

Community facility or tourism product? Managing the multiple identities of a small museum

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Abstract

The author would like to talk about the (sometimes conflicting) roles of local/regional museums as centres of community interest and as tourism attractions, drawing upon our experience here at the Rotorua Museum as a case study to illustrate the tensions and opportunities that arise from being a small locally-funded museum in a major tourism destination. Balancing the interests and needs of a small, ethnically diverse community, which funds the museum operation through local authority rates (property taxes), with the requirements of being the only museum within a major regional tourism sector, requires decisions to be made that may not be in the Museum Studies textbook.

Compromises are made and conflicting interests balanced against each other. There are also huge opportunities from embracing tourism, however, and if the right balance is achieved there can be great benefits to the local community. The author will illustrate how the Rotorua Museum consistently achieves the highest community satisfaction rating of any regional museum in New Zealand, while at the same time is regarded as a top tourism attraction, being named New Zealand's Best Culture and Heritage Attraction for three consecutive years by the NZ Tourism Industry.

It is not easy being a small community owned museum in a major tourism destination. On one hand your local community, for which the museum has an important role in affirming the local identity, quite rightly has expectations that you will put its needs first; on the other hand the opportunity to earn revenue as a marketable tourism product can be extremely attractive and seductive to your owners, more often than not the local Council which is always looking for ways to reduce the costs of your operation to its constituents. And then there is the added responsibility of representing your community, its culture and its history to visitors from around the world in a compelling, truthful and entertaining way.

So, how can you achieve a balance between these seemingly conflicting roles without harming any of them? Do you need to make compromises?

In this paper I will briefly discuss the potential conflict between serving a local community and addressing the needs of the visitor industry, and then describe how it is possible to successfully manage both without compromising either. As a case study I will draw upon my experiences at Rotorua Museum, a relatively small community owned regional museum located in New Zealand's leading tourism destination.

Museums as cultural tourism product

There has always been a degree of uneasiness in the museological community about the notion of museums as tourism product. This is largely due to the inherent tension between the ideals of the museum sector (and museum professionals, especially curators and conservators) to preserve and conserve the objects and stories they hold on behalf of their local communities, and the ideals of the tourism industry to, put crudely, sell the consumption of experiences for the individual benefit of the consumer: the user, the visitor.

Some museum professionals find distasteful the notion that their work and the objects they care for can be marketed and sold as "product," while tourism industry people sometimes express resentment that museums, often in competition for customers with their own businesses, are "subsidised" by public money, forgetting of course that many of the activities carried out by museums are essentially not-for-profit and for the benefit of the community, rather than simply maximising profit for shareholders. This tension is really a clash of cultures but, as with tension in all relationships, can lead to opportunities for both sides if managed well.

It goes without saying that museums are generally well suited to the role of sustainable tourism product. Museums offer ready-made, conveniently packaged cultural experiences which, if managed correctly, can host and accommodate significant numbers of visitors without endangering their collections or compromising their values in any way. Of course this is the ideal. The reality is frequently less than ideal, and we can point to any number of examples around the world where unfettered access from large numbers of visitors actually results in a negative experience and a risk to the fragile resources that are museum collections.

For example, many of us have experienced the nightmare that London's national museums can be, with free admission for all and seemingly no control on visitor numbers. Quiet contemplation of great objects is sadly a thing of the past at many of the world's great museums, while the threat to the objects themselves is sometimes all too real. I will never forget the sight, twenty years ago on a class trip from the Museum Studies Department at the University of Leicester, of a group of uncontrolled French school children attempting to climb on a dinosaur skeleton at the Natural History Museum, while more recently it was reported in the Independent newspaper that the British

Museum itself is struggling to cope with hordes of visitors and, I quote, “numerous visitors running their oily hands over ancient sculptures, literally climbing over ancient temple statuary, and sitting not at, but on the feet of statues.” Worse still, the reporter continues, “the guards didn’t seem to be doing anything. They, apparently, see this all the time.”

Of course, these are extreme examples of huge encyclopaedic “museums of the world” that have become victims of their own success and fame if you like. For them I would suggest there are neither quick nor easy solutions. Without applying policies to restrict visitor numbers they are destined to continue to be overcrowded tourist attractions, delivering questionable experiences and, at worse, endangering their collections.

