

Communication and Marketing of Cultural Institutions in French-Speaking Switzerland

François H. Courvoisier

Professor of Marketing

Fabienne A. Courvoisier

Research Associate

University of Applied Sciences – Haute école de gestion, Neuchâtel,
Switzerland

François H. Courvoisier has a Ph. D. in nonprofit marketing from the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland. After having managed the marketing department of several industrial and services companies, he teaches marketing in the University of Applied Sciences – “Haute école de gestion” in Neuchâtel and is head of research in marketing.

Fabienne A. Courvoisier, graduated from the University of Neuchâtel, Switzerland, works as a research associate in the University of Applied Sciences – “Haute école de gestion” in Neuchâtel. She carries out projects in cultural marketing and in the field of quality and origin labels on food products.

Abstract

Publicity, advertising and marketing in cultural institutions are fields that have rarely been studied in French-speaking Switzerland. The general objective of the research aims at finding out how the clients of cultural institutions concerned with visual arts evaluate the quality of their communication and modify their behaviour accordingly.

Keywords

Cultural marketing, museums, communication, consumer behaviour.

Introduction

With the support, both scientific and financial, of the University of Applied Sciences of Western Switzerland (HES-SO), the “Haute école de gestion” (HEG) in Neuchâtel, in conjunction with the Cantonal School of Applied Arts in Lausanne (ECAL) has set up an innovatory and exploratory project of applied research into two fields that may, at first glance, appear to present a paradox: culture and marketing.

We shall, therefore, study, on the one hand, the way in which the cultural institutions in French-speaking Switzerland organise their relations with the public and, on the other hand, how the public reacts to their various approaches. By comparing these two points of view, we shall be in a position to identify the possible points of difference between them. This will further enable us to establish a classification of the various cultural institutions in French-speaking Switzerland and highlight the merits of their experience in each case.

The Issues Involved

Publicity and marketing in cultural institutions are fields that have rarely been studied in Switzerland, even less in French-speaking Switzerland. In an environment of cultural and leisure activities that is becoming more and more competitive, even saturated, inundated with offers, an increasing number of private and public institutions are attempting to create a niche in this market. They are promulgating their institutions, their specific offers for both permanent and temporary events to diverse types of public.

As a result, numerous questions arise: What are the most effective means of publicity for cultural institutions? How do different categories of clients react to them? What are their habits and usual choices? Do the conceptions of those responsible for cultural institutions correspond to those of the public?

The research being undertaken at the “Haute école de gestion” in Neuchâtel will provide answers to these questions, which have not, so far, been systematically investigated by the cultural institutions in French-speaking Switzerland. In fact, as far as some of them are concerned, marketing is ignored, as it is often seen to be incompatible with art, aiming merely to increase revenues and completely disregarding artistic mission.

A Review of Existing Publications

One of the first steps in our research consisted of reviewing the existing publications on marketing and public relations in cultural institutions. Although the subject is not altogether new, as it has been regularly included, for example, in international conferences and workshops such as those organised by the AIMAC (International Association for the Management of Artistic and Cultural Institutions), Swiss publications have not often included this new concept of cultural management. However, in the copious writings published in the English-speaking world, many important concepts on the subject are brought to light. We can summarize them as follows.

Particularities and Specific Aspects Involved in the Field of Culture

These must first be defined (Mayaux, 1987, Evrard *et al.*, 1993, Filser, 1994, Pelletier, 2000, Colbert, 2000a) in order to establish the different aspects of what is involved.

The intangible nature of service activities is an inherent characteristic. Unlike consumer products, the cultural contribution cannot be considered according to palpable criteria except in the form of its commercial advertising aids. This “physical irreality” is frequently responsible for a feeling of uncertainty on the part of the consumer, particularly when evaluating the quality of the service provided. For this reason, the personnel and the physical set-up of the cultural institution become of strategic importance in building up confidence, as they are the physical means of contact between visitor and institution.

By becoming personally involved and actively participating in the cultural activity, the public, up to a certain point, counter this intangible factor. This result can be achieved through interactive projects, a process that now appears under the denomination “servuction” (a contraction of service and production: Eiglier and Langeard, 1987). Consequently, the symbolism of a cultural production is of vital importance, which means that the consumer’s emotional reaction must also be taken into account.

