

## Museums and Publishing

RICHARD HARLING, THE CULTURAL COMMERCE CONSULTANT



In my career working with some terrific museum and commercial publishers and distributors, I have realised that there are no formulas for getting a museum's publishing right or one style of publication that always works, but the best results do come when the publication's commercial and cultural considerations are thought through together. To achieve this there are some important questions to ask.

The first is, why publish? There are plenty of other avenues to promote an exhibition or provide access to a museum's collection, yet museums are often drawn to the hardcopy book for its prestige, or as a revenue stream. Books are a (relatively) permanent form that can be useful in developing professional contacts and securing loans and acquisitions. Book publishing also promotes important aspects of your museums programs and overall public engagement. A good example of this is Queensland Art Gallery's innovative children's programs and their inventive and complementary children's books or the ambition behind Newcastle Art Gallery's excellent catalogue, *Illumination: The art of Philip Wolfhagen*.

There are a couple of key elements behind an engaging publication. Firstly it should have strong connection to the way the collection or exhibition is presented. Make sure the book designer works closely with the curator and exhibition designer. The book will then extend and enhance what the visitor has found so compelling. Secondly research shows (perhaps counter-intuitively) the decision

Richard Harling was Manager Retail and Publishing at AGNSW for over a decade. The questions he is asked the most by small to medium sized museums are about what makes an engaging print publication and how to sell and distribute it effectively. Here he shares some tips and cautions.

to buy a book is made quickly, often in under thirty seconds. The 'feel in the hand' is crucial to the buying decision. Format, typography, binding, paper choice, layout, the cover and a wealth of other elements make this up. So take time to find samples of books that 'feel right' and give these to the production manager and designer.

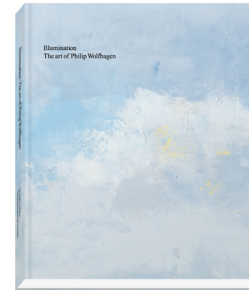
To publish successfully museum staff need to have skills and experience in editing, design, production, sales projection and distribution, but only the largest museums will be likely to have staff with all of these skills. Luckily many of these skills are available from freelancers and it's important to budget to include them.

But before developing the publication make sure that you have a fully costed budget and that you know your intended audience. For example, is the museum's proposed collection book intended for the general visitor or as a scholarly publication? Knowing this helps develop a clear publishing and distribution proposal that shapes the publications textual, visual and production levels and ensures it is right for its market. Having a clear identity for the publication makes it easier to find and work with a potential distributor. To prevent cost blow-outs discussions with distributors should begin at the publishing proposal stage—not at the end of the design phase or when the product has been finished.

In terms of structuring a budget, building a sales projection (a complex and difficult task) is essential and should come first. Will the publishing project be worthwhile in non-financial, let alone financial terms, if only a few hundred copies are sold? A non-financial benefit might be the publishing of new

Left: Queensland Art Gallery's innovative children's programs included complementary children's books such as this award winning *Portrait of Spain for Kids*, 2012. For more go to: <http://www.qagoma.qld.gov.au/kids/publications>

Below: The Newcastle Art Gallery's catalogue, *Illumination: The art of Philip Wolfhagen*. The exhibition will tour to the Hamilton Art Gallery (November 2014 - February 2015) and Gippsland Art Gallery (February - April 2015).



scholarship and its dissemination into libraries or other distribution channels. Previous publication sales from your museum vs visitor numbers will help work out some benchmark pick-up rates. If they are not available then discreet phone calls to other museums are needed.

Sales numbers are often much lower than museums expect. It can be surprising to know, for example, that even major museums may sell their collection book to less than 1% of their visitors. And while I have been involved with distribution deals that moved thousands of copies of catalogues the norm can often be in the low hundreds. The financial returns from distribution are again often far lower than museums expect. 30% of the ex-GST retail price is often the best a museum can hope for.

While a good budget will include provision for writers, copyright, editing (structural and copy), pre-press, printing and shipping and a decent contingency – the key issue to manage is whether the publication will make a profit or a loss. Sometimes making a loss can be ok but it must be planned for so there are no surprises for the CFO or oversight bodies such as auditors or board members.

It may sound like I am cautioning against publishing. I'm not. Few things are as powerful in promoting a museum or extending and enhancing a visitor's experience of a museum like a good publication. But be careful, poor publishing outcomes can come back to haunt a museum for years to come.

*Richard Harling, The Cultural Commerce Consultant. As a consultant Richard assists cultural organisations with cultural and commercial retailing and publishing. Clients include Newcastle Art Gallery, Opera Australia, Dymocks, Drill Hall Gallery, Australian Booksellers Association and Ian Potter Museum. He can be contacted at [richardharling@iinet.net.au](mailto:richardharling@iinet.net.au)*