But my real interest here is the small museum which struggles to promote itself as a visitor attraction, whilst maintaining and nurturing its central role as community facility. There are a number of important lessons I have learnt about operating a community museum as a successful tourism attraction and I would like to share them with you today. Firstly, though, a little about my museum and the environment we operate in.

Rotorua Museum: A case study

Rotorua Museum of Art and History is by world standards a small museum, although in the New Zealand context it rates as a medium-sized regional museum. Rotorua has about 55,000 inhabitants which makes it the eleventh largest city in New Zealand, but in Taiwan it would be just a village! Remember that New Zealand is a large country in terms of land area (about eight times larger than Taiwan) but with a very small population of only 4 million people. To put that into perspective, in Taiwan there are about 636 people per square kilometre, in New Zealand only 15 per square kilometre.

Rotorua is the centre of tourism in New Zealand, attracting around three million visitors per year. The area is famous for two things: it is one of the most active geothermal areas on Earth; and it is recognised as the centre of Maori culture in New Zealand. Maori are the indigenous people of New Zealand and make up about a third of the population of Rotorua.

Tourists began coming to the Rotorua area in the early 1800s to see the famous Pink and White Terraces, spectacular silica formations once called the “eighth wonder of the world,” that were completely destroyed during a massive eruption of nearby Mount Tarawera in 1886.

Since the first arrival of Europeans to the area, Rotorua has been synonymous with tourism in New Zealand and this continues today. Some 6,500 people in Rotorua are employed directly in the tourism industry, 25% of the total adult workforce, while the annual spending by tourists in Rotorua is approximately NZ\$450 million with an additional \$250 million of value added contributions to the local economy. In short, tourism is the lifeblood of Rotorua. Without the tourism industry the city would be indistinguishable from all the other small, economically downcast towns that dot the countryside of the region.

It is within this context that the Rotorua Museum has found a niche in which to operate. Coincidentally, the building that houses the museum was the New Zealand government’s first major investment in tourism. It was opened in 1908 as “The Great South Seas Spa” , designed to attract wealthy visitors from around the world to enjoy the thermal waters of the area and undergo all kinds of bizarre (by today’s standards) treatments for a wide range of ailments. The Bathhouse, as it became popularly known, operated as a therapeutic spa until the 1960s, including being a major centre for the rehabilitation of wounded

soldiers in both World Wars I and II. In the early 1960s spa therapy fell out of favour and the building was scheduled to be demolished by the government but, thankfully, the local community protested and the building was given to the local city council and the museum opened within it in the late 1970s. The building is now protected by an Act of Parliament as a heritage building of the highest significance and is much loved by the people of Rotorua as an icon of the city.

Over the past nine years the museum has developed from a small community museum barely attracting 40,000 visitors per year, to an important component of the local tourism industry attracting over 110,000 visitors per year and generating significant levels of revenue. The museum has been voted New Zealand's Best Culture and Heritage Attraction three times in the past five years, and is recommended as a "must-see" attraction in the Lonely Planet guide for New Zealand, surely the highest accolade a museum can achieve these days?!

At the same time, the Rotorua Museum has managed to maintain and enhance its vital role in the local community, consistently rating the highest of any regional museum in New Zealand in terms of community satisfaction. The current level of approval, at 82% of the community as a whole, including non-visitors to the museum, is the highest result ever achieved in the annual independent survey of local government owned museums, while approval amongst those residents who actually visited the museum in the previous year stands at 92%.

So, how was this level of approval from local residents achieved at the same time as the museum was being transformed into a major visitor attraction in its own right? Some key lessons have been learnt and I will summarize some of them now:

Lesson 1: Do not lose your identity as a museum

I am sometimes asked what is the key to a museum becoming a successful visitor attraction, and my answer is always the same: before you can be a great visitor attraction you must first be a great museum.

By this I mean it is vitally important that your museum retains its identity as a museum. Do not lose sight of your founding mission, of the primary importance of your collections as the very reason for your museum existing, of the critical role your museum plays in representing and celebrating the cultural identity of your local community, or your region or nation.