Another important aspect of cultural offers to the public is that they precede demand for them. It is true that artistic production attracts a certain public and not the other way round, thus sometimes creating a serious dichotomy between the cultural approach and marketing, which aims rather to identify and discover its client in order to offer the services and products that meet his requirements. Moreover, it should be noted that a cultural offer is of an ephemeral nature, not only on account of its uncertain character but also the unique nature of the work itself.

Another characteristic of cultural activities that should be mentioned is the division between the basic services, representing the principal benefit that the customer expects, such as a visit to an exhibition, and ancillary services which add value to the former, such as a shop or cafeteria on the premises.

The Functions of a Museum

A review of the material published reveals several functions and missions for museums: the maintenance of a comprehensive collection to ensure the safeguard of heritage to be passed on to future generations, thanks to the conservation of works of art, and access to the public with the aim of providing didactic and informative material. This coincides with ICOM's definition: "A museum is a non-profit making institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their environment."¹

Thus, museums take on a role of mediation (Mottaz *et al.*, 1994) and devote their efforts to educational, aesthetic, scientific and historical missions in the service of the public (Kotler and Kotler, 1998).

Stephen (2001), quoting Weil², adds a further concept. He makes a clear distinction between the museum's function and its aims. The former concerns the work with its collection, whereas the *raison d'être* for such cultural institutions is to benefit the public by making an impression on their lives. In other words, museums become the providers of recreational experiences, in addition to their function as collectors and conservators.

Transforming Museums

Davallon *et al.* (1992) draw attention in their publication to the emergence of a management model for cultural institutions which involves a reorientation of the organisation of the museum, its professions and services. This model has been developed through the influence of the visitors who are no longer considered as such but become clients. The museum adopts the reasoning of cultural industries, centred on service to the customer. In this way, it becomes a centre for the production of goods and services, and this tendency is backed up by the development of three organisational functions of the museum: the function of production and publicity, the services to the visitors, and finally that of research and study.

The management model for the museum involves other aspects concerning the best means of responding to social demands. It is with this in mind that marketing procedures are gradually being adopted, thus necessitating new skills and additional training in the organisation of the museum. Its function has, as it were, broken up into several skills and types of professional worker. According to Kotler and Kotler (2000), the challenge that faces those responsible for cultural establishments today is to safeguard their institution's mission by setting up contacts with the public at large as well as offering their

visitors a richer experience in the museum. From the point of view of marketing, museums must consider the needs of their public by attracting new groups of visitors and getting them to become regular clients by encouraging them with more interesting exhibitions, giving greater satisfaction.

The museum consequently becomes a supplier of products destined to meet a need for instruction and culture, an aesthetic need and one of visual enjoyment, even a desire for national ownership of works of art. Consumption of its product therefore proves to be necessary and thus the public has an essential part to play.

Consumers of Culture

Assassi (1999) presented the concept of many different publics, one of the most important characteristics of cultural marketing for a non-profit making institution. The author differentiates four types of public to be taken into consideration when setting the objectives and putting into practice different activities: the downstream public, the internal public, the upstream public and intermediary public involved in outsourced services. Figure 1 illustrates them.

Figure 1. The different publics in a cultural institution

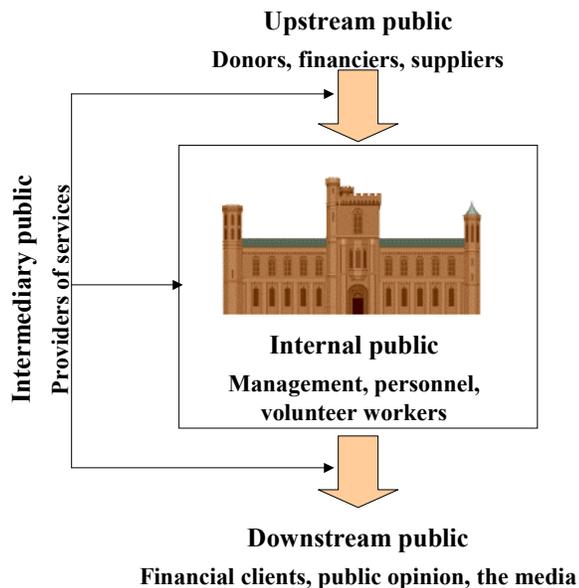


Figure Assassi's (1999) concept, as illustrated by the authors.

