

BUCHAREST MUSEUMS AND THE CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC

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Motto: *The cultural values belong to the past, but they have to recreate realities and landmarks from the present.* (PhD Associate Professor Dumitru Borțun – Communication students' National Congress, 2010)

Museums play an important part in the cultural, social and economic life of a country, being capable of providing benefits not only at an individual level, but also at a collective one. Moreover, museums store the memories, cultures, dreams and hopes of peoples all over the world.

If we were to analyse the public's reactions to the museums' offer, we would notice that they are very different. There are some that go to a museum very often – loyal visitors, but also others that very seldom visit a museum, if ever. However, in most cases, museums are deemed as being static, sophisticated and unfriendly. They are cultural repositories and memory recipients that are not making any efforts to try and meet the public, because they feel that those who need it will find them. In *Museum Management and Marketing*, Richard Sandell states that this reaction is characterised by indifference, excessive prudence, scepticism and the desire of not altering the national values and the existing work practices (Sandell Richard and Janes R. Robert, 2007: 348).

Obviously, this is the wrong approach. If their aim is to attract visitors, museums should acquire a public dimension and promote themselves as agents able to provide cultural experiences with a long-lasting and positive social impact.

The 21st century brought a major change in the relation between museums and their public. Being face-to-face with the contemporary visitors, more and more museums started to be aware of the part they play and gradually shifted from “being something” to “being for someone”. We could even talk about a public pressure exerted by users of cultural products and services. They are the ones that made museums recreate themselves as institutions for the people, a place where they can spend their free time and (re)find the cultural heritage values.

Today, some museums have grasped the extremely important social role they play; through the significant impact they have on the communities where they are active. Museums are defined more and more as a leisure location. At the same time, through the attractive and interactive programmes, the museums also fulfil their educational role.

Museums are for people. Understanding the visitors' needs, expectations and desires are essential for a successful museum, says Timothy Ambrose, author of "Museum Basics" (Ambrose Timothy and Paine Crispine, 2006:19). To this end, we have to highlight the importance of marketing research that helps museums identify and meet the needs specific for every category of visitors. Culture means dialogue and dissemination; it can be defined as part of the whole only if it is disseminated, claims Hans-Georg Gadamer in "Praise of Theory: Speeches and Essays" (Gadamer H-G., 1998).

It is practically impossible to speak of marketing and public relations in the cultural field, if the dissemination element is missing. It is not enough to disseminate the truth; it has to be convincing. You succeed in convincing those that correctly get the messages conveyed to them. But these are not universal messages; each type of public should have a specific message.

The main quality of modern museums is that of having reduced the communication and interaction gap between the institution of museums and the public. Museums have understood that it is not enough just to passively display their collections. Thus, the museum institution no longer focuses only on collections and scientific research, but also on the visitors, by carefully analysing their needs. The difference between the contemporary visitor, the one defining today's generation, and its "predecessor" is the desire of seeing the museum not only as an education environment, but also as a relaxing and interactive one, that is adjusted to the current realities. He wants to be encouraged and motivated to discover the cultural patrimony.

Consequently, museums have evolved from organisations focused only on products and scope, to consumer-oriented entities. For a long time, museums have been seen as elitist institutions, just like their public, who was supposed to choose a museum solely based on the values that were to be found there. Focusing on the public meant changing the approach, attracting more visitors and making them loyal.



But let's come back to the modern visitors, who present some differences as compared to the ones in the past. First of all, there is a wider audience, more demanding, more aware of the quality of products and services, because they have access to more sources of information and pass time. This educated, extremely demanding public is represented by the elites.

At the same time, museums want to avoid elitism and to attract a public that, so far, has never set foot in one of them. High culture and mass culture are complementary. This message is also conveyed by the great Romanian actor Victor Rebengiuc, in an interview for the online version of *Business Magazin*, in February 2010: *I don't think it is normal for one cast to be isolated, to be an island in an ocean of misery. Elitism should live together with what generates it. Elitism should be democratic and being part of the elite means being part of a people, being among one of the most capable members of a nation, and that everything you do is for that people.*

Without lowering their standards, some museums developed strategies aimed at making the masses visit them. And a good example here is *the Night of museums*, an event originating in France. On this occasion, each year in the month of May, numerous museums in Europe can be visited for free and are open all night for visitors. The Night of museums was launched in 2005, as an initiative of the Ministry of Culture and Communication in France. In fact, the event has been organised since 1999, its original name being the Spring of museums. As of 2006, the Night of museums has been organised under the Council of Europe's patronage, and last year's event also under the UNESCO patronage. The Night of museums is the nightly equivalent of the International Museum Day, celebrated on the 18th of May and introduced by the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

There are at least three elements that render the Night of museums an innovative event, with an impact on the culture consumers. First of all, the Night of museums offers the public the experience of *a different visit* at the museum. On this occasion, the museum institutions come up with innovative ideas and propose to the public all types of activities that supplement the experience of visiting the permanent exhibits.

