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Small change? Big impact

ICOMON e-Proceedings (Nicosia, 2011) **5**
(2012), pp. 7-11

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The Dutch Geldmuseum, or Money Museum, recently unveiled its new logo and corporate identity. The bold new colour was something of a departure from our previous, more conservative identity. Anyone who has followed our development will know that when we first set up the Geldmuseum in 2003, we needed an identity that would appeal to financial institutions and the future sponsors of the museum. We retained this temporary identity for a long time, but in fact it suggested a completely different style of museum to the one we aspire to be. An identity related to coins and their patina suggested that we were a museum in the old-fashioned mould, full of old exhibits in darkened rooms. But we knew that this was not the case. After some soul-searching, we decided to approach a designer to develop a new image.

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First of all we had to reflect on why the Netherlands needed a museum that focused solely on numismatics. Would it not be easier to incorporate our wonderful collection into that of a better-known national museum, such as the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam or the Teylers Museum in the city of Haarlem? A national numismatic collection would complement the collection of the Rijksmuseum perfectly. Why build a new national museum about money when there are so many other fantastic museums which explain the history of the Netherlands much more comprehensively than we can?

The answer was that we are the only museum in the Netherlands today that can help people understand current financial and economic events, and therefore to some extent what is happening in society as a whole. We can show the public the roots of the present economic crisis, for example, and also teach them about similar events in the past and how they were dealt with. Or, in relation to the continuing debate on the euro, we can inform the public about

currency unions of the past, how they worked and how long they lasted. This approach is also embodied in our mission statement: ‘the *Geldmuseum* shares its knowledge on money as a social topic with a broad audience. It reveals and shares stories on money, money behaviour and money culture with the public, thereby giving new meaning to its collection for the community’.

The museum’s basic *raison d’être* lies in its capacity to use its collection to explain what is happening today. This is the Geldmuseum’s role. We do this by choosing a theme that is relevant to today’s world and working our way back through numismatic and economic history. We put our temporary exhibition *Crisisroute* together in only three months, with the intention to explain the credit crunch of 2008 in a way that all visitors could understand. We launched the exhibition with a competition on *Twitter*, asking people to come up with the best way to solve the crisis. The competition was judged by Cees Maas, chairman of our board and former treasurer of the Netherlands - a very prominent figure in financial circles in the Netherlands. The press release for the competition received over 9,000 hits on the web.

Having identified our purpose and mission, we then looked at whether our corporate identity communicated this effectively, and staff at the Geldmuseum were unanimous in the view that it did not communicate our social relevance adequately, if at all. In fact we could not even identify with our own image.

To discover more precisely how the public perceived us, we commissioned a market research company to find out what image people had of the museum. It turned out that this image was the exact opposite of the image we wanted. Potential visitors who did not know us thought that the word Geldmuseum meant rows of coins in glass display cases and a museum aimed primarily at collectors of coins, medals and banknotes. However, when we explained what the Geldmuseum was about – that the museum did not in fact consist of display cases full of coins, but is mainly dedicated to a permanent interactive exhibition designed to amaze and entertain people of all ages with the answers to questions like ‘what do people do with money?’ and ‘what does money do to them?’ – the expectation of potential visitors changed, and they began to see the museum as both stimulating and relevant for them.

It was clear that we had a job to do: we needed to change our image. But how could we change the views held by the public? A new corporate identity was vital and after an extensive briefing we asked three designers to pitch for the job. The winning concept not only included a new logo but also gave us a new way of communicating with the public: direct,

urgent and fresh. The winning designer understood that the Geldmuseum was not just a museum like any other. Many museums tend to communicate in a reserved and formal way, but this is not the case with the Geldmuseum, because it's just not in our nature. We see our museum as contemporary and dynamic, and one with a clear message. To communicate this message to the public, we try to be direct and express a sense of urgency. Every aspect of the museum helps to get this new image across, from the look of the main entrance to the design of our business card.