Chazaud (1997) also points out that the needs of these different types of public are not all identical. Some may consist of the pursuit of personal betterment or may depend on a common history of all mankind or of a particular society, others wish to identify with a shared heritage or again, establish a link with their own daily lives.

Collin-Lachaud (2003) adds that the service provided is made up of an experience in which the client's satisfaction more often derives from involvement in the production of

the service, i.e. interaction, than from an impersonal and objective evaluation of the result. In the case of cultural services which are made up of shared experiences, the consumer contributes to the success of the event as he, himself, produces part of his satisfaction. His decisions in cultural matters are based on the symbolic elements of the product rather than on tangible elements. Their effect on the consumer will be felt in terms of aesthetic enjoyment and emotions aroused. The quality and values appreciated by consumers are generally considered as two important sources of consumer satisfaction.

Kotler and Kotler (2000), for their part, introduce the concept of a museum experience which combines various factors adding to the products offered to visitors. They quote Hood³ who shows that consumers look for six kinds of benefit and values from their leisure activities:

1. Being with others and enjoying social interaction;
2. Doing something worthwhile;
3. Feeling at ease;
4. Appreciating the challenge of a new experience;
5. Having the opportunity of learning something;
6. Actively participating.

Marketing Culture

McLean (1997a) proposes the following definition of cultural marketing: "Marketing is the management process which confirms the museum's or art gallery's mission and which is therefore responsible for the identification, anticipation and effective satisfaction of its users."

The reasons for introducing marketing in cultural institutions have sprung from a desire for the democratisation of culture, an increasing need of finance, increasing competition both within the sector and extra-sectorially with the leisure industry, and, finally, the need to get to know their visitors (Gombault, 1997, Tobelem, 1997).

Marketing can thus provide cultural institutions with a framework for analysing and implementing educational programmes, and programmes for organising membership and financial support, increasing internal revenues and establishing public relations (Tobelem, 1997). But Chatelain (1997) draws attention to the fact that marketing is rarely used as an instrument in its own right in the overall functioning of the organisation, but is regarded rather as a miscellany of tools to which one has recourse from time to time.

The Cultural Marketing Mix

The product includes everything experienced by the public in the museum (Kelly, 1993). Evrard *et al.* (1993) and Teboul (1999) make a distinction between two levels of cultural offer in the following terms: the central or basic offer, corresponding to a utilitarian function the customer expects to find in such an organisation, and ancillary service products, which complete and add value to the basic offer, without being essential. Chatelain (1997) also adds subsidiary commercial products which enable museums to diversify and attract a new type of client, thus bringing in further sources of income.

Price is a concept still not fully understood by those responsible for cultural institutions, that are not always aware of its essential role. Consequently, its strategic importance must be analysed, taking each public into account separately (Kelly, 1993). Chatelain

(1997) recommends studying this concept from two different angles: entry fees and the prices of ancillary products. The former depend on three factors of museum management: the number of visitors, financing and the ethical problem of how the museum relates its mission to democratic principles. Price-fixing is usually determined by what is psychologically considered as being within the limits that the visitor is willing to pay, taking into consideration the availability of substitutes and direct competition from the market. Diversification of tariffs and free entry for certain classes of visitor are strategies widely implemented to help obtain a regular flow of visitors, attract new types of public, encourage customer loyalty, reduce cultural inequality by democratising access to culture. As far as the pricing of ancillary products is concerned, they can be left to be freely determined by market forces.

As regards distribution, the museum's influence can extend well beyond its physical location through catalogues, shops outside its own premises and by arrangement with other institutions (Kelly, 1993). There are various strategies for making its exhibits available to the largest possible public: itinerant exhibitions, the loan of works of art, exhibitions organised in locations other than its own premises etc. By these means, a product can be "rejuvenated" by a change of public (a process sometimes referred to as an extension of its life cycle), the best use made of finance by increasing the possibilities for amortisation, and the possibility for each museum to benefit from certain events by organising exhibitions connected with them. There are two complementary strategies: "pull" (attracting the public to museums by promoting their image and reputation) and "push" (actively advertising their products by techniques of promotion) which open up access to the market without any loss of identity (Chatelain, 1997).

