

Cultural Enterprises Podcast

Series 3, Episode 6 – Post-pandemic Sustainability in Cultural Trading

What is sustainability?

Sustainability is a term which has been popularized in recent years and is an important issue that is coming to the fore, both in the museum sector and society at large. Sustainability is commonly associated with the environment, but increasingly it is understood as relating to how our society is structured and how we live our lives. Scholars typically think about sustainability using the ‘three pillars’ model, in which sustainability is achieved by thinking about the inter-connections of the pillars of environment, society and the economy.

A useful definition here is provided by the University of California Los Angeles, which states that sustainability is: “the integration of environmental health, social equity and economic vitality in order to create thriving, healthy, diverse and resilient communities for this generation and generations to come.”

While this definition may appear daunting – in terms of its implementation within cultural trading – there are many examples of products that currently meet these criteria. For example, a product made of recycled material, that is produced by a women’s co-operative and is Fairtrade certified would encompass each of these.

A basic way of thinking about sustainability in relation to cultural trading is to consider what impact a product might have on these three areas – does it have a negative, neutral, or positive impact – and based on this is it something that it is justifiable to stock? The difficulty comes, in many instances, in trying to determine what yardstick to measure this by. Some museums have institution-wide sustainability policies, many do not – and at present there are no sector-wide standards to apply. So, in many instances accountability comes down to individual initiative.

The museum sector is only beginning to grapple with what it means to be sustainable. But these issues are here to stay and are likely to inform museum practice considerably in the years ahead, particularly as museums understand how they can contribute to the government’s climate commitments to reduce emissions by 78% (compared to 1990s levels), by 2035.

Moreover, from the perspective of cultural trading, multiple reports show that Gen Z and Millennial audiences highly value sustainability and are willing to pay more for these products, so it behooves museums to think about these issues in terms of their bottom line

For museums, there are two main ways in which they can engage the topic of sustainability. The first is from a curatorial perspective – museums and other visitor attractions can create exhibitions and cultural experiences to educate their audience on these issues.

The second is from an operational perspective – museums and other visitor attractions can introduce practical changes to the way in which they are run to reduce the environmental impact they have.

Cultural trading can make a significant contribution to both.

As we know, cultural trading plays an important role in adding to the experience by providing visitors with an opportunity to take something home with them. To support curatorial messaging, we can think about the role that a book about the climate crisis might play, or a souvenir made from recycled material can have to help consolidate sustainable messages in an exhibition. Similarly, products like a reusable cup may help visitors to make behavioral changes to become more sustainable in their everyday lives. To support sustainable operations, cultural trading can be pursued in ways that address these issues, such as eliminating excessive plastic packaging; stocking products with a lower carbon footprint; or reducing product lines made with environmentally damaging materials, such as cotton or palm oil. We can also take a more expansive perspective and perhaps ask questions about the ‘afterlife’ of products sold – are they single use items or will they likely be used repeatedly by the consumer? And should this play into the decisions that retailers make?

How has covid affect cultural trading?

In terms of the impact of covid on sustainability in cultural trading, the picture is somewhat mixed.

The pandemic has significantly impacted the ability of museums to earn income. In some instances, cultural trading has been curtailed entirely and museum operations have more or less come to a standstill. In others some museums have been able to develop their online offer and generate revenues, which have been a lifeline in the absence of any other visitor income. In both instances the immediate focus has been on ensuring the continuing viability of the trading concern, meaning that further sustainability initiatives have taken somewhat of a backseat.

The positive aspects of lockdown however, are evident in the creative lengths that cultural traders have gone to think about new, innovative ways of retailing in this context. Examples abound, such as Beamish Afternoon Tea deliveries to museums producing subscription boxes that allows visitors to have an experience of the museum delivered to their homes. Alex Nicholson-Evans, Commercial Director of the Birmingham Museum Trust, outlines really instructive examples of creative and locally-focused retailing approaches in a previous podcast in this series, and I would encourage you to listen to the episode.

Similarly, a big part of the discussion about emerging from the pandemic is the idea of ‘building back better’ – or how we can improve what we were doing before. So this has been a chance to think about what cultural trading might look like moving forwards and how it can help meet broader institutional and even social goals. As such, we are presented with a unique moment which has spurred creative thinking and presents a unique opportunity to think about the future of cultural trading.

What is the future of cultural trading?

The key issue here is how can we continue the success of the shop but do so in innovative ways that adhere to sustainable criteria?

One key takeaway from the pandemic is the success many museums have enjoyed by shifting to e-commerce. The longevity of this shift remains to be seen. If it continues then this points to a different kind of relationship that consumers are building with cultural

attractions, one that moves beyond a site-based focus. In some ways this can potentially reduce emissions, particularly if museums are able to organize sales from producers directly to their customers and reduce shipping and storage overheads. But the additional resources used to power e-commerce websites are themselves problematic. And if the sophistication of cultural trading means that new markets are being created beyond the museum visit, and ultimately this means producing and selling more stuff.

And this is largely because this trading is still premised on a certain kind of retailing. A question that I have been thinking about for a while is this: 'how can we radically rethink what museum shops are and what they do?' or alternatively 'what will museums shops be like in 30 years' time, and why will they be that way?'

Cultural trading broadly reflects social trends in consumption. A potted history of museum trading is as follows: From more or less the emergence of the modern museum, they sold publications emphasizing the educational goals of the institution. Then, in the early 1900s, museums started selling reproductions of photographs and postcards which were wildly popular at the time with the public. Museums followed a social trend. It was only in the 1970s and 1980s that cultural trading in the UK assumed its current form, which is premised on mass produced commodities and largely mirrors our consumerist society. That is to say that there is no one fixed way of providing this amenity to visitors. So is there a way of doing things differently? Is there a way of doing things more sustainably? And if so how might we reflect in this the ways that society consumes now?

A quite direct approach for dealing with these issues would be to embrace principles of a notion called 'de-growth'. This is the idea that we make deliberate decisions to consume less. In practical terms cultural trading could be limited in some way, perhaps selling only items or products made within a local vicinity. The potential for environmental, social and economic benefits of such an approach are fairly evident.

We could also think less about selling products and more about helping visitors co-produce things to take away through interventions like Makerspaces – If cultural trading sells a part of their experience to take home, then is there a way of turning the shop into a more active space that encourages and monetizes visitor creativity – to truly extend the experience of the visit by doing something that engages in the culture visitors have just viewed?

And we can also consider the expanded role digital can play cultural trading. During lockdown museums have begun experimenting with digital forms of revenue such as content subscription services via Patreon, personalized content via Cameo, and there has also been a great deal of hype surrounding NFTs (or non-fungible tokens). This leads us to ask whether there may be ways to provide forms of digital souvenirs. Could visitors purchase limited edition digital content (available only onsite) in the same way they do a keyring? Or perhaps they could purchase passcodes in the shop for digital skills experiences in which they are taught a cultural tradition or practice?

These examples have at their core a preoccupation with attempting to reduce the resource expenditure associated with trading (including emissions produced through transit), while attempting to think about viable ways for cultural trading to continue generating revenue and providing meaningful opportunities for visitors. They also attempt to consider how cultural retailing can respond to emerging social trends and influences, including ideas of authenticity, individuality, and the growing primacy of digital content.



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Of course, the very barrier to change here is the bottom line, and the need for cultural trading to continue contributing to the institution's financial wellbeing while attempting to negotiate sustainability. For many museums, sustainability goals will mean attempting to do less harm through a series of small but important changes. We should, however, not rule out a more radical kind of thinking about what cultural trading can become, and how it can be reshaped to respond to significant issues facing society.