

Marketing News

The art of the Craft: Massachusetts museum rebrands, ups visitors, revenue, reputation

By Deborah L. Vence

Three years ago, growing competition from other art museums in New England was costing the Fuller Museum of Art in Brockton, MA, the attendance and donor support it needed to compete in a crowded marketplace of art lovers. Exhibit openings at Fuller were drawing an average of only about 50 people per show.

Such low numbers prompted Fuller Museum officials to make a bold move: to change its focus and brand identity from general art to contemporary craft, and its name to Fuller Craft Museum, which became official in mid-April 2004.

“As we started looking at (other) museums in New England, the lightbulb went on to find a (particular) niche,” says Gretchen Keyworth, the

museum’s director. “A focus group (within Fuller) came together to figure out how we would do this. We made a number of presentations (in 2003) to the board on how we were filling a need by creating a craft museum.

“New England is a vital area for craft, and every time there was a craft show (at area museums), attendance would spike,” she says.



Tightly branded direct mail pieces and catalogues helped spread the word about the museum’s new focus. Inside the museum, brand-building brochures and posters greet visitors.



fullerCRAFT museum™

Let the art touch you

Without much coaxing, the board between September and November 2003 approved the bulk of Keyworth's plan. To help execute, Keyworth hired Sametz Blackstone Associates, a Boston-based strategic communications consulting firm that specializes in branding, design, marketing—and fundraising. Sametz Blackstone's clients include Boston Symphony Orchestra, Harvard University, Harvard Museum of Natural History, and Massachusetts Audubon Society.

"I was committed to having Sametz Blackstone help make the change—everything from design issues to thinking more seriously about the mission of the museum, to strategy, to marketing, to philosophy," Keyworth says.

With Sametz Blackstone onboard, the museum would go on to experience a transformation from an ordinary gallery to one quickly earning national and international status in contemporary craft. The shift essentially has positioned the museum—housed in a 20,000-square-foot, contemporary building, circa 1968—as the only one focusing on contemporary craft in New England and one of only six craft museums in the country.

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"We found there were many artists working in traditional craft media—fiber, ceramics and glass—who were not getting exposure or well-attended exhibitions by the institutional landscape here. Craft is a discipline that is tactile and familiar and accessible. It's rooted in materials and objects that are functional," Maydoney adds.

Making over the museum started off with a new tagline: "Let the art touch you."

Through research, "We discovered that Brockton has a history of people working with their hands... a long history that was passed on from an industrial age of shoe manufacturing. This was important context for what was going to be a craft museum in the middle of this community," explains Andrew Maydoney, vice president of research and strategy at Sametz Blackstone.

The consulting firm learned there was an unmet need around contemporary craft.

Keeping in mind the concept of people "working with their hands," a new logo design also was born, a white fingerprint pattern imprinted on a light-green background. Green was chosen to emphasize the natural surroundings of the museum (which includes an open courtyard with a lagoon and fountain), while the fingerprint design demonstrates the idea of people touching the art.

Along those lines, Fuller Craft launched what it calls the "touch" program in June 2004: selected objects in each exhibition are available for people to touch as long as they use the signature white gloves provided by the museum.

The April grand opening, featuring *The Perfect Collection* exhibit of 300 objects from collectors in New England, was promoted through press releases sent to newspapers nationally. In addition, word-of-mouth and a direct mail campaign played significant roles. Monthly direct mail brochures were sent out promoting the museum and its new focus to people residing in the New England area. People who received the mailings were on lists Fuller Craft had and those obtained from The Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston.



***The Perfect Collection* introduced the world to the new Fuller Craft Museum. Because important local collectors leant their art to the exhibition, they also "leant" their prestige and friends. The exhibition drew large attendance—and bolstered new fundraising efforts.**

Collectors clamored to donate their crafts to *The Perfect Collection*, which, because there were so many loans, prompted Fuller Craft to plan for a second exhibit to accommodate the high level of interest.

“It was fantastic. People had these collections that were over the top. There was a good base of constituents. These people were going to be our foundation... people who go to galleries, move across craft circles,” Maydoney explains, noting that some 400 people attended the grand opening.

“The idea for *The Perfect Collection* was that we would take a couple of pieces from our museum collection, but the majority was going to be a collection of contemporary pieces selected from private collections across New England. The idea being fully that when Fuller Craft was realized as a craft museum, its most ‘perfect’ collection would look like the one we had assembled,” he adds.

With its new focus and brand, Fuller Craft has managed to lure 20 times more attendees to its exhibit openings, for an average of 1,000 people per show. Membership has exceeded expectations as well, with more than 1,000 new members.

That was the message Fuller Craft wanted to convey to the public, though the inside strategy was to get the most serious collectors into the building—and start to build a base for fundraising.

