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Visitor Accounts of the Museum of London Docklands

Museums are one of the most traditional platforms for representing history and historical artefacts. Due to increased competitiveness, some museums are seen as experiencing major challenges. These challenges can be widened in diverse visitor issues requiring effective strategy formulation and application to address them positively. The Museum of London Docklands is taken as an appropriate case in this regard. This paper aims to outline visitor related issues followed by suggestions to overcome them generated from conceptual underpinnings and empirical assertions.

The Museum of London Docklands is a part of the Museum of London. It is situated at Canary Wharf and the only grade one listed venue in the area. The Museum of London Docklands represents the glorified history of the river's, people and ports of London. Visitors will explore the historic backgrounds of the London Docklands port that transformed the River Thames as a global gateway to London. Visitors will also learn about the Roman settlers as well as the immigrants, merchants, slaves and invaders those were in London.

The Museum of London Docklands is situated in an area of easy access. The West India Quay is just two minutes walk. The museum has car parking facilities and has easy access via riverboat from the Bank Side, Canary Wharf Pier or Maritime Greenwich Pier. The area is suitable for cycling and the museum itself encourages eco-friendly transportation. The museum building has five floors including the basement. The basement floor consists of four class rooms, the cafe, bar, lounge and dinning with space for special exhibitions and the Mudlarks children's interactive gallery are on the ground floor. The first floor consists of

exhibition space, the Thames gallery and the Sainsbury' study centre. The second floor has the First Port of Empire, the Warehouse of the World, the Sailor Town, the Docklands at War, the City and River, the New Port and New City exhibition room. The third floor comprises of the Quay Side room, the Wilberto Rice Theatre, the London Sugar and Slavery, the Legal Quay, the Thames Highway and the Trade Expansion.

Data on visitors shows that in 2009-2010, 95,429 visits had been made to the Museum of London Docklands and 66% of visitors have made their first ever visit. Out of the visitors, 51% live in London and 39% were children. Further, 19,824 visits have been made by children in booked school and youth groups and 13% of UK visitors were from minority ethnic backgrounds. To analyse the purpose of visit, 67% have come on a general visit and 28% for a specific exhibition or gallery visit. Following duration of stay, 41% have stayed over two hours. Finally, 91% of the visitors have said that they are quite or very likely to return (The Museum of London Docklands, 2015). The Museum of London Docklands attracts visitors between five to sixty years of age, due to the wider availability of programs. The museum encourages students and school visit, family and group visit, tourists and individuals. The Museum holds free family events on every Saturday and school holiday. The museum has modern interpretation facilities; including helpdesk and reception, printed brochures and leaflets, signposts and information boards. For the disabled the museum has induction loops, large print brochures and a floor plan.

The Greater London Assembly (GLA) and the City of London are jointly funding the Museum of London Docklands. The Department of Culture, Media and Sports transferred the responsibility to the GLA. Cultural strategies, related targets and priorities of both its funding partners are directly contributed by the Museum. The operational management units work within a set framework. The museum has a dedicated Visitor Management Department that is responsible for the visitor related issues. Entry to the Museum is free of charge all

year round so visitors can come back as many times as they like, leaving time to enjoy a relaxed, stress-free day out.

The Museum of London overall has a specific mission is ‘...to inspire a passion for London and a passion for learning. We do this through increasing public awareness, appreciation and understanding of London’s cultural heritage, its people and its stories’ (The Museum of London, 2015).

The Museum of London Docklands faces some significant challenges: first, as stated by the museum officials that the museum is not allowed to use direction signposts outside the museum or even leaflet distribution due to legal issues and thus this is quite difficult to trace out the location. Second, the museum is situated mainly in a regenerated office area. The area is visited by business or service oriented peoples who have less disposable time and busy work schedules. Third, comparatively less diversified number of visitors than other museums and galleries in London. Data shows that only in 2009-2010, 13% visitors’ belonged to ethnic minorities, although the surrounding areas have a historical background of different ethnical peoples like: the Jews, the French, the Caribbean and the Bangladeshis (The Museum of London Docklands, 2015). Fourth, nearness to the Greenwich World Heritage Site that poses significant threat and market competition to the museum. From diverse perspectives of branding, marketing and promotion; as well as in many cases, evidently the UNESCO World Heritage Site status can add importance in a place of touristic importance (Hassan & Rahman, 2015a; Hassan & Rahman, 2015b; Hassan & Iankova, 2012). The very basic reason roots in the Greenwich World Heritage Site’s relatively wider coverage in both online and offline media that may possibly have weakened publicity stands or the public image of the London Docklands Museum. Fifth, the museum has display items that are touchable and hence prone for tear and wear. This is a challenge in a way that the child visitors can destroy the items, unintentionally. Sixth, the museum appears to lag behind in