I have little tolerance of museums that strive to be nothing more than cultural "theme parks" in an effort to appeal to a mass audience. By all means develop and adopt innovative techniques for telling the stories of your local community, but never let the medium overwhelm the message. How many times have you gone to a museum filled with noisy interactive technology that adds little value to visitors' understanding of either the museum's collections or the stories they tell? The best museums are the ones that successfully deliver rich experiences and increase visitors' understanding without the visitor noticing how this happens, not the ones with the biggest budget for audiovisual or computer technologies. One of my favourite museums, the Hyde Park Barracks in Sydney, Australia, tells fascinating stories in a compelling way using simple, but effective technology. The technology enhances the stories; it does not get in the way of them.

Remember that your international visitors will almost certainly have visited many great museums around the world and will be very discerning about what they want to see, and why. Your small museum must tell local stories in a manner that can engage these visitors and enhance their understanding. As I

said earlier, if you are a good museum then you have every chance of becoming a successful visitor attraction, but the opposite is also true: if your museum does not engage visitors and tell local stories well, visitors will vote with the feet and find something else in which to spend their discretionary time and money.

Lesson 2: Understand your different audiences and cater to their needs

It is extremely important to understand that your audience, or market, is not homogeneous, rather it is made up of many different groups, or segments, each with its own motivation for visiting your museum and each with its own set of needs and wants. It is therefore vital that your museum does not take a one size fits all approach to its visitors.

The people from your local community will usually come to your museum for very different reasons than will tourists on group tours, or free independent travellers. For locals, a programme of changing exhibitions and public programmes is essential to hold their interest and to encourage return visits. Tourists on the other hand are probably only going to visit your museum once in their lives, so you will need to have permanent exhibitions that present the stories of your area in a way that really adds value to their itinerary. Their motivation for visiting is to better understand the natural history and geography of the place they have travelled to, and the history and culture of the people who live there, so your museum has an important responsibility to facilitate this understanding. "Telling local stories and telling them well" could well be a worthy mission statement for all small community museums.

At the Rotorua Museum the segmentation of visitors begins at the admissions desk. Rotorua residents have, since October 1997, had completely free access to the museum and its exhibitions and programmes at all times. Locals are asked to supply proof of

residency to gain free admission, most doing so with their local public library card. The free admission policy is widely publicised in the local news media at every opportunity, and all advertising of special exhibitions and programmes contain the by-line "free for Rotorua residents with ID." This policy is now so well known in the local community that very seldom do local people arrive at the museum without their ID. If they do, staff are trained to gently ask some basic questions to ascertain proof of residency, such as asking children what school they attend, or the visitor's postal code.

On the other hand, non-residents pay one of the highest admission fees for any museum in New Zealand, equivalent to about 250 New Taiwan Dollars for an adult. There are no discounts for senior citizens, students or any other group. The rationale behind this charging policy is that since the museum is owned and funded by the people of Rotorua, without any contribution from outside the city, all non-residents are treated the same and pay the same admission fee. While this policy is occasionally challenged by visitors, particular senior citizens from Britain and the United States for some reason, staff are trained to explain the rationale and this is generally understood and accepted by visitors. Many even comment that they wish their own local museums had such a policy.

For local people, of course, the fact that the museum can earn significant admissions revenue from visitors has many benefits. Firstly, it reduces the cost of running the museum for the local community. Secondly, it enables the museum to bring in special exhibitions and programmes from other parts of New Zealand or overseas, which local people can enjoy absolutely free. It cannot be underestimated how valuable free admission for locals is as a public relations tool. Locals are encouraged to bring their visiting (and paying!) friends and family to the museum, and are frequently heard saying such things

as “this is our museum and it's free for us, but you guys have to pay!” And, of course, every time admission prices are increased for out-of-town visitors our local residents get an even better deal. Locals are constantly reminded, through regular mail drops and radio and newspaper advertising, that the museum is their museum. This serves to affirm the museum as a centre of local pride and identity: the museum holds our treasures and tells our stories to the world.

For your international visitors, one of the most important things you can do as a small museum is to provide information in a range of foreign languages. In New Zealand I have to say this is not done at all well by most museums, including some of the largest.

