Chapter 1

Overview of the thesis

Background to the research

The twenty first century is a challenging time for the modern museum. No longer are museums quiet places of contemplation for the educated. The days of them being able to concentrate on collecting, conservation and research are long gone. However, these traditional roles have not been abandoned. Indeed, in a climate of diminishing resources and disappearing species they are perhaps now more needed than ever. The challenge for the modern museum is that, in addition to their traditional roles, they are now also expected to inform, educate and entertain, and to provide a ‘value’ museum experience within a competitive marketplace. Central to this challenge is the changing nature of the visiting public, and how their expectations as informed and technologically aware consumers can shape museum activities. A key issue for researchers stemming from these changes is to develop an understanding of the factors that influence the extent to which museums incorporate electronic marketing strategies into their overall marketing activities, in their efforts to communicate with their publics.

The use of the Internet in the home, at work and in educational institutions has increased appreciably over the past few years. E-mail is now a significant and ubiquitous method of communication, and many use the Web to source information in the first instance. The Internet has far-reaching social repercussions only just now being considered. One critical issue relates to those without access. As has been stated by Lloyd and Bill (2004):

Groups that do not have the opportunity to participate in the services provided by new telecommunications technology will be increasingly disadvantaged socially and economically (2004: 1).
This idea of there being a ‘digital divide’ between those who can access the technology and those who cannot affects participation in a range of social spheres such as education provision, government services, cultural activities and the political process (McLaren & Zappala, 2002). This makes the Internet, and websites generally, a concern of government and policy makers. It also makes the Internet of concern to those charged with managing publicly-funded cultural organisations. Clearly, the Internet has changed the way humans behave, how they interact, how they gather information, and how they communicate (Lagrosen, 2003). Furthermore, the Internet is also now considered an essential part of any overall business strategy (Adam, Mulye, Deans & Paliawadana, 2002). This applies to the museum sector as well, as there has been considerable pressure on museums, as there has for all not for profit organisations, to adopt sound management and business practises.

Along with other functional areas of business, marketing has had to make adjustments to accommodate the rise of the Internet. For instance, as a marketing communication tool, websites are now seen as standard practice for advertising campaigns. In general, innovative marketing communication channels that deliver relevant messages to target audiences have emerged as major components in the marketing programmes of many organisations (Harmon, Webster, & Weyenberg, 1999; Watson, Pitt, Berthon, & Zinkhan, 2002). Within the museum sector the role of new technologies is also of increasing importance. As Rentschler and Hede (2007) note:

"New media has had a profound affect on museum marketing as it is one of the most widely available innovations relevant to both management and cultural practitioners. (2007: xix)."

For these reasons research into electronic marketing has become a growing field—with a considerable number of textbooks written on e-business, e-commerce and the various business models possible in this new digital world (Chaffey, Ellis-Chadwick, Johnstone & Mayer, 2006; Hanson & Kalyanam, 2007; Lawrence, Corbitt, Tidwell, Fisher & Lawrence, 1998; Mohammed, Fisher, Jaworski & Cahill, 2004; Strauss, El-Ansary & Frost, 2006). Similarly, there has been academic studies into various aspects of new media and electronic marketing in the for profit sector (Adam et al., 2002; Moffett,
Research studies have been conducted on organisations that have a consumer product for sale, or deliver a service, and their online strategies considered: for example, Perry and Bodkin’s (2000) content analysis of Fortune 100 companies’ websites and Griffith and Krampf’s (1998) study of the Web strategies of retailers in the USA. However, organisations that seek to communicate culture, such as museums—whose product is less concrete and more a part of the social fabric than a part of consumer interaction—have fallen outside the sphere of interest of many researchers in the field of electronic marketing. (See Rentschler and Geursen (2003) for one exception.)

Even within the general marketing field, research on museums’ strategies has been conducted only relatively recently. That is not because museums do not necessarily seek to turn a profit, and are therefore not ‘businesses’, or that they are not big business. Or, indeed, that they do not generate significant customer numbers. In 1998/99, considerably more people visited an art gallery than a cricket match (Australia Council for the Arts, 2003). More recently, Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) data show that in the survey period 2004–2005 an estimated 23% of the adult population in Australia visited a museum, with the same percentage visiting an art gallery. In the United Kingdom it is estimated that there are over 42 million visitors to the major museums and art galleries each year (Travers, 2006). Clearly modern museums are now large, diverse organisations with sometimes significant resources and a role in society that brings with it considerable responsibilities. However, as Rentschler and Geursen (2003) suggest, arts and cultural organisations generally have been slow to adopt those aspects of the new economy critical to success. This is especially true in terms of museum marketing strategies, and particularly in the field of marketing communications (Kotler & Kotler, 1998; 2000). Part of the reason for a lack of enthusiasm for marketing relates to the conservative nature of museums and their traditional concern for the collection and not their ‘customer’ (Neilson, 2003). In addition, marketing in not for profit cultural institutions such as museums requires quite particular strategies which means that formulaic responses drawn from the for profit sector may not work (Andreasen & Kotler, 2003). For example, the Australian state museums must devise marketing strategies that reflect the fact that they compete for funds from government as not for
profit cultural organisations, while also offering the public, now with high expectation as informed consumers, a ‘value’ museum experience.

