

## **To Be or Not to Be: New Branding Strategies of UK National Museums in the Global Village**

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How does a national museum occupy the visitor's mind in the global era? Facing increasing competition all over the world, 'branding' has played a more important role in strategic planning for museum marketing. In the UK, five out of eighteen national museums have changed their names during the last few decades and some are still planning to change the names of their branches to build a stronger brand name and identity. However, some are persistent with their established brand names. What kind of motivation makes this difference? What new branding strategies are adopted to face more competition in the global village? Three national museums have been selected as case studies to understand their strategic thinking by conducting in-depth interviews. As a result, it is the branding strategy that decides these national museums' 'to be or not to be'.

Keywords: branding, national museum, museum marketing, British Museum, National Museums Liverpool, National Museums Scotland

## Introduction

In modern society, a brand name means everything and nothing. McDonald's, IKEA, IBM, Google, Ford, to name but a few, all give consumers immediate recognition of what their product is and should be like. On the other hand, some local shops with brand names such as Glass House, West Port, and Keracher's give no indication of what the business is about and what standard they hold unless in their local area with frequent customers. When a consumer decides to buy a product or service, with a wide range of choice, what is the key factor in affecting the process? Is it the quality and packaging of the product? Or could it be the price? Or is it maybe distributing channels? After all, the brand is always the key element when it involves in the process (McLean 1996). Brand image is a shortcut to attracting attention and building familiarity and trust (Kotler & Kotler 1998: 219-220). People seem to trust those brands that they have heard before and know what they can get from the companies. They might be willing to spend more money on the same product because of the brand image and name. It is the power of branding that matters. In brief, the power of brand name means recognition, reliability and value.

**Photo 1.** One of the most recognisable global brands-McDonald's



In the era of competition, the brand name has gained a great niche not only in the commercial world, but also in the non-profit sector (Wallace 2006: 177-180). Non-profit organisations compete for attention from the visitors, for the sponsor, from the donors, for the support from the government and for resources from the society (Kotler & Andreasen 1991: 99-105). For example, the Red Cross tends to attract more resources than the Save Children Fund because it has a reputation and wide awareness among the general public. In the museum sector, the

same situation has been similar after the museum boom in the later twentieth century. Any museum needs to plan a better branding in order to raise its profile before attracting more support from different sources. It is without doubt that the British Museum is able to find more sponsors for its capital projects than a local authority museum such as the St Andrews Museum, or even any other national museum in the UK. The National Gallery, Tate, the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts and the Guggenheim Museum are among the museum names best known in the world. What is the value of the brand name of a museum? Why do museums want to change their names? How do visitors react to these changes?

There are three aims in this research:

1. To understand the role that branding plays in the national museums in the UK through a historical review;
2. To investigate the practical in using branding in these British national museums by conducting in-depth interviews;
3. To find out the effect of branding of case studies and propose a possibility to increase their competitiveness.

## What Is Branding?

‘Branding’ is a common term in the commercial world. It is particularly popular in marketing as well as in public relations. What is a brand? It is defined as ‘a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of these, intended to identify the goods or services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition’ (Kotler & Armstrong 1991: 260). It is regarded as one of the basic features of product design and covers various aspects of a product, including the brand name, the brand mark, the trade mark and the copyright. In its broad sense, it is the same as the corporate identity in its intention to gain an instant recognition and should be built to be long-lasting (McLean 1997: 142-144; Museums & Galleries Commission 1994: 27-30). In the non-profit sectors, a brand is helpful in market segmentation and creating a customer loyalty (Hannagan 1992: 116-117). For cultural enterprises, the name of a well-known company conjures up image in the mind of the consumer, who associates a particular product with that name (Colbert 2001: 32). In the museums and heritage sector, it has its value and mainly includes the brand name as well as its intellectual property right. As in the private sector, it is a way of differentiating similar products, particularly in the competitive market (Ruyard & French 1999: 159-161). A brand could be also a distinctive identity that engenders loyalty. Hence, branding ‘consists of creating and maintaining a body of programmes and attitudes that convey a clear promise, encourage familiarity, and generate ongoing support’ (Wallace 2006: 1-4). It is an important part of realising the aims of museums, as it assists a museum to articulate its identity and project its images to consumers (Hede 2007: 154-158). In summary, museum branding is a marketing tool to fulfill its mission, build its identity and establish a long term relationship with the public.

