

# Separating the ‘Imagined’ from the ‘Obvious’: Adopting Museum-specific Product Positioning in Zimbabwe

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**Abstract—** The 21<sup>st</sup> century business environment in Zimbabwe presents enormous management challenges to all manner of businesses. High unemployment rates leading to dwindling disposable income at family levels as well as increased options on how to spend the little extra means museums face the full wrath of the challenges. Whilst its focus is on education and enjoyment surrounding material culture, and are non-profit oriented, Zimbabwean museums find themselves, competing for clients with other recreational facilities. This paper explores the uniqueness of the Zimbabwe Military Museum and examines the possibilities of market positioning as a viable strategy of reversing low visitorship and visibility challenges it faces. Instead of applying a ‘one-size fits all approach’, this museum needs to appeal to the right audience with the right product. Working around the premise that all museums collect, store, document, present and research upon unique material collections in the name of educating and entertaining its clientele, is it irrefutable that museums of the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to encompass a vision, mission, business leadership and visitor service. These are some of the hallmark characteristics associated with successful profit-oriented organizations. After all, the fate of museums is intertwined together with their visibility, social relevancy and viability.

**Index Terms—** Museum, Museum Marketing, Product Positioning, Zimbabwe Military Museum

## I. INTRODUCTION

Whilst the term ‘museum’ retains several definitions, the International Council of Museum (ICOM) upholds that in general, museums remain as “... non-profit oriented permanent institutions in the service of the public and for its development which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment” [1]. This means they are open to a versatile public which is not only defined by different socio-economic, religious, political, racial and cultural backgrounds. It also means the same museums are permanent in nature and that they are supposed to keep abreast with the needs of its clients if they are going to remain educative and entertaining. Unfortunately, the definition gives an impression that the same museums are established more with the moral aim of surviving as compared to succeeding [2]. This is especially true for the context of Zimbabwe where

NMMZ had never seen the value of a marketing department before. The fact that NMMZ has the legal mandate to manage the cultural heritage of Zimbabwe was apparently seen as everything that was needed to rubberstamp the significance of museums in Zimbabwe. This is despite the obvious economic challenges that have been bedeviling the country for over 15 years. The fact that museums in Zimbabwe have been receiving increasingly fewer repeat and new visitors over the last 10 years is evidence that the visibility of museums is becoming questionable. This paper explores the character of the Zimbabwe Military museum in a bid to establish why positioning is key in their quest for social relevancy and visibility.

## II. BACKGROUND TO THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Guided by the NMMZ Act chapter 25/11, NMMZ is partly funded by the government through the Recurrent and Capital (Public Sector Investment Programme- PSIP) budget through the Ministry of Home Affairs. It is administered by a board of trustees and its executive director reports to the government through the Ministry of Home Affairs. With a wide range of categories of cultural material, NMMZ established administrative regions, each with its own Regional Director. These regions are the Northern Region, Eastern Region, Central Region, Southern Region and the Western Region. These names hint on the areas across Zimbabwe where they focus on. Each region is also administered from a national museum. This administration entails research focus, curation, preservation and conservation of immovable and movable cultural property in that specific region. In the order of regions listed above, their respective national museums are the Zimbabwe Museum of Human Sciences, Mutare Museum of Transport and Antiquities, Zimbabwe Military History Museum, Great Zimbabwe Museum and lastly the Natural History Museum. Although this presents a more de-centralized outlook, decisions are made from the NMMZ Head-office in Harare.

Whilst museum monopoly over heritage management and presentation as well as uniqueness of their collections ought to be enough to ensure the success of NMMZ’s business management efforts, aims and objectives, the reality is far from that imagination. The government’s resolution to ‘wean off’ 100% dependency of parastatals resulted in NMMZ instigating self-sustenance efforts. These are strategies that finally trickled down to regional levels. This has seen each NMMZ administrative region effectively retaining part of the revenue they generate. Despite this economically ‘viable strategy’, the same challenges be-deviling the museums since the late 1990s remain ever visible. In reality, Zimbabwean museums have been witnessing an annual decline in repeat and new visitors. For instance Zimbabwe Military History Museum (ZMM) and visitorship for structured class statistics

show that in 2011 they were 15 414 visitors, 2012 they declined to 14 222 and 2013 it further fell to 13 222 [3]. Like any other public institution, NMMZ also has to justify its own existence. This is both for accountability towards the taxpayers as well as expanding its income-supplementation capacity.

