Case Study: The British Postal Museum and Archive

Key themes
- Recognising the need to diversify when income is predominantly from one funder
- Exploring the link between marketing, PR and income generation
- Developing trading through partnership working, especially for smaller organisations
- Reviewing and building on trading ideas piloted to date
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Summary

Founded in 2004, The British Postal Museum and Archive cares for the visual, physical and written records of over 400 years of postal heritage including stamps, poster design, photography, staff records and objects ranging from pillar boxes to vehicles. To date income has come predominantly from Royal Mail (whose archive it manages) in the form of a donation and contractual agreement. Since inception it has been trading to supplement this income and is now reviewing trading activity to enable future growth and development. While recognising the importance of reducing dependence on their key funder, the organisation is committed to ensuring that all trading ideas also support their mission. In this case study they discuss the challenges of being a museum trading without a traditional museum space and how trading activity is helping them to reach new audiences and raise the profile of their collection.

Date

Based on an interview with Deborah Turton, The British Postal Museum and Archive’s Head of Access and Development and Siobhan O’Leary, Development Officer, held on 13 August 2008.
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**Background**

The British Postal Museum and Archive (BPMA) was established in 2004 to manage the public records of The Royal Mail Archive, and the museum collections of the former National Postal Museum. Its mission is to increase access to its collections, making the story they tell of communication, industry and innovation available to everyone. It operates in two locations, a main office, public search room and archive service in Central London, open throughout the week, and a museum store at Debden, Essex, open on selected days throughout the year. Its principle funder is Royal Mail Group Ltd.

The BPMA is custodian of two significant collections. Its museum collection encompasses postal equipment, uniforms, vehicles, pillar boxes and related items, inherited from the former National Postal Museum, which closed in 1998. Its other responsibility, The Royal Mail Archive, is an extensive collection containing the historical business and staff records of Royal Mail and its former incarnations (including the General Post Office, or GPO), every British stamp issued since the Penny Black, plus numerous items ranging from posters, photographs and postcards to original design artwork, postal ephemera and beyond. More unusual items include evidence from the 1963 Great Train Robbery (collected by the Post Office special investigations unit because the attack involved a travelling post office train), a telegram from the Titanic, and a first edition of James Joyce's novel Ulysses (seized in the mail for obscenity in the 1920s).

A significant challenge for the BPMA is its current split location, combined with a lack of exhibition space and associated facilities such as educational space, shop and café. This has implications for both audience development and ability to generate income. Relocation to a new venue is therefore a priority. The long-term objective is to bring the archive and museum collections together to provide enhanced facilities for visitors and to support organisational income generation activity. This is an ongoing project with over 45 potential sites investigated to date. Once a site is identified, it will still take around four years to realise the project, involving a major capital fundraising campaign and the engagement of major stakeholders.

The BPMA's current heavy reliance on a single funder, however, means that it needs to develop new income streams now, even before a new venue is found and an associated shop and café can be established.

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Funding

Like many charities, the BPMA is comprised of two arms: a charity (Postal Heritage Trust) and a trading company (Postal Heritage Services Limited). As a result of how the organisation came into being, each of these receives the majority of its income (about £1 million annually) from the same source – the BPMA’s founding funder, Royal Mail.

Royal Mail provides a donation to the charity to support its access and educational outreach work, to improve cataloguing and to support the BPMA’s relocation project. Royal Mail also contracts the BPMA through its trading arm to manage its business archive. The result is that close to 90% of the BPMA’s income comes from one funder. Deborah Turton, Head of Access and Development explains, ‘That’s the crux of why we need to generate more traded income. Our two largest income streams are from the same source. It’s likely that the Archive contract will continue to be renewed so long as Royal Mail remains happy with the service we provide, but they are likely to decrease the amount they donate as time goes on, so in the long-term we are aiming to replace a significant portion of their donation with other income.’

Going after more grant funding has been one strategy towards this aim. As Turton explains, ‘Since 2005 success with Heritage Lottery funding has enabled us to expand our educational offering, including providing digitisation and online access to part of our philatelic collections, and developing a number of education packs, two of which have won Archive Landmark Awards’. The BPMA has also had success with MLA (Museums Libraries and Archives) funding for educational outreach, as well as being one of only two organisations throughout the country to succeed in obtaining funding from all three pots of money available to support the first phase of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad. As Turton continues, ‘Increasingly we will be looking more towards trust and foundations to support our educational outreach activities’.