Museum branding begins with shaping an internal common sense by defining its mission and designing brand name and image. It then reaches out to a wide range of external stakeholders, such as visitors, the government, the donors, the community and even sponsors in order to build loyalty and support from these stakeholders. It is sometimes regarded as part of corporation identity (CI) or corporation identity system (CIS). In many examples, visual elements are used to reinforce the impression of the public, for instance, the name, logo, uniform, signage and building (Museums & Galleries Commission 1994: 27-30). In other cases, museum branding covers more intangible factors such as the exhibition content, education programmes, information provided either by its publication or on its website (Wallace 2006: 9-16). In fact, a good museum branding requires a combination of both visual

and intangible elements to assist its sustainability. It is the first impression received by visitors and lasts longer in visitor experience. It helps greatly for any museum to gain a position in the much more competitive global village (Scott 2007: 169).

McLuhan said 'the media is the message'. The brand of a museum has the most direct effect on public perception; therefore, a good branding strategy tends to not only reinforce the museum's reputation but also encourage visitors to come to the museum. In modern society, museums need also to consider which media they use to convey a clear message (Adams 1983: 90-91). Different media has its own advantage: word of mouth provides long lasting loyalty effects, visual design develops a consistency of image and gives the first impression, the internet and website expands the limits of time and space. These communication and promotional tools normally work together to attract consumer's attraction (Kotler & Kotler 1998: 210-220). Good reputation and strong branding will distinguish a museum from the others and attract attentions from stakeholders. It is a key player in positioning and segmentation of a museum.

Branding helps the museum to find its niche in the competitive global market. For example, the name of British Museum is so powerful that it would be folly to change it, at least for the next few decades. Take the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside as another example, it was too difficult for anyone to remember, not to mention the ambiguity of Merseyside that might have confused people's perception. As a result, a shorter and more comprehensive name, National Museums Liverpool, was adopted in 2003. Another example is the National Museums Scotland. Its branding strategy has transformed along with the political environment and national identity. The use of 'National Museum' in each of its branch museums recently has symbolised the strong identity after political devolution in the country. Hence, the brand name of a national museum should be impressive and also easy to remember, just like a new product that is able to echo among the public. For example, the Louvre is so powerful that nobody has to ask where it is or what it is famous for, even without adding any information such as national or museum of arts or fine art into its name. However, not every museum is lucky enough to have this prestige and this is why branding is becoming more and more important nowadays.

## Research Design

The design of this research is mainly a qualitative study, using a historical review and in-depth interviews for data collecting. It first reviewed the historical development of national museums and their branding strategies and then chose three of eighteen national museums as case studies.

The historical review intends to provide a brief evolution of national museums in the UK and an insight into the branding and the relationship between national museums and their environments, particularly the political, social and economic aspects. The 'product life cycle' from marketing is adopted to analyse their existence. Elements were to be found for the explanation of their branding strategies. Establishing branches of these national museums has also been investigated as it reinforces the power of museum brand.

By utilising in-depth interviews, it aimed to find out the reasons for the changing of museums' brand names, or decision in not to change their names. This would reflect the practical situation in national museums and increase the understanding of their strategies in branding. Several issues raised in interviews include the strength of their brand names, the process of decision making, the influence from the external environment, the shaping of their identity and the response from the public. Based on the representativeness of historical background, geographical distribution and branding strategies, there are three cases chosen for in-depth interviews. They are the British Museum, the National Museums Liverpool and the National Museums Scotland.

## National Museums and Their Branding Strategies in the UK (Historical Review)

National museums in the UK have experienced different stages in their history. It has the oldest national museum in the world: the British Museum, established in London in 1753 (Wilson 2002). It also has a very young member of the national museum family: the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool established in 2007. Through a historical review, it is the aim of this research to understand the role that branding plays in their development and how it reflects the characters of these national museums.