Therefore, the context within which museums operate is complex and quickly changing, and is the result of a range of external forces beyond the control of museum management. In addition, what may be required of them as regards their use of technology and the Web in the future also determines, to an extent, their strategies in the present day. One commentator has boldly stated that in the future “twenty-first century arts institutions… [could be]… delivering gallery tours in cyberspace and staging holographic plays” (Hiller, 2001: 46). Although many traditional bricks and mortar museums now offer what they call ‘virtual’ exhibitions, very few include such a complex level of interaction when communicating with their online customers. However, even if museums only use their website for what textbooks call ‘brochureware’ (Strauss et al., 2006; Hanson & Kalyanam, 2007), that is, for tactical purposes rather than strategic, museums need to develop marketing communication strategies that take into account both the nature of their product and the electronic environment (Sterne, 1999), as well as the needs and wants of their publics. They also need to adopt strategies that will allow any electronic marketing plan or program to be implemented successfully.

From a marketing perspective a successful business is one that delivers its customers value in a goods or service exchange. While museums have a social mission, and are not necessarily called upon to produce a “positive financial outcome” (Weil, 2000: n.p.), they do need to be ‘business-like’. The scenario whereby they are required to deliver value to their customers is one, then, that museums have only recently had to consider. In respect of their use of marketing generally, and electronic marketing specifically, a useful question for researchers to address is how are museums dealing with this scenario? Following from this, researchers could also consider the issues that influence museum decision making in relation to any use of electronic marketing as part of an integrated marketing strategy.
Research problem and methodology

In brief, there have been significant social, economic and cultural changes that have affected the way museums have to operate and how they see themselves and their audience (Kotler & Kotler, 1998). Marketing has become a vital component of museum management (Rentschler, 2004). Consequently, an integrated approach to how museums communicate with their publics has become a necessary part of museum business strategy. In addition, changes in the museums’ marketplace is making the use of modern tools, such as electronic media, within their marketing strategies increasingly important. However, the Australian museum sector has developed in a different manner to other parts of the Western world, and it is not certain that it is subject to the same forces, or has exhibited the same responses. For the Australian state museums, in particular, as the pre-eminent cultural institutions in their respective state, this is a significant question due to the differences apparent between their structures and the similarity between their collections.

Within this context, the overall aim of this research is to:

Investigate the factors that influence the extent to which the Australian state museums now incorporate electronic marketing strategies into their overall marketing activities.

The research questions that inform the research design follow a progression of interactivity between museums as organisations, marketing theory and the development of the museum concept over time, and how this affects the Australian situation. Firstly, a research question was developed that sought to provide a snapshot of the situation in the Australian state museum system at the time of writing. Research question 1 (RQ 1) can also be used to provide insight into any differences between each museum:

RQ 1  To what extent do the Australian state museums exhibit a marketing emphasis?

Following on from this, Research question 2 (RQ 2) seeks to establish how the Australian state museums perceive the environment in which museums must operate in
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the twenty-first century. In addition, RQ 2 could be used to demonstrate how various factors operate to shape museum activities:

**RQ 2** What are the drivers of change in the museum sector?

The third research question builds on the second, in that the literature indicates that the drivers of change in the museum sector result in a scenario where marketing is seen to be a vital component of a successful modern museum. Research question 3 (RQ 3) is, then, designed to provide a picture of the role marketing has in museum management:

**RQ 3** What is marketing’s role in museum management?

Research question 4 (RQ 4) goes to the next level, taking account of the investigation of RQ 2 and RQ 3. Various drivers of change have operated to establish an environment where, within an overall marketing emphasis, electronic marketing is evident. RQ 4 aims to determine the extent to which museums use electronic media within their overall marketing strategy:

**RQ 4** To what extent are electronic media part of museum marketing strategy?

As was noted above, there are differences between each state museum and how they operate. Finally, Research question 5 (RQ 5) seeks insight into the ramifications of this situation in relation to this thesis’s overall research aim, and asks:

**RQ 5** What are the similarities and differences between the six state museums in their approach to marketing generally, and electronic marketing specifically?

RQ 5, then, aims to explore whether there are any themes apparent that might explain any similarities or differences between museums, or whether there any overarching issues that could assist museum management in formulating their marketing strategies.

