

Measuring the immeasurable: capturing intangible values

Dr. Carol Scott

Keynote: Marketing and Public Relations International Committee of ICOM

19th September 2011, Brno, Czech Republic

Abstract

When we refer to 'intangible' experiences, we are describing encounters, events or occurrences which do not have a physical presence, which cannot be perceived by the senses.

Intangible experiences encompass some of the most important dimensions of life- love and longing, inspiration and joy, excitement and pleasure. Their presence is acknowledged by each of us in our everyday lives and is part of our essential humanity. But the incorporeal nature of intangible experiences presents special challenges, especially when it comes to measuring them.

Introduction

Capturing and measuring intangibles is a subject of considerable discussion across a diverse range of sectors including community development, business, government and museums. This quote, from an occasional series published by the Canadian International Development Agency, is revealing. It discusses the role of intangibles as integral to realising 'community capacity' arguing that society's capacity to meet the needs of its members is dependent upon both the resources available to it and on how well those resources are utilized. The capacity to use tangible resources is dependent on intangible capabilities.

Then come a wide range of less tangible, but no less important, dimensions of capacity having to do with skills, experience and creativity; social cohesion and social capital; values and motivations; habits and traditions; institutional culture, etc. These intangible dimensions of capacity, often referred to as "capabilities," are crucial because they determine how well society uses the other resources at its disposal...Core capabilities (intangibles) refer to the creativity, resourcefulness and capacity to learn and adapt of individuals and social entities. They are what allows them to realize their human and social potential to the highest possible level (Lavergne and Saxby 2001, 2-3).

Intangibles are important because they *enable* us to do so much else. Intangible capabilities allow us to realise our human and social potential to the highest possible level.

In the business sector, intangible assets are now recognised as drivers of economic value creation. They are variously associated with the leadership, human and intellectual capital, workplace culture, innovation, adaptability, brand equity, reputation and the quality of alliances and networks that make an organisation or business successful or otherwise (Youngman 2003; Carayannis 2004; Jarboe 2007).

Governments have also recognised the role of intangibles in the health of individuals and communities. National indicator projects focusing on individual and community *well-being* emerged in the 1990's in response to a global reaction against quality of life being measured solely by economic growth, fiscal wealth and GDP.

The role of cultural vitality in sustaining communities and the recognition that culture is relevant to building social capital and social cohesion has supported the inclusion of cultural indicators within wider social indicators frameworks. Policy development increasingly focuses on the intersection of cultural participation and other social areas including community building and individual well-being (Jensen 2002; AEGIS 2004). Central to these policies is belief that public engagement through civic spaces such as museums is fundamental to building trust and consolidating the norms of reciprocity that underlie social cohesion.

Regular involvement in these [cultural] activities can produce social solidarity and social cohesion through the creation of community symbols and community identity (McCarthy et al 2004, 29).

Intangibles, we find, are emerging as central ingredients in business success, sustainable community development and social policies concerned with the well-being of communities and their citizens. Where do museums fit into this picture?

Museums and intangible value

Museums are public spaces and permanent institutions in the service of society. People visit them as individuals and in family groups. Local communities benefit from their presence.

In attempting to identify the intangible impact of museum experiences on individuals, commentators have described states of '*absorption*', '*focused attention*' and '*captivation*', (McCarthy et al 2004, 45). '*Deep satisfaction*' can occur through the '*pleasure*' of seeing an art work or having a cultural experience that is moving and meaningful (McCarthy et al 2004, 46). Silverman (1993, 1995) describes museums as spaces where people can explore '*personal meaning*'. Others are confronted by '*universal truths*' (DCMS 2005, 6) or find a '*new perspective on the world*' (McCarthy et al 2004, 48). Uplifting spiritual experiences can occur that enable us to experience '*the religious, the numinous and the sublime*' (Holden 2004, 34) and which result in enhanced states of well-being.

These experiences have an impact on the individuals who experiences them, but museums also create intangible outcomes that are experienced collectively. Holden (2004, 34) suggests that symbolic value is generated through a culture's '*expression of communal meanings*'. Moreover, it is McCarthy et al's (2004) contention that the aggregation of individual experiences can accrue to the public realm, connecting people '*more deeply to the world*', extending their '*capacity for empathy*' through drawing them into the

experiences of people and cultures ‘*vastly different from their own*’ (McCarthy et al 2004, 47) and reinforcing ‘*social bonds*’ (McCarthy et al, 2004, 50). Museums make connections between people, ‘*reinforce a sense of unity and identity*’ (Holden 2004, 34) and provide ‘*a way for us all to see our place in the world*’ (DCMS 2005, 3).