At the Rotorua Museum we learnt very early on that if you provide meaningful information in a wide range of languages, not only will the experience of our non-English speaking visitors be enhanced, but we could use it as a point of difference and powerful marketing tool. For example, one of the cinema experiences we have in the museum, Rotorua Stories, was originally produced in seven languages (including Mandarin Chinese), but not Spanish as we did not perceive that we had a large enough Spanish-speaking market to make it worthwhile. How wrong we were! Not long after the cinema was opened, a tour guide from Spain asked if we could provide a Spanish version of the film and that if we did he would bring all his tours through the museum. We duly produced a Spanish version of the film and it has proven to be the most frequently requested foreign language version of the film, attracting virtually every Spanish speaking tour group from Spain and South America that visits Rotorua.

The same rationale applies to printed gallery guides and more detailed information about particular exhibitions or key objects and collections in the museum. These are produced in approximately fifteen languages

currently and more are added each year. With languages for which there are not yet many visitors, such as Thai, Portuguese and Dutch, we produce a limited number of laminated copies that visitors return upon completion of their visit. It cannot be underestimated how important these are in enhancing the experience of these visitors, many of whom are surprised and delighted that their language is provided for at all. This is not a particularly expensive undertaking but makes a huge difference to visitors and I encourage all smaller museums to invest in producing quality informational material in as wide a range of languages as you can afford.

Even better, if your museum can access foreign-language speaking tour guides, this can become a very marketable product that will enhance the offering of the museum and produce significant revenue earning opportunities. And, for the museum with plenty of money to spend, there is always the option of audio tours in different languages. Regrettably, however, this is well out of the reach for most small museums, including the Rotorua Museum.

Lesson 3: Understand and promote the role of your museum in the visitor industry

Many museums do not understand, or do not care about, their potential role as visitor attractions. Speaking from a New Zealand perspective there are a number of regional museums, especially, which do not engage in any real way with the tourism sector. They fail to understand that visiting museums (including art galleries) is consistently rated as one of the most important activities by visitors to New Zealand, and fail to position themselves to provide quality experiences to those visitors, and to reap the rewards of doing so.

It is also true that many operators in the tourism industry do not fully appreciate the importance of having a quality museum as

part of the local product offering to visitors. In this respect it is the responsibility of the museum to ensure it becomes involved in the local tourism sector by attending trade shows and participating in joint venture marketing campaigns for the destination. It can be challenging for the traditional museum director, coming more often than not from an academic or education background, to feel comfortable working within the tourism sector but I would suggest that the positive benefits from doing so far outweigh the negatives.

In short, understand the potential role your museum can play as a tourism attraction, and become actively involved with your local tourism sector, even if it sometimes feels like you are selling your soul to the devil!

Lesson 4: Don't be afraid to restrict access to your museum

I mentioned earlier the potential problem of overcrowding for museums that are tourist attractions. In my mind this is the single biggest reason for museums delivering less than satisfactory experiences to visitors, but also one that the small museum can do something about relatively easily.

Small museums should not be afraid to limit the number of people that can visit at any one time, although of course I acknowledge that museum directors are always reluctant to restrict access in any way. It is noteworthy that a number of museums around the world have adopted strategies such as timed admission (e.g. the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC), or admitting only visitors pre-booked on guided tours (e.g. the Lower East Side Tenement Museum in New York).

The Rotorua Museum is probably typical of many smaller museums in major tourism destinations: quite a small building with limited capacity for visitors, in a market where demand can easily outstrip supply, especially in the high tourist season. We have therefore had to develop strategies for coping with this demand and the shortage of space.

It was always going to be untenable for the Rotorua Museum to be a free attraction. If the museum was free it would simply be swamped with package tour buses all day every day, since tour companies love nothing more than free attractions that they can use to pad out itineraries at no cost to themselves. Sadly, a number of large museums in New Zealand have gone down this path in recent years and are paying the price. Serving as little more than free toilet stops and cheap shopping destinations, I would question whether anybody really wins from such a relationship.