For public relations, promotion campaigns, selective and short-term, encourage the public to visit the museum in question. The museum's mission is to decide on the objectives for long-term promotion in order to make sure that their publicity harmonises with the image the institution has of itself and its public (Kelly, 1993). As Chatelain (1997) points out, relations with the public represent the variable element in the marketing mix, the easiest and most frequently implemented by cultural institutions. They do indeed inform, attract and make permanent supporters of all the different parties concerned, both downstream (clients) and upstream (sponsors). But in addition, they benefit from spontaneous and gratuitous publicity offered by the media and by word of mouth. Publicity projects reflect the aims the institutions hope to fulfil, and their targets. They will then determine the means to be used: advertising, direct marketing and public relations. These targets can be of two kinds: downstream (the end consumers of goods and services, leaders of opinion) and upstream (those responsible for financing, decision makers). Museums recognise and have recourse to advertising as a component of the marketing mix, which aims to increase the number of visitors.

To complete this "traditional" concept of the marketing mix, McLean (1997b) quotes the work of Cowell⁴ which extends this approach to add the three P's:

- *People*: (the personnel employed by the museum) play an important role and influence the consumer's appreciation of a service organisation.
- *Physical evidence*: the way in which the environment is administered and the services organised.
- *Process*: provision of a high-quality service depending not only on people's efficiency but also on methods used.

The Aim of our Applied Research

The general objective of the research this article refers to therefore aims at finding out how the clients of cultural institutions concerned with visual arts (museums, art galleries and cultural centres) evaluate the quality of their publicity. On the one hand, through interviews (based on pre-established questions and open answers) with those responsible for these institutions, we analyse their activities and their methods of publicity and marketing. On the other hand, face-to-face discussions with visitors as they leave, to enable us to evaluate the impact that the “marketing of art” has on clients, based on their appreciation of both the scenography inside the museum, and publicity elsewhere outside the museum.

Using the data gathered in these on-site surveys, we are establishing a benchmark for the various cultural institutions in French-speaking Switzerland as to how the public appreciate their publicity. This will enable us to make suggestions as to how to improve visual forms of presentation for cultural organisations, in both their content and their advertising. In other words, we can identify the best practices to implement in order to be able to adapt them for use in smaller institutions which do not necessarily dispose of the means of advertising efficiently. We can thus give them the benefit of our experience and suggest the best possibilities.

Methodology

In order to obtain a clear definition of the subject and its scope, we first established how marketing and public relations are applied in cultural institutions (see above). Then we began this research with a qualitative study to analyse the activities in these two fields of 19 cultural institutions, representative of the visual arts in French-speaking Switzerland. On the basis of partly-guided interviews with those responsible (curators, directors, public relations officers), we were able to establish several salient points concerning public relations and marketing, which provided the “raw material” for a questionnaire designed for museum visitors.

The second stage consisted of a small-scale, but reasonably representative, qualitative study by questioning visitors, face-to-face, as they left the 19 institutions selected for qualitative interviews.

Once we had some idea of the concerns of management and the appreciation of the public in matters of public relations and marketing, we were in a position to analyse the differences between the two points of view. Moreover, it would be possible to compare the various institutions, and on the basis of these comparisons, we could suggest several possible solutions to include in managerial practices.

Preliminary Results

At the time of writing, April 2004, the compilation of visitors’ data is not complete. At the moment, therefore, we can give only the salient points of the intermediary results concerning public relations and marketing in 19 cultural institutions in French-speaking Switzerland and the results are based on about 50 visitors questioned in seven of the 19 venues selected.

The Point of View of Those Responsible for Cultural Institutions

We are concerned here with the views of directors, curators and public relations officers, when such a post exists, in the cultural institutions selected. The latter were chosen by virtue of their function in the field of visual arts in the six French-speaking cantons: Fribourg, Geneva, Jura, Neuchâtel, Valais and Vaud.

Discussions with the various people responsible for these institutions show that very few cultural organisations have an employee devoted to advertising and marketing. However, when such a post exists, it is more often in a private, rather than a public, institution.

When the subject of the cultural organisation's mission is broached, we find mentioned the same three important points as in the ICOM definition, i.e. the acquisition and conservation of objects, their presentation and promulgation, as well as research.

