

# On the ROM track. Again.

by Robert Ferguson

The cliché of the pandemic was that things would change. It was always said as a kind of promise: there would be no going back to normal. It turns out we aren't quite sure how to change – at least museums don't. Without new ideas to move beyond the pandemic, they remain trapped by



old ways of doing things.

What new vision will get them out of the weeds – and where will new ideas come from? As the sector's thought leader, the Canadian Museums Association should have been able to come up with an innovative turnaround strategy. But it hasn't been able to imagine a "different" future, so the job of divining a new policy to rejuvenate the sector landed with the Department of Canadian Heritage.

New ideas might have come from one of our larger museums – the deep pockets of the Royal Ontario Museum, perhaps. But the ROM can't seem to help itself: in 2008 it fell on its face with the Crystal. Now they've done it again trying to prove their vitality and relevance with the launch of "ROM Immortal." Their rebrand is just old-style thinking. The ROM is good at veneers; beyond the veneer, however, has anything really changed?

The ROM wants to present a new face to the public, but how is it changing if people still have to cross the threshold to interact with their content? That's the way churches work: you have to attend to get closer to God. How very 19th century of them.

This "rebranding" tells me only that the ROM hasn't developed a vision for what it can be. They could have thought more fundamentally about how a museum can fulfill its mission, but they chose not to. They just don't know how to show they're influential. The proof? You still have to visit to get closer to knowledge.

Sure, it has become harder and harder to reach consumers. At the best of times, standing out is difficult because you're competing against advertising and marketing from everybody. People are exposed to a flood of content every day; they will read and watch only what is appealing, relevant and valuable to them; the rest will be ignored. We can be empathetic about that.

The ROM Immortal brand was launched with a video – think of it as a movie trailer. It's a dramatically beautiful promotion piece that conveys mood and atmosphere and hopes to engage people. It doesn't care about distortion, and doesn't spend precious time expanding on narrative. These things try to showcase what people will see when they experience your product. Attracting audiences means telling an engaging short story that persuasively says, "Trust us, you'll love the movie." Our readers will know it's an idea we like.



Only it's not what the ROM needs. The razzle-dazzle of a new wordmark, or a glitzy video isn't the innovation that's needed. After 2 years of being closed, the wrong thing to do is to go back to normal. They needed to make meaningful connections with people, not to go back to the old style of persuading people to visit. Because the ROM evidently can't see itself as anything other than a cabinet of wonders, its rebrand succeeds only as a "how-not-to."

**I WILL LIVE ON IN WHAT I LEAVE BEHIND.**

### **From place to purpose**

So why do it? Probably because their business-minded board told them to. A few years ago, Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation argued "everything that moves an institution forward, or holds it back, can be traced to its board." He went on to comment that museums can "enact bold forward-looking visions only when their boards support them in seeing museums as spaces to challenge, take creative risks, and not simply conserve." Correcting this won't be easy because, in Walker's view, it is the trustees who determine the museum's purpose and anchor fundraising.

Museums have long had the choice between being a local venue that depends on novelty to keep attendance steady, or demonstrating their unique ideas belong at the centre of a vital public conversation about our world. Sadly, the entertainment-focused imagination prevailed, and many museums are curiously willing to embrace inappropriate marketing gimmicks that severely limit their potential societal impact.

It isn't up to the Leo Burnett's of the world to think differently; they do what they do. I'm sure the ROM is smugly satisfied that its video and new wordmark make it relevant to more people but it should be more plugged-in about how to reposition, and even going as far as "repurposing" itself. The ROM's board needs to think more innovatively instead of imposing the language of business on a nonprofit.

Museums should aspire to a strong brand and deriving its many benefits. But, conventional branding isn't the solution: does advertising really work? They want to see themselves playing a major role as a focus of reflection and debate but their outlook is limited significantly by the sector's traditional focus on programming for people who walk through the front door – people who make irregular and infrequent visits. Because they let their emphasis on place and the turnstile consume them, they are going about it the wrong way. Talk about untapped potential! The ROM's audience could just as easily be global. Instead, the ROM will continue struggling to attract tourists, school trips, and birthday party sleepovers.