Measuring intangibles: the challenges

It can be argued that any institution which creates experiences that result in such a positive array of outcomes (well-being, empathy, joy, belonging, identity, pride) can claim a measure of success. The success of museums is measured, however, not only by the institutions themselves but also by governments and by the public. To return to a point made at the beginning of this paper, intangibles are the capabilities that *enable* people to realise other capacities and it is this ‘enabling’ element, the contribution that intangibles make to socially desired outcomes enshrined in public policy which particularly interests public governments.

This creates something of a contradiction with regard to measurement. Although intangibles are increasingly recognised and admitted within government assessments of investment in public culture, they are measured through proxy indicators that have a tangible presence against which a numerical value can be attributed. This is the system increasingly used by governments seeking evidence to justify investment in arts and cultural heritage within a market-based view of economics.

An example is found in the New Zealand Ministry for Cultural Heritage’s *Cultural Indicators for New Zealand* project. The stated aim of the project is to ‘monitor trends in the contribution of cultural heritage to New Zealand society and economy’ (MCH 2010, 1). 24 indicators are organised around 5 themes of *engagement, cultural identity, diversity, social cohesion and economic development*.

Neither social cohesion nor cultural identity can be seen or touched- they are intangible states. Within the *Cultural Indicators for New Zealand* project, social cohesion is measured by evidence of social interaction between groups. The measurement of social cohesion uses indicators which have a tangible presence and against which a numerical value can be placed: (a) the percentage of non-Māori attendance at Māori cultural events; and (b) other ethnicities attendance at their own and other groups’ events. Similarly, measurement of cultural identity occurs through other tangible proxies to which one can attribute a numerical value:

- number of speakers of te reo Māori;
- percentage of local New Zealand content on television;
- ratings of Māori television programmes;
- the percentage of the population which rates culture as important to national identity; and
- the number and percentage of New Zealand cultural events with a specific New Zealand theme or content.

A different example comes from the UK's *Taking Part* survey (DCMS, 2010). This is a yearly nationwide survey of both adults and children which has been conducted since 2005. It is managed by the national government's Department of Culture, Media and Sport and was developed with the former Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), Arts Council England (ACE), English Heritage and Sport England.

The survey seeks evidence of the impact of participation in arts, sport and cultural heritage on individual and community well-being. Its use of economic valuation methods is seemingly incompatible with capturing the qualitative data resulting from intangible outcomes. But, *Taking Part* has adopted *selective preference techniques* which enable qualitative information to be admitted and recognised for the important role it plays in enabling other desired outcomes.

Using numeric or qualitative rating scales, respondents can rate their wellbeing as the result of a museum (or other cultural) experience. The results provide policy makers with a picture of the value of engagement, with specific reference to the improvement in subjective well-being generated by participation in cultural activities (DCMS 2010, 33). Subjective well-being is then correlated with the answers to questions related to the development of social capital in communities, specifically through the creation of trust and reciprocity offered by the opportunities for socialisation that result from participation in cultural activities. Selective preference techniques may signal a way towards resolving the key issue of recognising intangibles in measuring the value of museums and other cultural experiences that has been a source of conflict between government and cultural heritage sector (Bakhshi et al 2009).

There is nothing new about rating scales. What is important is the use of intangible outcomes based on individual experience, including those experiences resulting from engagement with museums, captured in national survey that is being used to assess investment in cultural heritage and determine future public policy. This links the value that the public places on the museum experience with the Public Value that public authorities seek to create through investment and policy. And arts and cultural heritage are the conduits for that value creation.

Conclusion

Why is measuring intangibles important? Certainly, we can see from the examples that the public attributes feelings of individual well-being to museum experiences. At a community level, museums are associated with identity, sense of place, meaning and belonging- key dimensions related to social capital.

If museums are generating these important intangibles, then we are fostering the very capabilities that can enable the development of learning, creativity, well-being and social cohesion. With this knowledge, our narrative about the value of museums to individuals, the economy and community health is strengthened.

Governments, with their market- focused view of economics, need evidence of value in this form so that they can make comparisons between many worthy competitors for the public purse. In our accountability to governments, we may have to accept their economic valuation models for the foreseeable future and use them to create our own, powerful, narrative. Finding ways to capture the intangible value that individuals and communities experience as the result of the museum experience and using it in our programmes, marketing, branding, advocacy and accountability enables the voice of the public to be heard.