Another strategy for reducing dependency on Royal Mail is to increase the proportion of income earned through trading. Turton is currently developing a four-year business plan to grow current traded income and to envisage what other income generation activity can take place once the BPMA has a new museum site. The first part of this planning process is assessing the success of trading activity to date.
Challenges to overcome

Development officer Siobhan O’Leary explains that the past four years have been largely about piloting a variety of trading ideas. ‘We are a young organisation and this is a learning process’, she states. ‘One of our biggest problems has been not having a museum site - which one would expect from an organisation called the “British Postal Museum and Archive”. It means we have limited footfall and have had to think more creatively about different ways to reach the market.’

One of these creative routes has been development of an online shop as part of the BPMA website. The BPMA has developed products such as postcards, greeting cards, figurines, mugs, magnets and T-shirts using images from their collections as well as smaller ranges that have tied in with specific exhibitions. Although reasonable sales have been achieved through their online shop, as O’Leary says, ‘Just because you have a website with quite a lot of visitors does not necessarily mean you’ll be selling a lot of products online. The conversion rate is quite difficult. It seems to be more related to your external activities - you need to be out there doing “real life” activities to push sales up. It’s important to understand this interrelation. The more things we do in the real world the better position we are in to generate income.’

‘Another challenge is overcoming the commonly held perception that we are just about stamps’, Turton adds. ‘While we do indeed hold one of the UK’s leading philatelic collections, stamps are only part of the collection. Our archive is officially designated as being of outstanding national importance and encompasses material relevant to a wide range of disciplines including art and design, film and photography, and British social history. If we think just about stamps our audience is quite small and specialised: those interested in philately and postal history. This audience want a very specific type of product and, on a commercial level, Royal Mail may be better placed to serve them. Looking at our current audience, evidence suggests that our typical user is male and in the 55-years plus age range. While we need to maintain and cater for this audience, we are also acutely aware that we need to broaden our user base.’
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**Trading and marketing hand-in-hand**

Consequently, for Turton and O’Leary generating income from trading is inseparable from broader organisational marketing and public relations. This in turn supports audience development. They see trading as needing to be based on the untapped assets within the museum and archive collections and the subject expertise of curatorial staff. This serves to not only generate income but to achieve the broader strategic aims of increasing access to the collection and raising the BPMA’s profile beyond the current audience. This is especially important for a new and relatively unheard of organisation.

‘Initially it may be easy to think, “we need income - get the money in any way you can”, says Turton, ‘but trading and marketing and PR go hand-in-hand. On the one hand you need your marketing and PR functions to raise your profile such that people value and trust any product you produce. On the other hand, the products you sell also act as PR for the whole organisation.’

The most successful trading initiative to have achieved this combined aim for the BPMA to date is an ongoing project focusing on the output of the GPO film unit. This has been a partnership initiative between the BPMA, Royal Mail, the British Film Institute (BFI) and BT Heritage. The GPO film unit was set up in 1933 to produce public information films promoting postal and related services. Its output included documentary classics such as *Night Mail*, the 1936 film depicting the overnight journey of a post train from London to Glasgow, and others less well known but equally ground-breaking films. The BFI approached BPMA, as custodians of The Royal Mail Archive, to discuss a partnership project concerning the

One of the aims of the BPMA’s new business plan is to build on this kind of success and mesh together profile-raising with income generation. ‘Everything we do to raise money also has to have a profile raising aspect,’ says Turton. ‘Long-term this feeds back into income generation, but it also assists us from a strategic point of view; for example with relocation we are more likely to have been heard of by key stakeholders or funders if we have products that have captured the public’s attention. On the business development side, if we have a higher public profile it means that people are more likely to buy from us and, once we have a new museum venue, come and visit us.’

The result has been a re-mastered DVD version of *Night Mail*, released in December 2007, and the production during 2008-09 of a further three DVDs containing a selection of the re-mastered films. Further public access and marketing to support DVD sales has come from a cinema tour and an overview of the GPO film unit on BFI’s Screenonline interactive educational website. The project has had significant benefits for the BPMA: generating ongoing income from nation-wide DVD sales royalties and from sales made by the BPMA through its own outlets, plus generating substantial organisational PR far in excess of anything the BPMA could have achieved alone.

