

Barely Tolerable Branding

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What's ahead:

- **Does importing a blockbuster panda exhibit signify top brand status, or is it a sign the zoo is losing its battle against Toronto's multiple distractions?**
- **What's more important? Being a local entertainment venue dependant on novelty to keep attendance steady, or demonstrating the Zoo has its own unique ideas and belongs at the centre of a vital public conversation about our world?**
- **The zoo has to understand the requirements of being a leading global learning institution.**

People judge organizations in a “blink,” so what do Torontonians think about their zoo now that city councillors are trying to import a Panda exhibit from China? If the zoo wants to be taken seriously as “one of the strongest conservation advocacy groups in the world,” it should avoid tactics that make it look more like a local entertainment venue.

The zoo is important to Toronto – “one more way to put the city on the map” is how Councillor Glenn de Baeremaeker describes its value. This sentiment emboldened city council to move quickly last year to assert its control over zoo management after consultants reported that the Zoo's foundation was not raising sufficient money. The report had declared the Zoo capable of raising a quarter of a billion dollars and repositioning itself as a world-leading zoo.

Toronto councillor Giorgio Mammoliti is “convinced the pandas are a ‘catalyst’” for the zoo's ambitious plans. He hopes the pandas will raise awareness about the Zoo, motivate more people to visit, and encourage more people to donate money to support the Zoo and its research. This seems unlikely: the core problem is that a panda exhibit isn't the brand building tactic that best suits the zoo's high aspiration. Mammoliti's entertainment-focused imagination, a common trait in the museum sector, seems limited to creating a spectacle that produces, at best, superficial attention.

Branding isn't supposed to be a temporary mechanism to grab attention, yet that's how the sector treats it. The zoo, like most museums, is locked into a way of doing business with significant flaws: their chosen marketing tactics do little to alter the public view of museums as a short-term, novelty-based commodity. The result: many realize the only real brand they have created for themselves is as organizations that have to scramble to be noticed and appear to be perpetually cap-in-hand.

If the Zoo is important to Toronto, shouldn't its marketing be aimed at ensuring it receives the right kind of attention? It has to understand the requirements of being a leading, possibly an elite, global learning institution. It needs to be a thought leader capable of promoting its own unique ideas.

Museums generally have failed to clearly establish and communicate their public value and are losing the battle against society's multiple distractions: visitorship is down, those who do visit aren't staying connected (only 3% of earned revenues come from membership sales), public giving is low, there are few large donations, and government support is declining. All of which leads to desperate measures like panda exhibits: depending on novelty to keep attendance steady, says the Getty Institute, is the sector's own version of the Ponzi scheme. More museums are committing to costly, high-profile exhibitions that must be supported by costly advertising, which commits them to chasing bigger audiences. It's an endless and unsustainable cycle.

Museums must try harder to put themselves back at the centre of a vital public conversation about our world. People are interested in knowing what propels society forward: this is the concept the zoo wants to connect with. So the Zoo must concentrate on being a indispensable and engaging source of information, be willing to challenge audience thinking, and demonstrate it can engage audience interests beyond its local borders. Until they can exploit their uniqueness they will not be recognized and rewarded.

The Toronto Zoo might be another National Geographic Society, an organization amply-rewarded for understanding that staying ahead of competitors requires innovation, not emulation. It supports unique research because the research provides fresh stories, and telling those stories enables the achievement of its mission. Proprietary content helps build the trust with audiences essential to effective fundraising. It establishes the burden of proof and highlights the broader public impact of the organization.

The Zoo needs to develop the same compelling, inspiring objects that demonstrate its unique ideas and leadership. Toronto, by now, should be tired of calling itself "world-class" but not having anything more than chutzpah to back up its claims. Positioning its zoo as a deep content brand would enable the institution to leave its Toronto-centric marketing focus behind, and become the outwardly-oriented international player it wants to be.