At the Rotorua Museum the price of admission is deliberately set high in order to limit visitor numbers during the high season. It is still a very affordable attraction in the Rotorua context, and generous family discounts ensure there is not real barrier to New Zealanders especially, but it is high enough to discourage low-cost package tours, not a market we are interested in being involved with. We are also considering implementing seasonal pricing, whereby prices are lower in the off-season to encourage greater visitation, and higher in summer to restrict numbers as outlined earlier.

During the high season especially but usually year round, no tour groups are admitted to the Rotorua Museum without prior bookings, and this includes visiting school groups. The museum is small enough that a large busload of visitors makes quite an impact; therefore we limit admission to one busload at a time. This ensures that other visitors' experiences are not overly affected, and also that the tour groups have space and time to enjoy the museum.

Likewise, all tour groups visiting the museum must use our docent guide service. This ensures group visits are managed and keep to schedule (since most tours have limited time available, never enough of course!) A team of about sixty trained

volunteer guides take care of visiting tour groups and can deliver quality experiences in a wide range of languages.

So, in summary, small museums need to carefully consider what sort of experience they wish to offer their visitors and should not be afraid to limit visitor numbers if that will lead to a better museum experience for all.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that museums can, and should, play an important role as tourism attractions. In some cities museums are at the centre of the tourism industry, changing visitor patterns and reviving economic fortunes. The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and Te Papa, New Zealand's national museum in Wellington, are examples of two new museums that have completely transformed the tourism industries in those two previously unfashionable destinations. Here in Taipei, the National Palace Museum holds the world's greatest collections of Chinese art and is considered a major tourist destination in its own right - it may well even be the primary reason many visitors come to Taiwan in the first place?

For small museums in smaller cities and towns, however, finding a niche in a very competitive tourism sector is not as easy as it might be for large museums with great collections and well resourced marketing departments. For small museums to succeed they must find a balance between their primary role as community based centres of local history and culture, and their role as the keepers and tellers of local stories to visitors from outside.

In this paper I have attempted to explain the tension that can exist between these seemingly conflicting roles for small museums, profiling the Rotorua Museum in

New Zealand as a case study to demonstrate how this tension can be turned into a positive force, whereby the museum achieves success both as a community museum and as a tourism attraction.

I think it is vitally important that museum leaders have an understanding of the tourism industry and the role of museums as tourism product, and embrace the opportunities that can come from being involved in it. If managed carefully and in a sustainable manner, small local museums can utilise the rewards of tourism, both financial and in terms of profile, to enhance the work they do for their local communities. Earned revenue from admissions can be used to reduce the cost of running the museum to the local community, or can be used to enhance collections and their care, or to bring new exhibitions and programmes for the benefit of local citizens.

However, tourism can also be a curse for museums when uncontrolled access by large numbers of people leads to poor experiences for visitors and potentially endanger collections. This is especially true for large museums with worldwide profiles. Smaller museums on the other hand, being more nimble and less constrained by history and expectation, have the ability to address these issues in a positive way, can devise strategies to restrict visitor numbers if necessary, and can really add value to visitors' experiences by using innovative story-telling techniques.

If a small museum can achieve a sustainable balance between its identities as a community facility and as a tourism attraction it will discover that it can enhance its success and reputation in both roles, without compromising either.

About the author

Mr. Greg McManus has been Director of the Rotorua Museum of Art and History since 1997.

Previously he was Director of Gisborne Museum and Head of Curatorial Services at Manawatu Museum and Science Centre.

Rotorua Museum is regarded as one of the most successful museums in New Zealand, being recognised as New Zealand's Best Culture and Heritage Attraction for three consecutive years at the New Zealand Tourism Awards, culminating in a Distinction Award in 2003.

Mr. McManus holds a B.A. degree in Anthropology from the University of Auckland (New Zealand) and an M.A. degree in Museum Studies from Leicester University (UK). In 1989-90 he held a Research Fellowship in the Anthropology and Sociology Department at the University of British Columbia (Canada). He is an alumnus of the Getty Leadership Institute (class of '96) and undertook an IPAM exchange with the Museum of international Folk Art, Santa Fe, NM, in 1999.

Mr. McManus is currently Chair of the New Zealand National Committee of ICOM, and is a Board member of INTERCOM and ASPAC. He is also a Board member of the New Zealand Museums Training Council.

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