terms of arranging diversified programmes compared to other museums in London. Innovative technology applications such as Augmented Reality (AR) can have special importance in this regard (Azim & Hassan, 2013; Dadwal & Hassan, 2015; Hassan, in press). Research shows that innovative technology such as AR can have excellent acceptance in museums and similar areas (Hassan & Ramkissoon, in press; Hassan & Jung, in press; Hassan & Rahimi, in press). This is evident from the data that represents that 34 % visitors in 2009-2010 were repeat visitors (The Museum of London Docklands, 2015). Seventh, relatively lower budget for training, Marketing and improving visitor facilities whereas, most other museums in London have a significant budget for training activities. Eighth, different television channels like the Discovery Channels, the National Geographic Channels have specialised feature programmes and documentaries that allow the visitors to enjoy museum experiences while staying at home. Ninth, the museum should pay attention to safety and security issues in a professional manner rather than depending on volunteers. Tenth, as per comments of the responsible museum official the museum is generating less revenue from internal sources in comparison with other museums in London.

The Museum of London Docklands is facing some major challenges. However, there are some ways to overcome these challenges. *First*, the museum at its present location should fight to get the legal right for installing direction signboards. This is a very important issue for sustainability and even for existence of the museum. *Second*, the Museum of London Docklands should be relocated in a non-commercial area with easy access by all means of transportation. The place can be preferably near to any popular area having touristic importance (Hassan et al., 2012). *Third*, since the remote past the London Docklands area has been populated by diversified ethnic groups. The museum should emphasize branding that will help to attract diversified visitors. Branding is an essential factor for any visitor attraction's popularity and marketing. Understanding visitor demand is

another essential factor. *Fourth*, nearness to the Greenwich World Heritage Site and the National Maritime Museum that pose threats and market competitions to the museum should be turned into a potential source of visitors. The museum should have collaboration with these sites to share experiences and this will help to avoid the potential market threats and competition in a great way. *Fifth*, display items that are touchable and prone to ‘Tear and Wear’ should attract more concern regarding safety issues. This should involve more security officers who will work as guides at the same time. *Sixth*, the Museum of London Docklands should offer discounted rates for special events and adopt programmes to attract visitors through applying innovative technologies such as AR. According to the museum official’s statement, this can possibly reduce negative impacts of the off peak seasonality. The museum has some very popular areas like the Mudlock, Sugar and Slavery, London under Siege, which are always visited by the visitors. Initiatives like employing more attendants to narrate related stories or diverse displaying programmes can be adopted to make all areas of the museum popular. *Seventh*, the museum should allocate increased budget to staff training, motivation and marketing. Marketing is a key component for any organization (Hassan, 2012a; Hassan, 2012b; Lumsdon, 1997). *Eighth*, to avoid potential threats from home entertainment systems is much harder than any other policy suggestion. However, the museum can upload videos, podcasts and can show documentaries on different electronic channels. For example, the Design Museum of London uses podcasts on the website that are helpful for the tentative visitors to get ideas about the museum (The Design Museum, 2015). *Ninth*, safety and security issues are of great importance in museums and galleries. The Museum of London Docklands needs to adopt security measures in a professional way. There should be clearly mentioning of machineries, fire exits, dangerous equipments, ensuring non-slippery floors and stairs. *Tenth*, for generating income sources, the museum should rent the existing facilities like the conferencing and dining of the 1802 restaurant.

Visitor attractions and services are interrelated (Hassan, 2013; Swarbrooke, 2002). Most museum and galleries in London are adopting this strategy for internal revenue generation. The National Maritime Museum Funding Agreement 2008-2011 shows the clear direction to generate internal income through admissions, trading and fundraising (The National Maritime Museum, 2015). The British Museum is going to build the World Conservation and Exhibitions Centre on over 1,000 square metres to increase the museum's existing capacity (The British Museum, 2015). This new facility for commercial use and rent is expected to raise the volume of service value addition and earnings in a huge way. The Museum of London Docklands is expected to face wider competition in the coming days. Thus, the museum requires benchmarking to remain competitive and to stabilize the position with partly similar museums as the Sherlock Holmes Museum, the London Transport Museum, the Imperial War Museum and many more. Benchmarking *'encourages managers and their staff to think in terms of performance measures and practices to increase profitability'* (Wöber, 2002: 2).

This study identifies issues related to visitor management in a popular destination having the Museum of London Docklands as the case. In this technology penetrated age, visitors can experience a destination virtually without even moving physically. Thus along with many other factors as signage, promotion or marketing, this study asserts on getting equipped with the latest technologies in a museum to both attract and retain interests of the sightseers. Visitor issues can be diverse that literally can become very difficult to deal with in many cases. This study defines some key issues that the case museum is facing followed by suggested ways to ensure remedies. Still, the Museum of London Docklands has been thriving as a promising destination with its uniqueness and resources.

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