The other challenge is that despite NMMZ enjoying state-sanctioned monopoly over heritage management and presentation, its museums still heavily rely on the same public that is constantly being enticed by other non-museum related business, such as movie theatres, sporting events, and musical concerts among others to provide entertainment. The imagined world is whereby assumptions are made that by virtue of museums having collections that are unique and authentic, then, they automatically remain significant. The 21<sup>st</sup> century business environment does not in any way guarantee a safe passage of operation, relevancy and survival for national museums in this country. The visibility of the individual museum in the society is still measured by the number of visitors who pass through its doors. At the same time, the attainment of NMMZ's mission statement, aims and objectives still heavily hinges upon the capability of individual museums to attract new visitors. The reality of achieving aims and objectives in museums lies with sales and customer oriented approaches [4] as well as product positioning, just like what other private and public businesses do. Since the 1920s, researches on museum-related issues have paid close attention to visitorship [7]-[24]-[23]-[11]-[9].

### III. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ZIMBABWE MILITARY MUSEUM

With its history firmly rooted in the history of the military and aviation in Zimbabwe, it opened its doors in 1974 as a celebration and commemoration of the achievements of the army, police and air force of Rhodesia. As such, its array of cultural materials spans from uniforms of armed forces, aeroplanes, and associated paraphernalia such as badges as well as military vehicles. Amongst its hallmark exhibits are the Russian and the Stuart tanks that are situated in the front of the museum. It has several galleries namely; the Police gallery which focuses on the history of the police starting from as far back as the time of the British South African Police (BSAP), through to the Zimbabwe Republic Police. It also has the Guinea Fowl Memorial whose focus is on the history of the flight school in Zimbabwe since 1940 to 1978. This memorial celebrates the transition of Guinea Fowl from an airforce training school, through to being a mining training centre and lastly into a school which carries the name Guinea Fowl to this day. The museum also has the Aviation Gallery that celebrates the history of aviation in Zimbabwe before the Thornhill Airbase was used. The last is the Aviation museum which exhibits different aeroplanes (military and civilian).

### IV. MUSEUMS AND MARKETING: CONTEXTUALISING POTENTIAL

The concept of marketing in museum management practice in Zimbabwe is a recent phenomenon. Although this phenomenon has been acknowledged on a global platform for the past 30 years, [26] is of the view that museum marketing mostly concerned itself with sponsorship, direct marketing, public relations and advertising ignoring the aspects of branding and market segmentation. While the literature on

museum marketing per se has begun to appear, there are still very few publications which particularly focus on the 'how' part of the equation. Art consulting group article entitled *beyond market segmentation: strategic market positioning* emphasized on the need for positioning strategies in the arts and culture sector. [10]-[12]-[14] all agree that museums equally need to adapt and re-adapt to changing operating environments through marketing.

Museums institutions faces stiff competition from institutions whose own mandates also lay within the entertainment sectors. Only through product positioning can the museums be able to remain relevance in the minds of the customers

### V. PRODUCT POSITIONING AND THE ZIMBABWEAN MUSEUM AUDIENCE

Abraham Lincoln once said... *"You may please all of the people some of the time, you may even please some of the people all of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time."*

Whilst the context of implication of Abraham Lincoln's utterance was not related to museums, the meaning can be applied to the Zimbabwean context in line with individual national museum's aims and objectives as well as the reality as it applies to all museums. Although [7] showed that museum principal is to educate, the question is how you fulfill the needs of both marketing and museum mission. Naturally, this fact should also point towards the acknowledgement of the diversity of visitor needs. The fact is that each and every individual is 'different' from the other, with such differences emanating from variable factors that include, but are not limited to, social background, disposable income, age, gender, aims and goals. [2] notes that product positioning needs to communicate core identity based on timeless and unchanging principles and elements of extended identity with visitors can associate. It becomes imperative that museums position their products in a manner that is unique, which meeting their tastes, interests and traits.

The 'how' part of product positioning requires a brand audit. [2] defines brand audit as the exploration of history, origins, associations, products, service and communications of the brand to discover what it stands for from the customer point of view. A lot of creative research is needed mostly because whilst the public is inelastic, the same pool of potential visitors is also highly malleable. The resolution to position museum products as a survival strategy can only be employed at a museum-based level rather than at a nation-wide level. This idea is perfect within the Zimbabwean context for two reasons. Firstly, although museums are managed from a central head-office, each region has some mandate on the operational strategies they can take. Secondly, although the only common feature in all Zimbabwean public museums is the archaeology component, each museum is very unique. Such uniqueness therefore means different interest to different people.

### VI. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The Zimbabwe Military museum was used as case study. This museum was chosen as it has a unique collection. Through interviews, questionnaires and observations, the researchers sought to understand three crucial factors. The first factor is about the promotional and publicisation of the museum. This would reveal the current focus of attention of the museum.

