketing and communication in Ecomuseums

Among the '70s and the '80s, especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries, the marketing has been introduced in the museum under the influence of two major challenges: the growing pressure on activation of new sources of funding and the ever more pressing competition from alternative forms of use of free time. The adoption of marketing strategies has provoked an outcry by the museum staff, and Academics.

In fact, there were problems in considering marketing strategies applicable to museums, as well as in measuring the success of marketing strategies in terms of revenue and number of visitors.

During the '90s, marketing in museums has been legitimated on the basis of development of the new cultural offerings (Bodo, 2011), built primarily to meet the needs of specific groups. Nowadays the term marketing is used in the meaning of strategy of defining identity and conveying reputation of the museum, and as a tool for stakeholder engagement (McLean 1998), and the optimization and proper segmentation of the offer, ultimately in the relationship marketing. Relationship marketing refers to all marketing activities directed toward establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges (Morgan and Hunt 1994: 22). Ecomuseums have to engage proactively their stakeholders over time, first of all communities.

Several trends, in the European cultural scene, require institutions to define more clearly the value or the specific nature of their mission and their activities in order to gain a better visibility and to be more attractive.

According to Scholars, ecomuseums are expression of both tangible and intangible heritage of a community. The first are the geographical area, the morphological characteristics, the landscape, the cultural heritage, the facilities and services, the products and manufacturing, the size and characteristics of the local market; the second, the intangible elements, refers to the 'spirit' of the place, the traditions, the system of civil and social values, the quality of human resources, the level of social skills, the cultural leadership that characterize the vocation of a territory.

A heritage 'marketing & communication' approach is important for the maintenance and the sustainable development of the ecomuseum and its community.

Marketing & communication strategies can help to empower community, and to make residents aware of their heritage. This is why marketing & communication strategies have to ensure that the concerned community is properly involved in the definition, marketing and operation of the ecomuseum and its objectives. In fact, it is important that the concept of ecomuseums is not distorted and emptied of its meaning, and that communities directly benefit from the marketing of their heritage.

Marketing & communication strategies are effective to attract both people and organizations interested, to some extent, in cooperating with ecomuseums, such as sponsors, volunteers, and donors, and eventually to attract visitors.

Among the most important ecomuseums marketing & communication goals there are attracting and building 'deeper relationships with more diverse audience' (Spitz and Thorn, 2003:3) rationalise the total process of developing resources, going through the definition of the visitor experience in order to allow them to enjoy the ecomuseum visit (Screven, 1986; Shackley, 1999; Goulding, 2000), intensifying efforts to raise funds from individuals and companies as well as the launching of subscription programmes (Chhabra, 2009). Furthermore marketing & communication strategies are useful to establish educational programmes for different, previously identified publics, i.e. school visits, training, courses; to managing change that links education, culture, and power; to plan membership and fund-raising programmes for private organizations; to communicate every initiative to the proper public. As aforementioned, Marketing & communication efforts need a proper planning to be linked up with each other coherently. Generally this point is a weakness in many profit and not-for-profit organization (Gregory, 2009).

2.1 Marketing and communication in Ecomuseums websites

A powerful tool of marketing & communication is the ecomuseum website. Considering the websites of ecomuseums in our cluster, the most important emerging value is authenticity, which connotes culture, origins, and the sense of genuine (Chhabra et Al. 2003). The analysis of the websites shows some common objectives, which are related to education and teaching people, particularly the younger people, about the value of the culture, nature and the sense of the place. Then ecomuseums are seen as being a repository for cultural materials and memories, and eventually an instrument to enhance tourism and sustainable economic development.

The marketing orientation of ecomuseums is highlighted in the website organization. In fact, websites offer typical sections, both in content and labelling, intending to explain to the user what are the main activities of the ecomuseum. The website is a perfect mean to communicate to internal and external audience, for branding ecomuseum, its activities, and territories, to enrol volunteers, to offer a unique experience, to inform and involve people, to ask them to "dirty their hands". Furthermore websites are "donor friendly" giving any information that may help the donors to understand to what extent and in what way the money will be spent. Many websites have available the "Donate now" button. Users choose how much they want to give and enter payment details.

Social media allow institutions to be directly connected with audience. Users can share and generate content. To reach these virtual spaces in a simple and fast way social buttons are provided. These tools allow the user to connect to web pages, share information and material through one or a few clicks. In fact, through their use, ecomuseums can signal their presence on other websites, and create audience awareness about the different channels to interact. Ecomuseums, as many organizations, employ Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Pinterest, and Instagram.

Analyzing in depth the website the typical sections are the following: identity of the ecomuseum. This part is usually identified as 'Home', 'About U.S.' or 'Who We Are'. On the homepage of the website, the organizations provide the user with essential information about the scope and manner of intervention (for example, through the use of a slogan or visual material). The sections 'About Us' / 'Who We Are' are intended to provide detailed information about the ecomuseum's history, mission, vision, and goals.