**Methodology**

An interpretivist position was adopted in this research. Briefly, it is considered here that there are multiple realities that defy measurement, and researchers can only seek to
understand real-world phenomena by studying them in detail. In part this position is based on the opinion that the ‘human’ facets of the real world could be lost when they are analysed in a quantitative manner (Hughes & Sharrock, 1997). Furthermore, the role of the researcher should be to analyse the perceptions of those involved in the phenomena under study (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Lowe, 2002). In short, the interpretivist position taken here stems from a belief that a qualitative approach will best provide insight into the research questions set out above.

Within the context of these research questions a multiple case study method was deemed appropriate, as it allows the induction of theory from the primarily qualitative data collected in the case studies (Stake, 2005). The subsequent data analysis can then seek to identify common themes and issues of concern within each case museum, as well as across the industry sector. From this analysis propositions and subsequent conclusions may be reached.

**Significance and implications of the research**

The research presented in this thesis has, then, significant implications for both theory and practice. As Bradford (1991) has noted, there is a distinct lack of museum marketing theory derived from studying actual museums and their activities. That is, there are marketing theories developed in the for profit, sale of goods areas being applied to museums. Therefore there is a clear need for theories based on research conducted in museums. This is doubly so for the Australian sector. To the researcher’s knowledge there has not been another study conducted in the research area covered here to date. Of course, this has necessitated that this study, in some respects, take an exploratory stance.

Given the qualitative approach taken here this thesis does not seek to provide results generalisable in other contexts. However, it is hoped that this study will provide insights into the factors that influence the extent to which the Australian state museums
incorporate electronic marketing strategies into their overall marketing activities that can be useful for practitioners in the field.

Structure of the thesis

In many ways the significance of electronic marketing to the Australian state museums is inseparable from the development of the museum sector itself. Similarly, the development of the sector is inextricably linked to the changes to its external environment—the economic and social changes that have occurred since a museum in the modern sense came into existence. In part, then, there is a ‘story’ to be told, a story that determined that a narrative approach to the structure of this research was the most appropriate way to proceed. Each chapter builds on the preceding, as would be expected, but each also carries the narrative forward, from the genesis of the modern museum, to the analysis of Australia’s current state museum system. A brief overview of the chapters following the present one is given next.

Chapter 2
This chapter outlines the ‘industry’ sector in which this study is set. The position is taken that the museum sector is such that definitions, history and development all need elaboration in order to place the study in context. In particular, the Australian state museum system, differing as it does from that in other countries, needs to be clearly outlined.

Chapter 3
Chapter 3 examines the part a number of relevant factors have played in developments within museum management, and the part each has played in changes to the role of marketing within the organisational structures of museums.

Chapter 4
Chapter 4 looks at marketing theories within the museum context. It considers the growing move to an integrated approach to marketing, as well as introducing the
concept of branding. It also examines electronic marketing strategies and how these relate to museums.

Chapter 5
In this chapter the researcher’s philosophical stance is further outlined and the research approach set out. An overview of the research design and the methods of data analysis are given. Ethical considerations and limitations with the research are also covered.

Chapters 6
This chapter firstly outlines the case study museums—the state museums of Australia, namely: the Australian Museum (New South Wales); Museum Victoria; the Queensland Museum; the South Australian Museum; the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery; and the Western Australian Museum—and looks at their history and governance structures. Secondly, it analyses the case study museums from a ‘marketing perspective’, using secondary data to compare and contrast the case study museums’ marketing strategies.

Chapter 7
Chapter 7 builds on the preceding by reporting and critically analysing the data drawn from interviews with staff from the Australian state museums. It seeks to reveal a ‘museum perspective’ by focusing on the themes that were based on a perceptual framework set out by the researcher, the research aim and research questions, and the main factors that were apparent from the literature review.

Chapter 8
This concluding chapter presents a synthesis of the ‘marketing’ and ‘museum’ perspectives discussed in Chapters 6 and 7. It considers the research questions in light of these findings, and addresses the extent to which the research has provided insight into the overall research aim. This chapter also considers the implications of the research for theory and practice in further detail, and suggests useful avenues for future research.
Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview, and a background and societal context, for the research. The research is set in the context of there being significant external forces, such as the changing nature of the public, that have shaped museums’ approaches to their audiences. In addition, the rise of technology and the consequent need to incorporate electronic marketing into their marketing strategies has provided the Australian state museum, the case study institutions here, with considerable challenges. How museums are responding, and they might respond, were noted as questions that have given researchers many opportunities for study.

This chapter then set out the overall research aim and the research questions, which were briefly discussed, and introduced the methodological approach taken to address the research questions, briefly noting the interpretivist position adopted, and the choice of a qualitative case study approach. A section considered the significance of the study and the implications for theory and practice. The chapter concluded with a section that described the structure of the thesis, pointing to its narrative style, and outlining the contents of each chapter.