‘The success of this project is that it meets multiple strategic aims. We are generating income through product sales, but we are also achieving conservation and preservation aims, not to mention marketing and audience development,’ says O’Leary. ‘The cinema tours are primarily about profile-raising as they don’t really generate any income but they bring awareness of our organisation to those who may not otherwise have heard of us’.

films. The BPMA and BFI subsequently financed a project to establish what films existed, what condition they were in, and to restore a selection with the aim of enabling public access to this historical material. BT Heritage joined the project to enable telecommunications films to be included.

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**Partnering for success**

Much of the success of the Night Mail and other DVD products has been achieved through partnering with the BFI, an organisation with greater capacity, profile and reach than BPMA. This partnership approach has also been used to develop the BPMA’s exhibitions programme. While necessitated through a lack of exhibition space, partnering with larger museums is a very effective way of reaching new audiences.

From November 2008 to February 2009, the BPMA will hold an exhibition at the Churchill Museum and Cabinet War Rooms (part of the Imperial War Museum) illuminating the role of the post office in the First World War. The BPMA has taken a selection of its collection and chosen an exhibition partner based on a synergy between the theme and venue. Similarly, a future exhibition of archive posters is planned for the Lighthouse Gallery in Glasgow, a gallery focusing on contemporary design and architecture.

This approach enables the BPMA to showcase their collections to new audiences. As Turton states, ‘People going to the Cabinet War Rooms are thinking about war and political history. People going to the Lighthouse Gallery are coming with a design mindset. So it’s about enabling us to raise the profile of what we’ve got and reach new audiences by appealing to their interests. This gives us an opportunity to try and engage them with our other resources. Following an exhibition visit they may go to our website, they may then buy a product, they may also remember us in another context such as a press article - so it’s about putting ourselves in the public consciousness as well.’

Another important part of this awareness raising process involves boosting the profile of the ‘non-stamp’ items in the collection. While the GPO film project has begun to do this for the film collection, Turton sees considerable untapped potential in the poster and original artwork collections as well as the wide array of postal-related objects. ‘The red letter box is a British icon’, says Turton. ‘With a wealth of unusual artefacts such as a telegram from the Titanic, our collection goes well beyond stamps. It’s about design and iconic “Britishness” and key moments in British social history. Recognising this means we can target PR opportunities beyond the philatelic press, where we are already well represented, and towards the heritage press, art and design publications and the mainstream media.’

At the moment the BPMA are focusing on promoting the design aspects of the collection and are forging links with design institutions such as the University of the Arts. ‘We want to engage students and younger people to ensure that we have an audience in the future,’ says Turton.

Turton has found that face-to-face meetings, combined with a tour of the archive, is a good way of getting external partners and press interested in the BPMA’s work. ‘Quite often it’s when we bring people in-house and we show them what we have, they are so taken aback - they see that stamps are just one tiny part. It excites them and they are open to working with us,’ she says. It was this approach that secured the BPMA a monthly half-page column in Royal Mail’s staff newspaper, which reaches 300,000 people across the UK.
Developing trading ideas

Turton and O’Leary recognise that the GPO film products are their ‘best players’ currently and that not all trading activities will achieve such a good return. Nevertheless, they are hopeful that by applying lessons learned in developing the DVD project to other areas, they will be more likely to achieve further success.

Another trading area, commonly pursued by museums and galleries, and currently being explored is licensing. This has also been approached through partnership working. They have engaged a licensing agent to test how this might work for product development and are working with Bridgeman Art Library to explore image licensing. The need to diversify income has not, however, diverted the BPMA from its charitable objectives. The BPMA’s aim of making its collection widely accessible means it is likely that only commercial use of images will be charged for while educational use will remain free.