A ‘national museum’ is defined in the report of The National Museums: the National Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom with four basic characteristics. These are: the collections of national importance, vested in Trustees on the nation’s behalf, mainly funded by the Government; answering the call from the Government for expert advice (Museums and Galleries Commission 1988: 3-4). After more than 250 years of development, new museums were established, local authority museums were upgraded to gain national status and some existing museums were amalgamated. All have seen branding changes through history. The number of national museums in the UK is eighteen in 2008, as shown in Chart 1.

**Chart 1.** List of National Museum Organisation in the UK

<b>The Report of National Museums</b>	<b>Year (Foundation)</b>	<b>Year (New Branding)</b>
Royal Armouries	1680	1680
British Museum	1753	1753
National Museums Scotland	1854	1985 (2007)
National Gallery	1824	1824
National Galleries of Scotland	1850	1906
Victoria & Albert Museum	1852	1899
National Portrait Gallery	1856	1856
National Museums of Science and Industry	1857	1999
Natural History Museum	1881	1992
Wallace Collection	1897	1897
Tate	1897	2000
National Museum Wales (Amgueddfa Cymru)	1907	1995
Imperial War Museum	1917	1917
National Maritime Museum	1934	1934
National Army Museum	1960	1960
Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland	1958, 1961	1998
Royal Air Force Museum	1963	1963
National Museums Liverpool	1986	2003
There are eighteen organisations in total.		

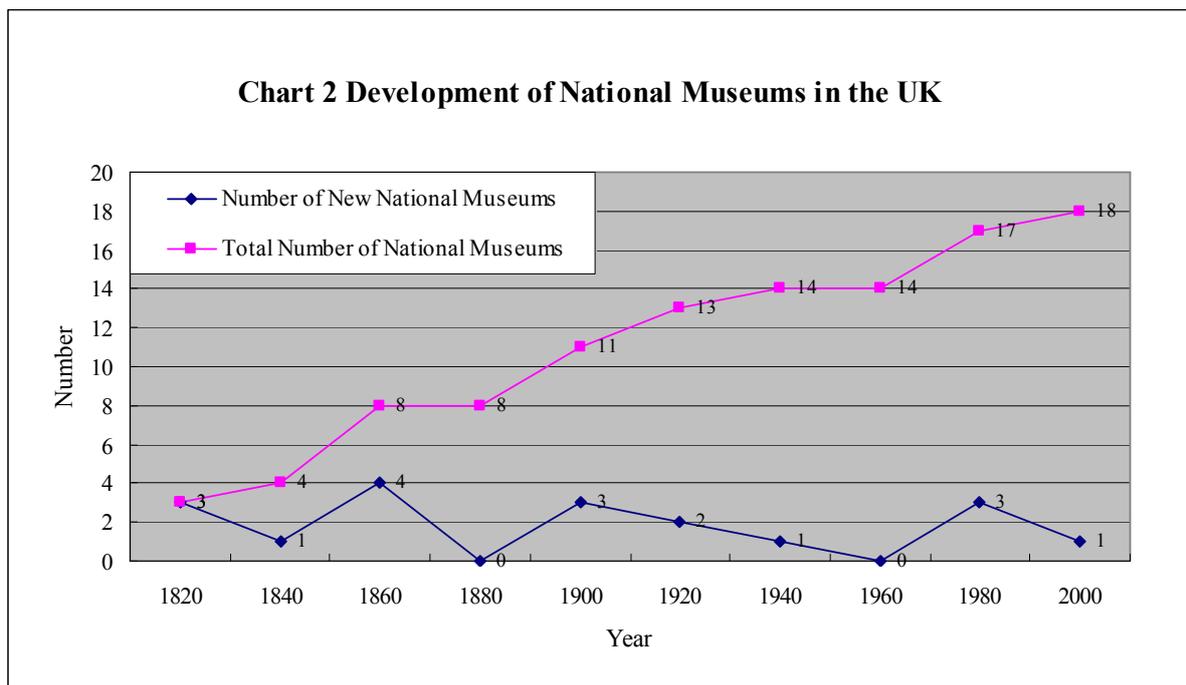
The evolution of national museums began with the foundation of the British Museum in 1753, even though the Royal Armouries was founded earlier but it was the Royal collection and did not open to the public until a later period. Since then, national museums and galleries have been developed for various reasons: to preserve the collections of national significance, to present the cultural and natural legacy of the nation, to diffuse knowledge and skills for the public and to protect the history of the nation. From the eighteenth century until the present day, development and growth can be divided into several periods by using the product life cycle (PLC) from a marketing concept, as shown in Chart 2.

