Hands-on Science

Science museums have been around for a long time. However, they're no longer full of dusty cabinets and obscure displays. A really old test tube doesn't set the heart racing. Ancient Bunsen burners are hardly the stuff of fantasy.

So the museums' marketing moguls now promote the museums as major tourist attractions or leisure activities. They run wide-ranging education programmes for schools, and use hands-on science and interactive exhibits.

The problem

New audiences must be attracted. The aforementioned marketing moguls have adequately cornered the schools and family sector, but they want more – they want adults to spend their leisure time visiting the museums. And they want adults to enjoy themselves. At the same time they do not want their museums to simply house just another coffee bar or café.

What are Science Museums for?

Museums house and care for collections. It's also the museum's job to display and allow interaction with these collections in ways that are fun and educational. The Science Museum in London does this so well that it has become the third most visited tourist attraction in London. Science museums can also be a place where people discuss politically important issues with a science content, like the cloning of human beings or genetic modification. If this happens, the museum is becoming a *democratic forum,* a place where people discuss important issues, and contribute to decisions. While the new Wellcome wing at the London Science Museum attempts to present the science within current issues, it is still mainly about education; there are no formal opportunities for discussion or debate.

Back to the problem

So science museums want new audiences, and want to attract them with activities, themes, changes in opening hours – or whatever – that allow these new audiences to have fun, learn and discuss science and society. Science museums want to become a 'Third Space', a space where people spend their leisure time (home and work are the first and second space). They are increasingly open to new ways of doing this. Now it's up to you. You must become the marketing mogul!

What you need to do:

As part of a team, your challenge is to devise a concept and outline business plan for a new science centre.

You'll need to have a good idea to convince potential sponsors that they should fund the project – that there's a demand in your area, and that you have something new to offer. Your business plan is vital – even good ideas need to pay their way.

Among other things, you'll need to research the local area to get an idea for market demand, research science centres and other local leisure activities to see what else is out there, and work out how you're going to fund the project.

You'll need to look at the market demand in your area.

Some questions to ask:

- How many potential visitors live within a visiting distance?
- Who is your target audience? (For most centres, the bulk of visitors are either school groups or families with children. Are you going to aim for the same audience? Or will you aim to target a different group?)
- Does your area attract tourists, and would they be likely to come to your centre? Would you be a new activity to bring tourists to the area?
- Is there already a science centre near where you are? If so, what will you offer that's different?

You might decide that your area needs a large-scale project with multi-million pound funding. (Be aware that this sort of funding is not easy to find!) Or you might decide to set up a small discovery centre in a shopping centre. Or you might have your own ideas! Whatever you decide, you'll need to have an idea of how many visitors you're aiming for and what you're going to offer them.

You'll need a selling point

- What makes your centre unique?
- Why should sponsors fund it?
- Why should people come?

You'll need to write something convincing – there's only so much money to go around…

You'll need to look at how you're going to fund it

- How much sponsorship are you looking for, and how much funding do you already have in place? Where will you be looking for funding? (Local philanthropist? Charitable trusts? National Lottery funding? Other grants? Companies?)

Remember that your costs will be in two phases.

Firstly, setting up the centre. This might include building, buying, or renting a building; the cost of renovations to an existing building; the design and construction of exhibits and display materials; staff involved in the development phase.

Secondly, the cost of running the centre. You'll need to staff it, pay for utilities, maintain the exhibits (hands-on means that things break down!) and occasionally buy new ones so you've something new to show. You'll probably want to run a programme for schools so that you have people at your centre during the week – this is expensive, but kids who enjoy it are likely to pester their parents to bring them back at weekends, so it's an important marketing tool. You'll need to market the centre in other ways too, and you'll need to keep looking for sources of sponsorship. You'll definitely want a website!

Your centre is unlikely to make a huge profit, you are doing this because you think it's important rather than to make money! You'll get some income from visitors by charging them to come in. However, this is unlikely to cover all your costs, so you'll need to have extra funding to break even. Any profits will probably be used to develop the centre further.

What you should produce:

1. A written concept and business plan which you can take to potential sponsors to convince them that you deserve their money!
2. A presentation which gets your ideas across. You might want to use PowerPoint slides to reinforce what you're saying.

Resources that might help you:

Most science centres have websites. It's worth having a look at these to see the sorts of things that are out there already. You can find a list of UK centres on the British Interactive Group website: www.big.uk.com/centres

The Eden Project website is a worth a look: www.edenproject.com

Their media centre has information about its development phases and costs.

@Bristol is a major new science centre in Bristol: www.at-bristol.org.uk

They run a workshop on marketing for GNVQ students, useful if you're within travelling distance!

Contact education@at-bristol.org.uk, or see their website for more information.

Techniquest in Cardiff has material available which they've written for Leisure & Tourism students. Contact for more information (CHECKING WITH THEM whether it's suitable for 'distant learning'!)

If you want to go further:

Run some focus groups to see what people make of your ideas. Would they work?

Assume that your science centre is going ahead. Come up with a marketing strategy!

Pick a local building or site and design your centre.