It is also of interest to note the pluridisciplinary character of the teams that manage the cultural institutions. For financial reasons, they must be able to count on their own staff to provide the various skills necessary to ensure an efficient administration, without having recourse to outsiders for promotion and management.

As regards the different types of public that should be aimed at in different institutions, they have not been systematically identified. In fact, very few of the institutions have a clear idea of their typical visitor and, therefore, of his expectations, needs and desiderata. On the other hand, almost all can recognise the typical "non-visitor" i.e. those they never manage to tempt on to their premises.

In order to announce their different events and activities, the institutions generally have recourse to traditional means: leaflets, posters, announcements and advertisements in the press (specialised or daily; national or international), contacts with journalists to ensure that a report appears in the press, audio-visual coverage, publicity on a Web site etc. Almost all the organisations contacted had a graphic identity and a logo which they used regularly on all advertising aids.

Museums and art galleries can communicate on different levels: institutional (presentation of the museum, its history and the work it carries out); federative (when institutions group together – for instance, regional museums – and communicate jointly); or on a temporary basis for temporary exhibits.

The museums that seem to be in competition with one another are those that have the greatest means of advertising and promotion at their disposal. Otherwise, those interviewed considered that there was little real competition between cultural institutions in French-speaking Switzerland, as they consider that they do not depend on the same public. The existence of several institutions in the same region would seem to be a stimulating factor, and it encourages visitors to go from one to the other.

At art previews and other cultural events, relations between the staff of the institution and the public are generally informal and direct, at the reception desk. Some institutions offer a visitors' book in which they can give their impressions of exhibitions. All the cultural institutions consider that the opinion of the public is important; they try to organise and give pride of place to an interface facility in order to benefit from feedback.

Co-operation and exchange networks represent a strategy common to all the cultural sites visited in the course of our research. Moreover, most of them co-operate closely

with their town, county or regional authorities, as well as their local tourist office and other Swiss or foreign cultural organisations.

The Visitors' Point of View

Our intermediary sample is made up of 51 people, questioned in seven of the 19 institutions selected. In general, all age groups are well represented, with a significantly higher proportion (29%) of 20- to 35-year-old visitors. Women are in a majority, 63% of those questioned. In addition, 43% had benefited from a higher tertiary education (university, specialised technical colleges).

The questionnaire starts with general questions about the impression the institution has created (in particular, as to ease of access, location, size, visibility). It appears that, overall, the replies mentioned little criticism of size. For most of the items, the people questioned agreed, either more or less, or entirely, with the statements proposed. However, the fact that people were questioned as they left the museum and not in a neutral place, may have biased their answers. Further, the fear of not being well thought of may have influenced some people.

The second point of our study showed that, on the one hand, very few visitors (14%) had consulted the institution's Web site prior to their visit. In the case of those who had, they were primarily looking for precise details concerning the museum (opening hours, tariffs, location, short-term exhibitions available at the time etc.). On the other hand, nearly half those questioned were in favour of using the net to participate in forums, or simply to contact the museum through its e-mail address.

The entry charge (ranging from CHF5 – 10 for the full price) was considered as reasonable by 78% of those who had paid to enter. Out of the 51 visitors questioned, 10 (20%) had entered free of charge.

Among the main factors preventing a visit to a cultural institution, 27% mentioned lack of time. From which we can conclude that the obstacles to cultural visits may not necessarily be linked to the museum itself (its themes, location, opening hours etc.) but probably depend on the visitor's own psychological barriers.

Moreover, among the motivations that have encouraged people to participate in some form of cultural activity, personal enrichment frequently appears (40%). The same reason is also given in answer to an open question as to what culture means to them. Generally, the reason for visiting a particular museum (the one in which they are being questioned) is curiosity (33%). The means by which the visitor has got to know of the museum is very often the recommendation of friends (30%).

Almost all the visitors questioned did not regret having visited the museum and 66% thought they would probably come back. In this case, once again, the fear of being badly thought of may be a possible cause of bias. However, cultural institutions should make the most of this potential mechanism for creating a loyal public, as this is of strategic importance for four reasons:

- It increases the number of visitors to the institution and intensifies consumption.
- Those responsible can justify the existence of their institution when they apply to the authorities that generally provide financing.
- It helps to guarantee middle-term extensions and a renewal of their public (especially through word of mouth).
- It helps to maintain a more regular flow of visitors all year round.