Three periods of growth can be identified: 1840-1860, 1880-1990 and 1960-1980. It is partly because of social and political influence; hence includes the Great Exhibition in 1851,

private bequest collections to the nation and the preservation of military legacy in the UK (Tzeng 2005:2-5).

A chronological list of national museums in the UK is shown as the Appendix I, with the foundation of each national museum and their branches and name changes. It also reflects social, political, economic and cultural contexts: the British Empire and its expansion, the enlightenment and dissemination of knowledge, free trade and economic power, the two World Wars, industrialisation and urbanisation, the preservation of industrial heritage and the political devolution, to name but a few. Tracing the branding strategies in national museums therefore provides some food for thought in understanding the interaction between them and their environments. This section intends to give a brief summary of major branding factors in affecting British national museums.

**Chart 2.** Development of National Museums in the UK



The glory of British Empire: Many of these national museums do not adopt the term ‘national’ in their brand name. Two main reasons seem to provide an explanation for this phenomenon. One is to emphasise the glory of the British Empire while the other is in the memory of legacy of industrial tycoons. The British Museum should be the best example for the first explanation. It is the first national museum in the world, founded in 1753, and represents the rise of British power. Most of its important collections are from all over the world to amplify its status in the international political arena. It is a museum of the world, based in Britain; therefore the name of ‘British’ can not be more proper (more details will be provided in the case study). The Royal Armouries, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Imperial War Museum and the Royal Air Force Museum all have the same situation without bothering to put the term ‘national’ into their brand name. Even though they are all national museums. However, this does not mean that there is no argument regarding their brand name. Recently, many people started to debate if the Victoria and Albert Museum should change its name to the National Museum of Art and Design, which would give visitors a better understanding of museum and its contents. Another museum, in order to position itself in a more comprehensive way, has chosen to change its name from the British Museum (Natural History) to Natural History Museum in 1992.

The influence of industrialisation: The influence of industrialisation, particular in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries creates another type of branding strategy. The Great Exhibition in London in 1851 helped to establish several national museums around the country, including the South Kensington Museum (now split into the Victoria and Albert Museum and Science Museum), the British Museum (Natural History, now the Natural History Museum) and the Industrial Museum of Scotland (later renamed as the Edinburgh Museum of Science and Art, and now part of the National Museums of Scotland, more details will be provided in the case study). It also had influence on many local authority museums in big cities, such as in Glasgow, Birmingham and Manchester. They also have some features in common, especially in their concept and buildings. Education for the science and art played an important role in the foundation of these institutions (Royal Scottish Museum 1986: 13-15). Their buildings used the element of Crystal Palace and incorporated plenty of industrial materials.

The economic power and private donation: In the late nineteenth century, it was the apex of the British economic power. Several donations were made to the nation at that time. The Wallace Collection and Tate (originally named the National Gallery of British Art) were the most important two of them, both opened to the public in 1897. The Wallace Collection was bequeathed by Lady Wallace with the collections collected by her husband and father-in-law. Tate collection was based on the donation of Henry Tate to the nation. These two national museums still keep the names of donors in their brand in the remembrance of their contribution. The economic power of Britain in the second half of the twentieth century enabled several national museums to set up branches. For example, the Science Museum, later renamed the National Museum of Science and Industry, has branches in York, Bradford and Swindon. Tate has four branches in three cities in England: Tate Britain and Tate Modern in London, Tate Liverpool and Tate St Ives (Searing, 2004).

The preservation of the collections of national significance: With 'national' in their brand name, the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the National Maritime Museum, the National Army Museum were created to preserve the important collections for the nation, either of art works or on a specific subject. The National Gallery in London, founded in 1824, is now the equivalent to the Louvre in Paris. Many people consider it as a live open book of art history. Similarly, the National Portrait Gallery, located next to the National Gallery in London, provides an in-depth comprehension of the artworks focusing on British portraiture. The National Maritime Museum and the National Army Museum, one the other hand, were founded to protect and present a live history of the British maritime and army empire.