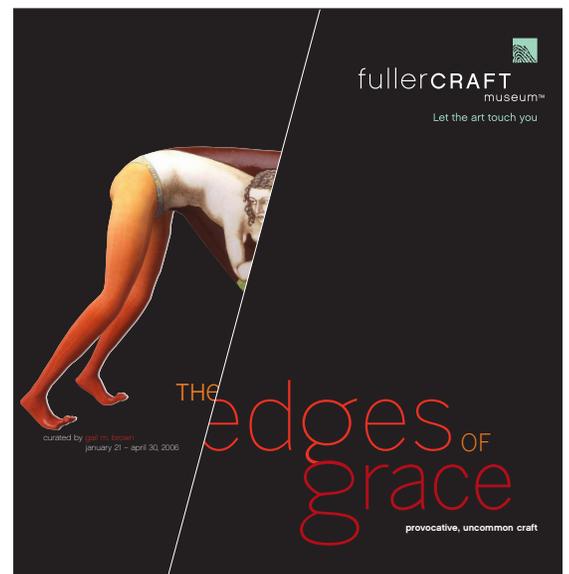
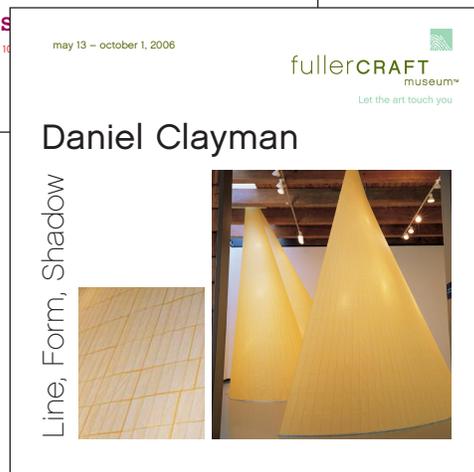
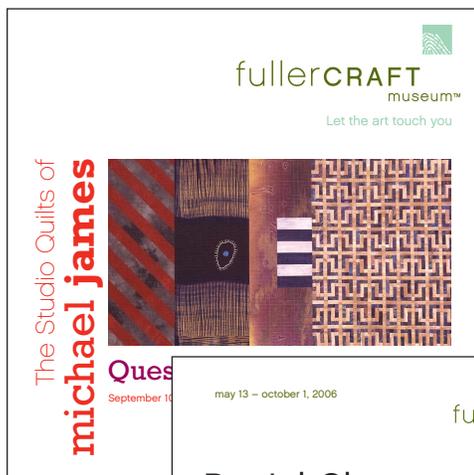
“People have come from Chicago, New York... even collectors from California (to Fuller Craft),” Keyworth notes.

And the results prove it.

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per show. Membership has exceeded expectations as well, with more than 1,000 new members, about a 40% increase over levels before the change in direction. Individual memberships are \$40 and \$60 for a family.

The museum’s changes have also boosted admissions. Museum admissions (\$8 adults, \$5 for seniors and students, free for members and children under age 12) increased by 73%, to a total of 7,065 people for fiscal year 2005 (ended June 30) compared with fiscal year 2003.



Fuller Craft Museum catalogues “live” the organization’s new brand and focus and strongly position the museum as dynamic and “worth a detour.”

Meanwhile, Fuller Craft has been receiving generous donations. In the past, cash and in-kind contributions reached \$18,000 for some events. But the most recent event this summer brought in \$100,000 in cash and in-kind contributions (donations of art-

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work, along with ticket, auction and underwriting receipts). Museum tours, held every Saturday, also experienced a jump in attendees. To compare, in fiscal year 2005 the museum attracted a total of 3,800 people for tours compared with 2,300 in fiscal year 2004.



“In the four years since we debuted our new focus and brand, we’ve continued, with Sametz Blackstone’s help, to build recognition, meaning, and relationships through strongly branded communications.”

—Gretchen Keyworth, Director, Fuller Craft Museum

About Sametz Blackstone Associates

Sametz Blackstone Associates, founded in 1979, is a Boston-based, brand-focused strategic communications practice that helps leading academic, cultural, corporate, professional service, and government organizations to better navigate change.

The firm has years of experience helping both start-ups and centenarians to articulate their vision and value, and to build and nurture relationships with groups critical to an organization’s success. Through strategic consulting and message development; the creation and production of integrated print, digital, environmental, communications; supporting and improving internal and interpersonal communications; and by transferring knowledge and tools to clients so that they can fully own their communications systems and engage their organizations, Sametz Blackstone helps clients to realize both their strategic and tactical goals. The firm collaborates to help organizations build or re-energize brands, promote products and services, recruit and retain the best and the brightest, raise philanthropic dollars, build membership and participation, strengthen their competitive position—and add value to the enterprise over the short and long term.

Located in Boston’s historic South End in a 150-year-old brownstone, Sametz Blackstone works with clients around the corner and around the world.

Sametz Blackstone Associates

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