Other two important aspects, mentioned when promoting the Night of museums, are the fact that the event is free of charge and the museums can be visited at night. *The free of charge aspect eliminates the barriers*

between public and museums, generating the idea of “culture for everyone”, mentioned Frédéric Mitterand, Minister of Culture and Communication in France, at the inaugural conference of the 6th edition of the European Night of museums (2010). At the same time, the public has the possibility of discovering the cultural heritage in a mysterious atmosphere, created by the night-fall. This initiative has not been random, because the association of night and museums aimed at rendering the event a specific significance. Museums are quiet and clam, just like the night [...], and the mystery of the night and the attractive peacefulness of museums is an attracting element for the public, added the French minister.

Romania is also involved in this European programme, and the number of participants increases from one year to another. Actually, the Romanian museums operate on full capacity only during the Night of museums. Attracted by the fact that the event is free, and maybe by its magnitude, thousands of Romanians queue up for dozens of minutes in order to visit these museums.

Between the 1st and 5th of June 2010, I conducted a marketing survey (*Promoting the Bucharest Museums*) that included 271 Bucharest residents. The survey also showed the respondents` attitude towards the Night of museums event. Results show that the Bucharest public is attracted by the social meaning of the Night of museums event. For most respondents, this is a way of getting to know the museum heritage, of spending time with their family, friends or co-workers and of being involved in the activities organised by the museums. Thus, the Night of museums is a way of showing contemporary visitors all the entertainment possibilities offered by a museum. The fact that the event is free-of-charge is another aspect that attracts participants, a sign that this type of offers are captivating for the general public, that does not hesitate in taking advantage of them. The Night of museums event can be included among the successful, innovative approaches adopted by museums, and the incredible performance scored by the Bucharest museum institutions is that of attracting that category of the public that doesn` t use to go to a museum.

Although not many Romanian cultural institutions admit it, cultural products, just like material goods, are sold on the market. And whereas material products have a practical utility, the cultural products try to meet some spiritual needs. Cultural products are symbolic goods and require from consumers elementary knowledge and cultural habits.



On a market where the competition in the cultural field is more and more present, and where the population's time and financial resources are limited, offering the public the best alternative for spending their free time is a tough job, especially for museums. First of all, the most difficult thing for museums is to become noticeable and be perceived as a friendly, accessible entity that offers unique experiences to its visitors.

Switching from the *museum-temple* to the *museum-forum* is seen as a normal thing in all major museums of the world. In Romania, this tendency still has to face some impediments that do nothing but delay the process. However, there are museums that have understood the importance of dialogue and adjusting the messages to all types of public.

As for the Bucharest museums, we notice a positive development in the approach of modern visitors. Moreover, some marketing strategies are very well designed and are implemented by means of very good innovative techniques: from antique products and food fairs, 3D photo exhibitions, cinema halls, Facebook and Twitter accounts, to coffee shops and modern museum souvenirs – all designed and adapted by the Bucharest museums, in order to efficiently attract the contemporary public.

Web 2.0 and the Bucharest museums

Around 2004, when the Web 2.0 term appeared, we start speaking of a new stage of the internet and, consequently, a new way of communication. The term Web 2.0 was used for the first time by Tim O'Reilly who, in the article *Web 2.0 Principles and Best Practices* describes it as *a set of economic, social and technological trends that altogether set the basis for a new internet generation, characterised by the user's active involvement* (O'Reilly Tim and Muser John, 2006). These new means of communication (MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, Blog, Twitter, Flickr and so on) are called *new media* and are designed to provide people with all necessary instruments in order to create and disseminate contents in the online environment, in order to share opinions and experiences.

At the Webstock 2010 Conference, the results of the *Who's getting social in Romania* survey were made public. The survey was conducted in August 2010 by the market research and marketing company Daedalus Millward Brown, and apart from relevant information on the social networks in Romania, it also ranks the online social networks preferred by Romanians. According to this rank, during the last year

the Facebook communication platform recorded a boost, outranking the Hi5 socialisation network and thus becoming the new leader of the social networks in Romania. Also called the internet's text message, the micro-blogging network Twitter is also continuously developing – the number of Romanians who have created accounts on this social network is constantly increasing.

