

Miami Herald

Modern Marketing Key to Tut's Visit

December 2005

James H. Burnett III

As the King Tut exhibit comes closer to opening in Fort Lauderdale, museum officials are ramping up their marketing campaign with ideas for modern times.

When Egypt's famous boy king arrives in South Florida on Dec. 15, he will be bearing candy, and it will be on sale at your friendly local shopping mall.

The one-pound boxes of chocolate bearing a gold-colored image of King Tut are the product of a promotions partnership with California-based See's Candies. The chocolates represent just one of dozens of corporate teams that Fort Lauderdale's Museum of Art has formed to spread the word about the four-month South Florida stay of "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs."

See's has opened an additional kiosk for the sale and promotion of the Tut chocolates in Fort Lauderdale's Galleria Mall, where the museum's resident gift shop is already all Tut all the time. Papa John's Pizza, Publix supermarkets, McDonald's and even Holland America Cruise Lines are also aboard the Tut train.

Ninety South Florida Starbucks shops are carrying King Tut exhibit posters. Sixty thousand Starbucks e-mail subscribers have been receiving "e-blasts" as the Tut exhibit's arrival draws near.

And in New York City, where precious metals are sported like Scout merit badges, a huge billboard in Times Square mentions the Fort Lauderdale Tut exhibit and features an image of King Tut's face and torso on his solid gold tomb, above the words "The Original King of Bling."

Short Attention

Call them odd couplings, but as information becomes more easily and cheaply accessible through the Internet and related technology, museums and other cultural and historical organizations are having to use ultra-modern strategies to overcome short attention spans for old products.

"This is a first for us," Lynn Mandeville, director of community affairs at the museum, said about the marketing blitz. "The Vatican exhibition [in 2003] was our first experience with this type of marketing approach. And that went over very well. We experienced similar results with [the] Diana [exhibit in 2004]. But this is on another level."

Several decades ago, museums regularly operated in the red and banked on the pure historical and cultural value of an exhibit to draw the crowds, Mandeville said.

Today?

"Most museums just would not be able to bring exhibitions of this magnitude in without this type of support," she said. "Take this exhibit. Arts and Exhibitions International, AEG and National Geograph

ic, on the cultural side of this, had to guarantee millions of dollars to the Egyptian government to cover everything from the transport of the exhibition to insurance and security. Museums are constantly in need of new funding in order to keep up.”

Specialized marketing partnerships can be lucrative for museums.

According to Richard Van Doren, See’s vice president for marketing, while the King Tut exhibit was at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art recently, they “sold a hell of a lot” of the \$16.60 truffle boxes, and the Fort Lauderdale museum stands to take 70 percent of the profits from the candy sales.

Chicago’s Field Museum and the Philadelphia Art Museum have also signed on with See’s for promotional partnerships.

“For the museums, I think our putting this image on a box of candy that will be seen by lots of people in public areas helps raise the notoriety of the exhibit,” Van Doren said.

And notoriety, Van Doren said, is just what older cultural institutions like museums need if they are going to compete with modern entertainment outlets.

Ken Carbone, founding partner of the Carbone Smolan Agency and a recognized museum marketing expert, agreed that museums and corporate America can make profitable partners, but that profit is not always good for the art.

Carbone said he has seen a number of museums make money from selling such things as scarves featuring the image of a work on display, or pasta noodles crafted in the shape of ballerinas to promote an Edgar Degas exhibit.

And he doesn’t like it.

“You’ll go through this incredible inspiring exhibit on a certain artist in an almost church-like environment,” Carbone said. “And then as you leave, you walk into the boutique. . . . When you’re at the height of your feeling about a particular experience, that’s when the commercial stuff hits you. You see a scarf . . . and you know it couldn’t be further from the vision the artist wanted to impart.”

Still, if it’s any testament to the power of such marketing, Carbone said that in spite of his misgivings, even he is not immune to purchasing the occasional art-related trifle, like a postcard, from a museum gift shop.

Finding A Balance

While some museum fundraisers might want him to “lighten up and get a life,” Carbone insisted that he understands their struggle to balance the cultural value of art with the need for money to show it properly.

“The commercialization of it has to be handled very carefully,” he said. “If it becomes the model, are museums going to start to shape exhibits along the lines of ‘Is this going to be a blockbuster or draw in the crowds?’ “

Peter Koeppel, whose Koeppel Direct has helped old-school corporations and nonprofits step up their technological games, believes that museums can maintain dignity while taking advantage of new-school tools.

Koeppel, who lauded the Fort Lauderdale museum’s partnership with See’s Candies as innovative, said cultural organizations might consider using TV infomercials, e-mail and Internet blogs as promotional tools, as well.

“There’s going to be advertisements on cellphones soon,” Koepfel said. “So it’s kind of a daunting task right now for organizations that in the past have relied on the product to sell itself.”

And blogs, Koepfel said, are not the domain of just angst-ridden teenagers - or they shouldn’t be.

“Smart organizations now have experts discuss products - or in this case exhibits - in blogs, where people can read and interact with the writer, and it encourages curiosity