The second factor is the visitor trends. Since there are visitors coming, the question is, what their individual interests in the museum are, and how similar or different these interests are to those of other visitors to the same exhibition. The third factor is about visitor characteristics. This would shed light on visitorship trends, promotional strategies and interests in the museum. The researchers felt that when these three factors are examined, it is feasible possible to establish a marketing position for the Zimbabwe Military Museum. After all, not everything on display has the same alluring effect on all visitors.

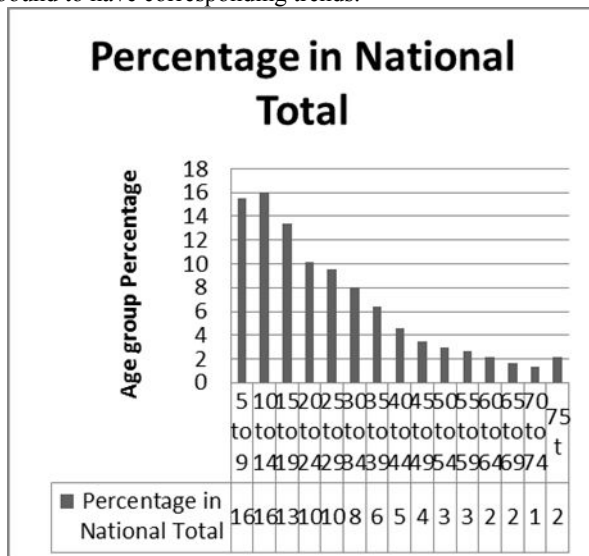
A small scale brand audit was made to understand these factors. A total of 4 employees, 100 students representing 5 local government schools, 30 students representing 3 private colleges from Gweru, 30 university students from Midlands State University and 20 general public from Gweru urban were used in the research. Of interest from to the researchers were personal views on museum collections, and experience on activities participated by consumers to show what museums products stand for from the customer point of view.

**VII. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

**A. Census Results**

Census results in Fig 1 below show a 1.1% population increase per annum from the 2002 figures. These results suggest that Zimbabwe has about 12.97 million people. Midlands Province, in which the Zimbabwe Military Museum (ZMM) is located, has 13% of that total which translates to 1.62 million people. Of that 1.62 million, 158 000 people are based in the city of Gweru (Gweru urban district). At the same time, Gweru is the most immediate source of the clientele for the ZMM museum. If one is to use the statistics given by ZMM on visitorship in 2013 one would realize that only 8% (13222 people) of the targeted respondents in Midlands region visited the museum in 2013.

Whilst province-based statistical breakdown of the population were not presented, the national statistics outlined the following breakdown which when analysed, may effectively suggest that even at a provincial level, we are bound to have corresponding trends.



Figures1 extracted from the Zimbabwe National Statistics Agency Report (2012)

Fig 1 above shows that the age-groups 5 to 29 contributes to a total of 64.6% of the total population in Zimbabwe and the age groups 30 and above only make up 35.4%. The visible trend therefore suggests that there are more young generations for the 10 year period since the last census. If this trend is also observed at provincial, urban and rural scale, this could have a huge impact on product positioning designed by the Zimbabwe Military History Museum for its most immediate source of visitors.

**B. Museum Visitor Trends And Associated Attitudes Discussed**

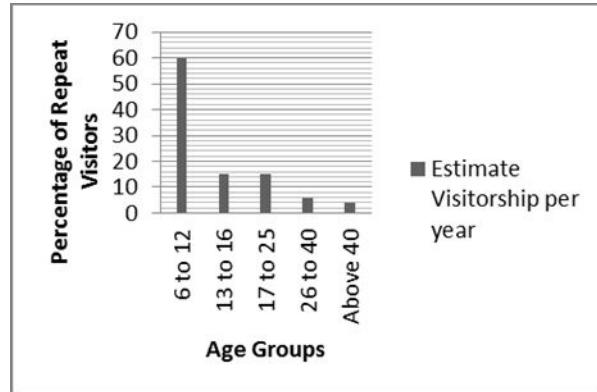


Fig 2. Statistical representation of repeat visitors to the museum for 2013

From fig 2 above it can be noted that repeat visitors to museum declined with the increase in age. At the age of 6 to 12, 60% of the target audience visits the museum frequently. Only 14% of those aged between 13 and 16 visit the museums frequently. Those aged over 40 only show a 4% repeat visitorship. For those aged between 6 and 16, they mostly visit the museum as part of structured classes organized between their schools and the museum. For those aged over 16, repeat visitors argued their repeat visits to recreational need, escorting their siblings as well as research. Of those aged over 40, they expressed their interest on the memories of the colonial times which they sought to share with their families. In a bid to explain the slumping trend of repeat visitorship associated with the age groups 26 onwards, the researchers noted that the museum appeared static in terms of presentation and anticipation. Whilst those between the age-groups 6 and 25 often came for school exercises, the majority of those from the ages of 20 outlined that the galleries remained the same and in fact, were deteriorating.