We chose the colour yellow because it is reminiscent of gold (gold itself was not an option because of the cost). We chose the euro sign as a sign-off in the logo to underline the relevance of the museum to modern society. Everything is about communication, both in the museum's exhibitions and outside its walls. Our new logo and identity give the museum a tool to explore new possibilities. To launch our new corporate identity, we gave the public the opportunity to decide for themselves how much to pay for their visit to the museum. For one month, visitors were asked to pay an amount of their choice at the end of their visit and to fill in a brief questionnaire in which they were asked why they were prepared to pay this amount.

The campaign was designed to get the public thinking about the value of things in life. What is something worth? As a museum dealing with money this is an extremely relevant theme.

This brings us to the question of whether we have achieved our goals. Has our image changed? Does the public now see us in the way we want? Generally, I believe we have been very successful, but as is so often the case, a change of corporate identity is also going to require a change of content. The Geldmuseum is not only adapting its message to the public but also the nature of its permanent exhibition. The focus of our permanent exhibition immediately put the museum on the map as a serious player in the world of financial education. By shifting our focus from coins, medals and banknotes to money and people, the museum was suddenly able to include all sorts of new financial topics. Our target group grew from a select group of visitors with a specific interest in numismatics to include the whole population of the Netherlands – for it cannot be denied that, after the weather, money is probably the most popular topic of conversation, both in the Netherlands and around the world. Growing numbers of young visitors during the past three years have also reinforced our popular appeal. In 2010, 43 percent of visitors were under 18.

But the one thing that justifies our existence was still missing: our collection. Indeed, since the museum opened its doors in 2007, one question has been asked repeatedly: where is the

collection? This is a question that we are about to answer. In the near future, the galleries of the museum will present a new version of the story of money and people. We will not lose the interactive freshness of our presentations and we will always take the present day as our starting point, but we will also ensure that our collection always plays a role in the way we tell the story. Another important change is that the new exhibition will be demand-driven. To make sure that we carry our visitors with us, the public will also be asked for their opinion about our new plans. Qualitative research will help us refine our ideas about what the public wants. Depending on the topic, our collection will assume a more prominent role at some points than at others, but it will form a continuous thread throughout the presentation.

We have divided our new permanent exhibition into four themes. The first themes are more traditional, addressing questions like ‘what is money?’ and ‘why does it look the way it does?’ As you can probably imagine, this is where we include much of our collection, but this is always done in a modern and interactive way.

The other two themes relate to social and economic issues. One is the global economy, both past and present, where we reveal how money is traded across the world and how this affects our daily life. Our final theme is how people earn and spend their money. Here we plan to focus on people from three different socio-economic classes in five different time settings, from the Roman period to the present day. We have not yet decided exactly how we will present this information to the public, but it will either involve an interactive game or the creation of different characters whose stories visitors can follow through the exhibition. The exhibit will open in 2013 and will definitely be worth a visit.

It will be a challenge to ensure that our main target groups – families and young people – continue to visit the museum. At this point they make up about half of our visitors and they clearly value our cultural contribution. The average length of visits for these groups is over two hours – significantly higher than other museums. The new exhibition will primarily focus on this group. To ensure that school groups continue to visit and that financial education remains an integral part of the permanent exhibition, the museum also wants to create a permanent financial education centre, which will be fully financed by the private sector. Financial education programmes need to be quite extensive, which also makes them expensive, so it makes sense to include such an exhibition on a permanent basis. This will be an important part of the museum’s makeover, with which we hope to attract more school groups and young people.

The museum will also focus on attracting members of the older generation who are interested in culture and art. At the moment this group is not widely represented at the Geldmuseum but we plan to make the new exhibition appeal to this group. In three years, when the refurbishment of the galleries is complete and we have the results of our first public survey, I will be able to provide a definitive answer to how we will go about doing this. But generally speaking, our goal is to attract this group to the museum by including additional layers in the exhibits to provide greater depth to the various themes and objects in the permanent exhibition. For example, as explained earlier, each visitor might choose a particular character as their guide and the complexity of the possible routes through the exhibition may vary, to appeal to different target groups.

The Geldmuseum is heading into a new phase in its nearly five-year existence. As I see it, we are continually striving to become a better and more meaningful museum that the public will see as a valuable asset to the community. Our plans for the future will form another chapter in these efforts.