National pride and political devolution: All the national museums outside London are under the influence of national pride and political devolution. These include two in Scotland, one in Northern Ireland, one in Wales and still another one in Liverpool. The National Galleries of Scotland and the National Museums in Scotland exemplify the strong desire to have national museums in Scotland. Political influence in Liverpool lifts the original local authority museum to a national status. Another influence was the amalgamation of different museums into a national museum organisation, such as the National Museums of Scotland in 1985 and the Museums and Galleries of Northern Ireland in 1998. Into the 1980s and 1990s, political devolution increases the pace in these places. As a result, almost all of them adopted new branding strategies to have either a new name or new branches. The National Museums Liverpool was named the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside before 2003. The National Museum Wales was called the National Museum of Wales before 1995 and later changed its name as the National Museums and Galleries of Wales until 2006. The last re-branding was the National Museums Scotland in 2007; it was previously called the National Museums of Scotland. It reflects the intention of these national museums to shape a stronger national pride and identity.

### Three Case Studies

As aforementioned, three cases were selected as the focus for further exploration by conducting in-depth interviews. These cases are the British Museum, the National Museums Liverpool and the National Museums Scotland. Information gathered from interviews is depicted as follows:

The British Museum regarded itself as a museum of the world. Its long history and outstanding scholarship represent its reputation. The core competence of the museum is its collections and expertise in research. Therefore, the term 'national' seems to be unnecessary in its branding as most visitors come to the museum to see world culture. It is actually a universal museum and plays the role of landmark in the museum sector all over the world. The location of the museum in the capital city, London, benefits from attracting tourists and resources. In general, the museum presents more identity of 'other' culture than 'British' culture. However, facing global competition, the museum also seeks for more participation from the international representatives. As a result, it has begun to build partnership not only in the UK but also from abroad. The branding strategy of the British Museum is to continue its long tradition without changing its brand name. In the meantime, it has also started to use its brand as a valuable asset to generate income and to attract more visitors. For example, the accomplishment of the Great Court in 2000 provides a great opportunity for visitor services, from a museum shop and café to information desks and rest area. As for the branch museum, it does not consider this as an important issue. Its recent focus is on building partnership all over the UK and in the international market. In 2007, it has a successful touring exhibition around South Korea, Japan and Taiwan. Much of the audience going to this touring exhibition were attracted by its brand name.

The second case-study is the National Museums Liverpool. It is the only national museum not located in a capital city. It was upgraded from a local authority museum to the national status because of political and economic turmoil in the 1970s and 1980s. When it gained national museum status, it was named the National Museums and Galleries on Merseyside. The name has been changed into the National Museums Liverpool in 2003 because both the director and its board of trustees considered the name was a better choice. One very important reason is because the new brand name is easier to remember and more comprehensive. The old name caused some confusion as many visitors did not have a clue of where Merseyside is. Its branding strategy was to match each of its sites with a better and proper name. For example, the name of Museum of Liverpool has been replaced by the Museum of the World reopened because the interviewee mentioned that its exhibitions and collections are not about Liverpool but the world culture. There are eight museum sites under the organisation of the National Museums Liverpool. The interviewee strongly expressed objection to use of term 'branch museum' to refer these sites. As a national museum in the region, it aims to build close connection and partnership with both the local and national institutions. It has a complex identity mixed with universal and local. For example, it opened the Museum of the World in 2005 and the International Slavery Museum in 2007 but at the same time plans a new museum called the Museum of Liverpool estimated to open in 2010. Another branding strategy is to expand its scale to impress the public and to attract more visitors and resources. The latest development of its branding is to participate in the planning process of the European Capital of Culture in 2008 and to play a central role in this international event.