**C. Personal Views On The Museum And Its Collections**

- All visitors concurred that the collections and exhibitions in the museum galleries were exactly as they remembered them in their previous visits except the display in the reception area.
- All visitors showed particular inclination towards at least two galleries. Those aged below 13 however showed higher interest particularly in the aviation museum as compared to the Guinea Fowl Memorial and the open air display of military vehicles.
- 85% of visitors aged above 13 years showed particular wide range of interest in the military vehicles, the Guinea Fowl memorial as compared to the Police Gallery and the Aviation exhibition.

- 50% of the age group over 16 years expressed concern over the depth of information that the tour-guides had displayed during their visits. This was especially regarding the knowledge and history of use and evolution of the displayed military vehicles within colonial Zimbabwe and the influence these vehicles during their service history.
- 70% of the age groups above the age of 16 argued that the Aviation History Gallery had a poor presentation.
- 70% of the 17 and above age groups cited that although the museum still contained interesting military materials, the fact that there was hardly anything new tended to influence their attitude towards repeat museum visit.
- 80% of the visitors about 17 years admitted that they actively engaged in recreational activities but the prospect of the museum hardly fitted into their programmes.
- Only 20% of the visitors came to the museum for research purposes but expressed low interest in visiting the museum for recreational purposes. Of this 20%, 16% argued that they were neither from Gweru, nor were they eagerly interested in this form of leisure. They also argued that recreational spots such as the clubs featured more into their lifestyles than museum visits.
- Of those aged over 16, 80% cited that the price of admission into the museum was fair hence pricing was not the factor that kept them away.

**D. Ranking Social Activities**

The research also requested respondents to rank social activities as they best reflected their recreational ‘wish-list’. On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being their first choice and 5 being their last choice, the table below summaries their feedback.

Activity	6-12 year olds	13-18 year olds	19 years and above
Sporting activities	2	1	2
Luna park visits	1	2	4
Going to church	4	3	3
Visit to clubs with beer drinking	5	4	1
Museum visit	3	5	5

Table 1 showing ranking of social activities as reflective of personal recreational preferences.

The trends noted in table 1 above showing ranking of activities indicate that different age groups hold different values to different activities. Whilst all the activities are part of the normal activities in the city of Gweru, the interest in the museum remains secondary. This low ranking may be attributed to the fact that, almost all the respondents above 16 had only been able to visit the museum on a Saturday since the working days were reserved for school and Sunday being reserved for church. This is in contrast to the visits by those aged below 15 who had visited the museum through-out the weekdays. In this regard, the daily schedule of all visitors

tends to reflect on how much they consider the museum as a viable place for their recreational activities.

**VIII. PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY THE MUSEUM**

NMMZ has a number of strategies that disseminate and inculcate interests of Zimbabweans about their cultural heritage. Of all these activities, the Adopt-a-Site program and the National Primary School Quiz appeal more towards the age groups between 6 and 16. The former, appeals to students up to Ordinary level whilst the latter, appeals to those below the age of 13. With regards to Zimbabwe Military Museum, it also spearheads the school quiz campaigns. Other than that, it does not have any activity of promotional strategy for any other age group.

**CONCLUSION**

Although the national population census statistics show that the younger generations form the largest segment of the population, the Zimbabwe Military Museum only have a single strategy that attracts specific visitors to the museum. This is the National Primary School Quiz show. Other than that, there is very little that attracts any other age group to the museum. The research also suggests that coupled with personal attitudes that different age groups have regarding this museum, even the auspicious events such as the Agricultural Shows do not make much contribution towards approaching specific target groups with the right product at the right time and with a right price which could see the museum being an institution that is regarded as interesting by the majority of the public.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

The character of 21<sup>st</sup> business forum forces museums to move away from the object-centred management since visitor trends and general tolerance to museums has proved that it is a wrong assumption that every visitor will appreciate every exhibition in the museum. As such, each museum has to devise a self-introspection on what collections they have and how these collections may interest specific audiences more than others. This is because although the public is highly malleable, it remains highly selective in terms of attention and energy channeled towards entertainment. After all, the actual aim served by product positioning is not to canvass every museum visitor but rather to find specific audiences that are most pleased by specific collections.

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