Activities of ecomuseum, topic sections are 'What We Do' / 'Our Work' / 'Our Program', 'Where We Work'. In these pages ecomuseum provides audience with a comprehensive overview about the way in which organizations seek to achieve their objectives. In addition

this section provides information about in progress and future programs, and a geographic map of the ecomuseum's area.

Photo-gallery and document's archive, this section contains photos, video-clips and documents used by ecomuseums for informational purposes and as a means of raising publics' awareness.

Information, this area is aimed to inform volunteers and publics in general about the new activities of the ecomuseum, events, news and updates to the site. The commonly used sections are: 'News' / 'News & Events'.

Blog, this section is dedicated to the interaction with users. Blogs allow ecomuseums to relate to the audience through comments.

'Get involved', this part of the website shows the different ways to become an active part in the work of the ecomuseum. Some organizations link this section to the social networks.

Fundraising, this theme, as expected, occupies a significant position in the websites of the U.S. ecomuseums due to the weight of financial constraints following a reduction in state funding that requires the ecomuseum to generate supplementary funds and to establish the means for better communications directed towards various target groups. 'Donation' / 'Support Us' / 'Donate' are the voices of the main navigation menu. Furthermore the website provides, for each page of the site, a button that enables users to quickly connect with the section dedicated to online transactions. On the donation page, in addition to on-line mode, there are information about traditional methods to financially support the ecomuseum.

From the website analysis it emerges that ecomuseums receive funds from gift shop sales, admissions, and federal grants. Furthermore, other funds derive from individuals Membership Dues, gaming, facilities, rental, special events, and food service.

Contact, the tools allow website visitors to communicate directly with the ecomuseum through the section 'Contact us' that provides e-mail addresses, and phone numbers.

Communication, ecomuseums also provide a media centre section for communicating with journalists. The label, often appearing in the main navigation menu of the website, is 'Media Centre' / 'Press' / 'Pressroom'.

Links to social-networks as i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, YouTube, U.S. ecomuseums place these links on the homepage, typically in the website footers. Buttons remain available while browsing the website.

Banner, ecomuseum websites use banner on the homepage for different purposes: to sponsor donations online, to communicate emergencies and urgent needs, and to provide navigation shortcuts to relevant website sections.

Newsletter, ecomuseums allow users to stay in touch with the organization through a newsletter. There is a website section where the user must enter the required data to register for the service.

3. Ecomuseums: identity and brand of a territory

An ecomuseum, which contributes to spread the territorial brand, affirms the identity and the authenticity of the place: culture, knowledge, tradition, creativity, distinctive products and manufacturing and *genius loci*, become institutions for the community (Kapferer, 2002).

Marketing ecomuseums could support the creation and the spread of a territorial brand rich of values able to engage different publics. A territorial brand is the sum of values, which lies in a positive, powerful and solid reputation, which characterizes certain territories, creating and rebounding income (Nogué, de San Eugenio Vela, 2011).

Brands are powerful tools by which territories and its communities rediscover their roots, identity, belonging, specificity, authenticity, values, and history.

The competitiveness of a territory seems to be increased by the presence of distinctive products and manufacturing that express the specificity of its values.

These products help to building the territorial brand (Vescovi, Gazzola 2007) and contribute to enrich it with iconic symbols, meanings and values that go beyond the simple geographical link between community products and territory.

Ecomuseums disclose the core features of a place, shaped in the relationship between territory (space) and community (society). An ecomuseum represents a cultural system of values, a territory from which those values are generated, and it could be considered the place in which a territorial brand finds its origin, is applied and becomes tangible.

In this meaning it is possible to affirm that ecomuseums could branding a territory, considered both as a geographic area, and an emotional space.

Branding is a transverse process of management and communication of a territory and implies a precise marketing plan (Dinnie, 2011). So, a marketing approach, based on cultural heritage esteem, is important to enhance, spread and 'market' territorial brand values.

Communication takes place both inside and outside of the ecomuseums and, reflects the complex nature of a ecomuseum.

The Ecomuseum needs to evaluate the way in which his identity is conveyed, and to verify that the resulting image and ultimately reputation, is accurate and consistent (Newman, McLean, 2006).

The institutional identity concerns in fact an organization in its entirety, and needs to be addressed in the widest sense of the representation and communication of the personality of the organization, which it is acting in its surrounding context. A similar approach has clear implications in terms of institutional identity management, and requires something more than the mere manipulation of the visual identity.

4. Conclusion

The context in which Ecomuseums operate, their dependence on volunteering, by communities and political issues, makes marketing and communication in these organization not only possible, but necessary and more complex than in a commercial environment. Ecomuseums should convey different messages through different means towards at different audiences.

A strong identity, able to reflect the reality of the organization, should simplify the process of marketing and communication.

Just so the museum will be able to project its own identity in an image appropriate to each segment of the public. It is not just the communicate the identity of an art museum. What are the images of the audience, and how they correspond to the identity of the museum?

When communicating, Ecomuseums have not to ignore their stakeholders, because the reputation of an institution is not the result only of a internal process. Ecomuseums must be able to deal with different publics and the it seems that websites could be a interesting tool to spread their identity and brand.

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