**Photo 2.** The British Museum: cultivating its existing brand



**Photo 3.** The National Museums Liverpool: expanding its brand



**Photo 4.** National Museums Scotland: shaping its brand as a new national identity



National Museums Scotland, mainly located in Edinburgh, is the third case-study. It was an amalgamation of two national museums in 1985, as a result of a report conducted in the early 1980s (Williams 1981). With the new name of National Museums of Scotland to replace the Royal Scottish Museum and National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland, it reflects the identity of the nation; however, it changed the name again in 2007. It later set up a new building to house and to display its Scottish collections, with the name of Museum of Scotland (now called the National Museum of Scotland). During the last decade, political devolution has a great effect hugely in Scotland. Both the Scottish Parliament and the Museum of Scotland become the symbol of shaping its Scottishness (McKean 2000). Although it still keeps its collections from all over the world exhibited in the Royal Museum (now part of the National Museum of Scotland); some people see the name 'Royal Museum' with doubt. As a result, it began a new branding process in 2007 (Heywood 2007). All its museum sites (again, the interviewee did not agree with the term 'branch museum' and insisted they are sites of the museum) adapted new names, shown as Chart 3. It is noticeable that all new names of its branches have 'national' in them, which stresses the importance of Scotland as a nation. It gives the public the impression that Scotland has all its own national museums in different sites and subjects. However, its branches are actually incorporated due to historical influence and decided by the central government, mentioned by the interviewee. Its new branding strategy creates an opportunity for the museum to be a focus of shaping the national identity and pride. It helps the museum to attract more visitors and resources from the society.

**Chart 3.** The brand name changes in the National Museums Scotland

<b>Period</b>	<b>Before the new branding</b>	<b>After the new branding (2007)</b>
Site	National Museums of Scotland	National Museums Scotland
Headquarter	National Museum of Scotland	National Museum of Scotland
Museum site	Royal Museum	
Museum site	National War Museum of Scotland	National War Museum
Museum site	Museum of Flight	National Museum of Flight
Museum site	The Museum of Scottish Country Life	National Museum of Rural Life
Museum site	Shambellie House Museum of Costume	National Museum of Costume
Museum site	Granton Centre	National Museums Collection Centre

### Findings and Future Prospect: Three Dilemmas

From the historical review and in-depth interviews, there are some findings concluded in this research. The branding strategy of national museums in the UK contains three dilemmas that demonstrate how difficult a national museum experiences during the branding process.

To change or not to change the name. The first dilemma is whether to keep or to change their names. A name is actually an intangible property of an institution. If the name is changed, it might damage the reputation of the institution and it might take a long time before the public is able to remember the new name.

The universal or local identity. The second difficulty is to find the balance of identity between universality and locality. In some cases national museums are getting more involved in the local community while in others they enjoy universal status to attract visitors and resources from all over the world.

To present 'our' or 'the other' culture? The third impasse is the struggle of presentation of 'our' or 'the other' culture. There was some confusion between 'our' and 'the other' culture in the branding of some national museums due to political turmoil and historical incorrectness. However, a good branding can help to clarify a museum's missions.

Consequently, all national museums are searching for a stronger branding strategy nowadays to reinforce their identity because branding can raise the profile of their museums and reinforce their images in visitor's mind. They might regard themselves as a universal or national institution in order to reach out to their audience. A good branding strategy will benefit the picture in public perception and help to attract more resources as reputation is considered a priceless asset in the modern world. At the same time, branding actually increases competitiveness of national museums in the global market when they have faced more competition from various sources in the new millennium. It also relates to their presentation of 'our' culture or 'other's' culture as a powerful tool in shaping the identity of the nation and establish a sense of community. Only when they have a good branding strategy can they build up their strength in the future development, for instance, to establish partnership and international exchange programmes.

To sum up, a good branding should define a museum's mission and root in the organisational culture. It should be a comprehensive and easy to remember name, such as the British Museum or the National Gallery. It also needs to build a systematic branding strategy in all its programmes, from the exhibition, educational activities to all merchandise products. Good examples include the British Museum and Tate. More and more efforts have been devoted to branding as it brings in audience, revenue generation and resources. What even more important is that branding also helps build visitor's loyalty. This research has found out that the branding process for the last few decades actually provides a good opportunity for national museums in the UK to rethink their marketing strategy and to seek for a better chance

toward a more competitive global market in the future. Branding will be the key for a national museum to decide 'to be or not to be'.

## Acknowledgement

I am grateful to David Jones for his assistance in the preparation of this article.

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