Also being reviewed is an online ‘print on demand’ service, available via the website. This facilitates access to the BPMA’s poster collection, but having been set up in 2005, originally received little marketing. Subsequent experience has demonstrated how important it is for the BPMA to better promote this service if growth is to be achieved. Linking in with the PR effort to promote the design aspect of the collection, they are reviewing the selection of posters they have available via this service. Experience suggests that future growth is likely to come not only from better promotion, but also from identifying the ‘best players’ amongst the many poster and photographic images available in the BPMA’s collections. Fortunately, because this kind of bespoke service means posters are produced for customers upon ordering, rather than the BPMA selecting and printing large batches that have to be stored, it represents an opportunity to test the poster market without the need for BPMA to produce posters themselves.

BPMA’s contract with Royal Mail has also led them to begin developing new heritage management services, such as a consultancy service to help Royal Mail create a database of War Memorials linked to Post Office buildings, and a similar stamp image scanning project. From this experience they believe they have found a potential growth area where heritage management services could be offered to organisations beyond Royal Mail. In all instances future trading will build on what has worked well in the past.

As part of its current evaluation of trading activity, the BPMA is undertaking considerable benchmarking to examine how other museums and archives generate income. The process has highlighted gaps such as the fact that sponsorship for exhibitions - standard practice for many museums - has not been pursued to date. They have targeted other similar sized organisations that do image licensing and product development as well as organisations that share the similarity of relying on trading online due to not having a museum space. ‘One of the things I’ve found most useful is learning from other people about what they are doing; their processes, what’s worked, what hasn’t worked. It’s both reassuring in terms of a lot of their experiences tally with ours, but you also get a lot of ideas that way as well,’ says Turton. This benchmarking and evaluation will be used to ensure that the BPMA’s future trading and marketing strategy will be focused on the areas of greatest potential.
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Top five tips from BPMA

There are many benefits to working in partnership  
A lot of what we have been able to achieve has been possible through partnering with other more experienced organisations. By working with others we have not only been able to reach new markets and raise our profile, but also to learn many valuable lessons and ways to do things.

Recognise the fundamental link between income generation and marketing  
When the products and services you sell relate directly to the mission of your organisation then your income generating activity has a number of key benefits: you are raising money to support your organisation while at the same time conducting an activity that furthers your core purpose and raises your profile.

For us, products and marketing go hand-in-hand. The products we sell contribute to the wider marketing of our organisation by showcasing our collection. At the same time, the PR and marketing work we do raises our profile and hopefully results in more products being sold.

Identify your ‘best players’  
For us these are the ‘gems’ of our collection, such as the Night Mail documentary and telegram from the Titanic, but all organisations will have particular products or services that set them apart. Use these to your best advantage by developing further products or services around these ‘star players’. But at the same time, don’t expect just one thing to bring in lots of money; you can’t rely on a single source of income. Pilot a few things you believe you can earn money from, then review to see what is working.

Benchmarking is an invaluable part of the planning process  
Don’t be afraid to ask for help from others. Time and capacity permitting, people have been incredibly generous in sharing information with us that has helped us in deciding on possible next steps. This is invaluable learning for a young organisation.

When targeting organisations to benchmark against have a clear idea of the specific information you want to garner; this will help you to choose the most appropriate organisations.

Don’t forget to look at your own, in-house generated intellectual property  
Beyond your frontline offerings and services consider the work you have done in developing resources. For example, our collection is obviously an asset but we should not ignore the work that our curatorial team has done in creating stories and interpretative text about the collection for exhibitions. Although the potential for this may be smaller, utilising this material in printed publications or similar is another outlet worth pursuing.

Archive images © Royal Mail Group 2008 courtesy of BPMA

Links:

The British Postal Museum and Archive – www.postalheritage.org.uk

For further details or to book tours contact info@postalheritage.org.uk or telephone 020 7239 2570

Sir Derek Jacobi presents an illustrated interactive guide to the history of the GPO Film Unit – www.screenonline.org.uk/tours/jacobi/tourjacobi.html

Print-on-demand postal heritage prints – www.postalheritageprints.co.uk

Sustainable Funding Project – www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp

The Sustainable Funding Project is an NCVO initiative working in partnership with the Big Lottery Fund and Charity Bank

The project encourages and enables voluntary and community organisations to explore and exploit a full range of funding and financing options to develop a sustainable funding mix.

The Sustainable Funding Project

www.ncvo-vol.org.uk/sfp

T: 020 7520 2519
E: sfp@ncvo-vol.org.uk