Since an important category of the museum visitors is represented by the young public, that is more and more present online, several Bucharest museums have created accounts on the Facebook and Twitter social networks. The audience, that here is called *friends, fans, followers* and those *following* the museum activity is constantly informed about the programmes developed by the museum institutions.

This marketing strategy adopted by the Bucharest museums is based on the changes triggered by the technological development and on the statistical data on the development of social networks.

The most important aspect taken into account by museums that developed marketing strategies is that of the age groups of the people choosing to use this social network. According to www.facebakers.com, the website providing official and updated information on the worldwide Facebook users, 37% of the Romanians who have an account in this network are aged between 18 and 24 years. The second category, 34% of users, is represented by Romanians between 25-34 years old. The 35-44 years age group is the third one, with 11%. What's worth mentioning is that more teenagers have shown interest in this social network, and the users aged from 13 to 17 represent 13% of all Facebook users in Romania.

In order to discover the profile of those using the Twitter micro-blogging network, Cristian Manafu conducted the study RoTwitter Svey that analysed not only the personal accounts, but also those of organisations. At the same time, the survey provides demographic and behavioural statistics about the Twitter users in Romania. According to RoTwitter Svey 2010, 84% of the Twitter users in Romania are aged between 18 and 35.

According to Dragos Stanca, new media specialist, Facebook entered the online environment as a student network. More developed than the Hi5 platform, Facebook especially addresses people with higher education. These users associate Facebook with the idea of intimacy and relaxation.



At the same time, many use this social network as a way of managing their own image. As for those using the Twitter micro-blogging site, they focus on self-development and financial gains. In most cases, they also have their own blogs and are interested in networking.

In the following paragraphs I will make an analysis of the Facebook and Twitter accounts of the Bucharest museums that will show how they adjusted to the new promotional trends, in order to attract the contemporary public. The criteria taken into account when conducting the assessment were the online activity (museum discourse, quality and frequency of the posts) and the number of friends.

I will start with the National Museum of Art of Romania, who has tried to communicate with its public by means of two interaction services provided by Facebook: National Museum of Art of Romania and MNAR Arts. These two interaction services used by the museum are characterised by a great number of friends and fans, as well as by the systematic activity they perform. Thus, *MNAR Arts* has about 5000 friends, whereas *the National Museum of Art of Romania* has over 12600 fans. Both pages, the fans and friends, are very active on Facebook. The public is carefully and frequently informed about all the events organised by the museum, and the photos section is constantly updated.

Apart from these, on Facebook there is another account, the *MNAR Friends*. The MNAR Friends is an NGO created in 1998 to provide moral and financial support for the National Museum of Art of Romania. The account has about 200 online friends and a fairly good presence on Facebook: the events are constantly updated and the public can learn about the museum visiting hours.

One of the reasons for having various services for interacting with the public, within this social network, could be the limits imposed for managing the number of users. For the friends account, Facebook allows a maximum number of 5000 friends, for a group maximum 3000 members and for the fan page, there are no limits. At first sight, the simultaneous use of these services could confuse the public. However, since the messages sent are unitary, the users focus on the museum institution sending them and only later do they pay attention to the account from where they were sent. At the same time, using several services to interact with the public, provided by Facebook, gives the museum the possibility of reaching the highest number of real or possible visitors.

Another museum extremely active on Facebook is the Romanian Peasant Museum. The Museum has reached the maximum number of friends allowed by this social network, and the fan page has over 6300 users. Just like in the case of the National Museum of Art of Romania, both services post the same messages that are constantly updated and adjusted to the public that is part of this social environment.

Unlike the National Museum of Art of Romania and the Romanian Peasant Museum, the National Museum of Contemporary Art chose to have a group on Facebook – the *Friends of MNAC* group has about 530 members. If you become a member of this group, you will be informed, from time to time, about the events to which the MNAC invites its contemporary art-loving friends.

The Romanian National Geology Museum has a Facebook account with about 600 friends. The museum, that on this social network is called the *Igr Geological Museum* informs its friends about its activities and presents photos and videos from the events they organise. The term Igr comes from the Romanian Geological Institute, and the account has links to this institution and to the official web page of the museum.

The National Museum of Romanian History is another museum institution with a Facebook account. In fact, this social network also has a group of friends called *the History Museum*, another independent association that mentions that the official page of the museum is MNIR. If for the 430 friends of the association new information is seldom posted, the *MNIR* fan page communicates very efficiently with its public. Thus, the 1100 MNIR fans constantly receive details about the events organised by the museum.