Twenty-seven percent of those questioned were voluntary workers for some association or institution connected with culture. According to figures supplied by the Federal Statistics Office⁵, one in four people in Switzerland are active voluntary workers i.e. do unpaid work for associations and institutions, which means a total of about 1.5 million people. Among the institutions that benefit the most from this personal commitment, sports and culture head the list. Our sample shows a slightly higher figure than the national average. Here again, there may be some bias from the person not wishing to appear in a bad light. In addition, the term “cultural” may have been taken as meaning “associative”, in a wide acceptance of the word.

A majority of the visitors (67%) considered that the influence of the cultural institutions was regional and that they did not play an international role. Our sample felt, therefore, that the institutions were somewhat restricted to a local framework, whereas in fact they make regular exchanges internationally either for research, or by close co-operation when creating exhibitions, and also by lending collection pieces. It is clear that the public do not realise that the institution visited may be well known abroad and that they work with numerous international partners.

As far as ancillary services are concerned, they are considered as an essential part of the institution, the most important (27%) being the library, followed by a cafeteria or snack bar, providing the possibility of having something to eat and drink. The satisfaction of intellectual needs comes before that of physiological needs. On this subject, we can quote Jack Lang, ex- French Minister for Culture: “Museums must offer cinemas, auditoriums, pleasant restaurants, rest areas, libraries, boutiques and gardens. In other words, they must cater for the mind and the body.”⁶

In the opinion of the visitors questioned, the principal roles of a cultural institution are:

- The presentation of new talent (32%)
- The presentation of topics of current interest (25%)
- The promotion of local artists (20%)
- The conservation and preservation of patrimony (15%).

A cultural institution must consequently keep up with its day and age and reflect current affairs. Its mission has therefore evolved: previously considered as existing for the conservation and preservation of patrimony, it has now become concerned with daily life. In addition, it now enables young artists to become known by offering them an opportunity to exhibit their works for the first time.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, we can safely say that museums and art galleries no longer reign supreme. They no longer have a monopoly of culture and have to work in a very competitive environment, whether it is made up of other cultural institutions or other leisure “substitute” activities among which clients of different categories can choose. These clients are, therefore, becoming more and more demanding, as they have predetermined criteria of selection, based on their experience.

In order to survive in this changing environment, cultural institutions must learn to get to know their public better before deciding what their policies and motivations should be, by developing the appropriate tools for surveys, public relations and promotion.

One interesting possibility may be the development of means for the regular collection of relevant data from clients and visitors, in particular socio-demographic details, and impressions of their visits. This can be achieved through a poll on the web site of the institution concerned, a questionnaire to fill in before leaving the premises, or presented as a computer game, or with an interactive electronic terminal. The aim in each case being to build up a data basis, encouraging the public to make return visits by letting them know about future exhibitions and activities.

In this respect, we consider that it is specially important to take the trouble to inform the student public through contact with teachers. In the course of our surveys, we met numerous families whose visit had resulted from the influence of a child who had been there on a school outing that had met with great success.

As a result of this research, we are going to study the ways of regularly collecting relevant information concerning the various kinds of public who visit museums, art galleries and cultural centres, by friendly face-to-face discussions. Our aim is to develop a CRM (Customer Relationship Management) tool, applicable to cultural institutions, and which would enable institutions to find out the needs and expectations of their clients, so that the latter become regular visitors.

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Notes

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- 1 <http://icom.museum/definition.html>
 - 2 Weil, S.E. 1990. Rethinking the museum: And other meditations. Smithsonian Institution: Washington DC.
 - 3 Hood, Marilyn G. 1983. "Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums", *Museum News*, April, p 50-57.
 - 4 Cowell, Donald W. 1984. *The Marketing of Services*. London: Heinemann.
 - 5 Swiss Federal Statistical Office. 2001. Voluntary work in Switzerland, Neuchâtel. (Available in French or German on <http://www.statistique.admin.ch>)
 - 6 Quoted by Stephen, A. 2001. "The Contemporary Museum and Leisure: Recreation as a Museum Function." *Museum Management and Curatorship*, Vol. 19, n° 3, p. 306.

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