### **The missed opportunity**

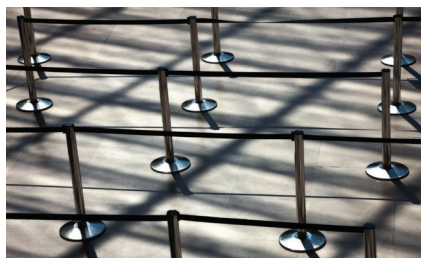
Museums weren't prepared for COVID-19 because they haven't adequately addressed this important question: "What business are we really in?" Nor does the ROM's new brand seem concerned about addressing these key questions either:

1. How do we reach people who may never darken our doors?
2. What's our plan to keep people connected to our work 24/7?
3. What's our plan for engaging people's curiosity and ensuring that they see the ROM as relevant in their lives?

It's time museums realized there has been a cost to being passive about telling people what they know – they've marginalized their organizations by failing to engage audiences in new and compelling ways outside their walls. It's time for a real plan for keeping people connected to their work between visits, a real plan for mobilizing new content that deepens audiences' sense of their relevance.

This should be the time to make purposeful changes aimed at a brand new future. This is a moment to try something different. But where are new ideas coming from? Museums need a think tank/thought leadership forum that can offer new solutions and help direct it. What they don't need is a board's knee-jerk thinking. Perhaps they had success branding their respective businesses that way, but museums – and nonprofits generally – require a different plan.

When only so many people can hear your story in person, you leave a lot – A LOT – of potential supporters on the table by not reaching out beyond your four walls. In 1922, *Harvard Business Review* was launched because the people running the business school recognized that only so many people could attend classes, but many more wanted access to professors' insights. It was conceived to help the school expand its reach. HBR's content has made its business school "immortal." Museums need to think similarly: make content an extension of their educational missions so their organizations can go from place to purpose.



Is your museum a cabinet of wonders or a hotbed of important ideas? If it's to be the latter, then stop behaving like a museum. Retooling to become a center for critical dialogue offers the promise of finding more meaningful ways to persuade the public about your museum's promise and social value.

## **The museum as a media organization**

With the many competitive pressures facing organizations today, places like museums have to focus on connecting with audiences on multiple levels. Museums need to dive into subject matter through conferences, publications, podcasts, reading groups, and film screenings; make every exhibition a Zoom classroom, a podcast lecture, a Twitter thread. The nimble post-Covid museum will rebound by being "intrusive" about transmitting stories so the museum becomes widely known for its unique ideas.

Marcus Gee fears the biggest risk is that the ROM will lose sight of its mission. Perhaps that's exactly the solution. One of the biggest problems organizations have today is missions that hold their imagination and ambition hostage, causing them to innovate too little.

Now the pockets of the ROM are deeper than ever: they've just announced a \$50-million donation from the Hennick Family Foundation – the single largest cash donation in its history. In the right hands, this could be a transformative gift. But the pledge "to transform iconic spaces and the way we experience art, culture, and nature for generations to come," combined with CEO Josh Basseches' promise that "Leading-edge physical and programmatic enhancements will help us evolve into a truly 21st-century museum" tells us we'll just get more of the same.

## **Is "same old" the best use of this visionary gift?**

Their thinking is flawed. The point is not to get more people in front of their exhibits but to expose more people to their ideas. They need to rethink the old, stultifying revenue model: museums need a reward system that acknowledges they can measure success by something other than turnstile count. Throw away the dead flowers.

Museums are institutions for knowledge and thinking: "places" for shaping conversations about important issues. Invest in storytelling that can travel: if you help people read more, listen more, see more, and think more, "place" won't matter so much: you will be building a brand that lives in people's minds, regardless of where they live, and regardless of whether they actually visit or not.

Leverage storytelling and everything will change. Everything will change if museums leverage storytelling to become focal points of discussion; if they build far-flung communities; when people start to see them as the organization bringing them leading ideas.

Start developing a strategy for taking advantage of the museum's assets; develop new content that shapes the conversation and makes your institution more relevant. Do this to grow awareness about your organization's intellectual capabilities and, ironically, you will actually get more people coming through your doors – but it won't matter as much.