In the beginning of 2010, the Romanian Literature Museum also joined the Facebook online community. Up to this moment, the museum has a little over 730 fans and a well-organised activity. Recently, the Romanian Literature Museum decided to use another interaction service provided by Facebook. Thus, *Mnlr Romania* was created, with over 1000 friends that are carefully informed about all events taking place at the museum.

The National Philatelic Museum doesn't communicate too often with its 220 fans from this social network. The page displays photos from the events organised by the museum, and the information is posted, on average, once a month. *The "Amiral Vasile Urseanu" Astronomical Observatory* has had, so far, a pretty modest presence on Facebook, with



only 35 fans and just one piece of news posted. This institution belongs to the history museums and is the only Astronomical Observatory in Bucharest open for the general public.

If, for Facebook, museums adapted pretty fast to the new trends in communicating with the public, when it comes to the museums being present on the Twitter social network, things are different. Thus, only two museum institutions have accounts on Twitter: the Romanian Peasant Museum (Muzeul Țăranului) and the National Museum of Romanian History (MNIR_). Muzeul Țăranului has about 550 followers, whereas MNIR_ about 80. The messages posted here are pretty similar to those on Facebook, just that on Twitter they have been adjusted for the number of characters imposed by this social network. Since Facebook became the new leader of the social networks in Romania, and Twitter is constantly developing, more and more museums could gradually choose to join these social networks.

The museum institutions that want to interact online with the current and possible culture consumers should also take into consideration the type of the organisation and the specificity of the social network. As I have already mentioned, the two types of cultures existing in a society are complementary. Consequently, there shouldn't be a selection of the individuals that will receive the products and services of a cultural institution. However, this "filter" (communicating on Facebook and Twitter, to the detriment of Hi5 and Neogen) is used a lot by these institutions. If they fail to adjust to these requirements, they risk wasting many resources trying to get to a public that, for the time being, does not need symbolic products. One cannot ask for an understanding and a constant use of cultural products from those environments where culture hasn't reached too often, if ever.

Under these circumstances, several Bucharest museums grasped the importance of education programmes that they have been successfully organising for some time now. The National Museum of Art of Romania organises various programmes, courses and workshops that involve children, teenagers, youngsters and adults. *The Family Programme* (4-12 years old), *the Teenagers Programme* (13-18 years old), *the "Bird hidden in the stone" workshop* (4-14 years old), *Cultural Rendez-vous* (adults), together with other activities organised by the museum are aimed at capitalising the museum's heritage, with an approach suitable for each age group, through interactivity and team work. Other Bucharest museums (the Romanian Peasant Museum, the National Museum

of Romanian History, and the “Grigore Antipa” National Museum of Natural History) developed educational programmes and creative workshops, designed for the youngest public, in order to develop the habit of interacting with the museum environment from the tender ages.

If on the micro-blogging networks it is possible to post only short texts, the blogging platform – those areas that host personal blogs, offer users a more generous space. A blog is a personal website where the author posts articles, called *posts*, which are displayed in a chronological order, broken down into categories, and the visitors can comment on them. As for the blogs of Romanian museums, there are two situations: in Bucharest there are museums that use the blogs to hold virtual meetings with the public that is interested in the museum activity (<http://muzeultaranuluiroman.ro/blog/>, <http://enescumuseum.blogspot.com/>), whereas at national level there are specialised blogs whose aim is to be information and debate forums for the professionals in the museum field (<http://coliasmuseo.wordpress.com/>, <http://muzeu.blogspot.com/>, <http://showmuz.wordpress.com/>). These platforms create real online communities and are pretty efficient from a communications point of view. The appearance and development of blogs is another example of successful communication and proves, once again, that the online interaction is a phenomenon that cannot be ignored.

The museum-visitor relation is a complementary one. On one hand, the visitors need the museum for its cultural and spiritual value, but also for spending their free time. On the other hand, the cultural heritage hosted by museums represents a true value only if there are visitors. The public that consumes culture helps museum institutions achieve their mission. Under these circumstances, museums have the mission of *packing* the cultural heritage they have in such a way as to make it attractive for the public. In other words, *the substance* is still the same, whereas *the form* is the one that makes the contemporary visitor come to the museum.

As long as this does not affect its major functions, any museum can develop its qualities of cultural area by adding entertainment possibilities. The fact that museums are trying to attract new types of public and them continuously adjusting to the contemporary visitor`s demands are visible signs of the encouraging evolution of museums in Bucharest. I am also optimistic when it comes to the part that museums will play in the future. In my opinion, if museums meet the public`s expectations and use the possibilities offered by the continuous development of



the cultural environment, they will succeed in being more and more appreciated by the general public and will contribute to the society's development.