Two years after emerging from bankruptcy, Please Touch Museum switches up branding

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The Please Touch Museum is leaving its financial troubles behind along with its old, dated logo, introducing a revamped brand identity on Friday along with details on future exhibits.

The children’s museum first filed for bankruptcy protection in September 2015 to settle $60 million in debt owed to bondholders, and the institution emerged just six months later, officially on March 31, 2016.

Much has changed in the two years since, including a new strategic plan introduced in 2017. Officials on Friday unveiled Please Touch Museum’s new visual identity – a part of the company’s reassessment and future.

The new logo replaces the dated font and purple figure – visual assets left unchanged for decades. The new logo is a “friendly monster, with a big brain and a bigger heart,” according to the institution’s brand story.

“The new brand is articulating in a real visual way how Please Touch Museum is positioned as a leading 21st century children’s museum,” President and CEO Patricia Wellenbach said in an interview with the Philadelphia Business Journal ahead of the Friday unveiling.

It’s become “a leader not solely as an arts and cultural institution, but as a partner to assuring the highest quality of early childhood learning experience for children and families,” she said.

The institution has a new tagline, too:

For fun. For learning. For all.

It was a competitive process that began two years ago; Philadelphia agency Tierney was chosen from a pool of eight firms from New York and Philadelphia.

“We needed to take the time to really solidify the business model, to restructure all the departments around the strategy, and bring in the teams that will drive aspirational goals that we have and engage a board that embraced those goals,” she said.

“In a way, it’s our moment to say, ‘Hello, World, here we are,” Wellenbach said.

The new visual assets follows last year’s introduction of a new mission and promise, which Wellenbach referenced:

The new mission: Change a child’s life as they discover the power of learning through play
The promise: To be a leader in 21st century children’s museums as a key resource of learning through play, and expand our reach and impact in the Philadelphia region and beyond.

The new strategic plan, “Please Touch Museum 2020: Reimagining Play to Empower 21st Century Learners,” was built around the mission and promise.

Cultural institutions revamp their brands for reasons that include replacing dated visuals and...
brand stories to speak more to current issues, according to Maud Lyon, president and CEO of the Greater Philadelphia Cultural Alliance.

“In the case of Please Touch, with what they’ve been through, it’s also framing the story around success,” Lyon said. “It takes a while to change perception; a branding campaign can be one tool you use to position your organization and get attention in a different way.”

Brand is about reputation now; it’s “shorthand for how people think of you, whether institution or person,” Lyon said.

In less than five years, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Mural Arts Philadelphia – stalwarts in the region’s arts and cultural industry – also adopted new visuals.

The Art Museum in 2014 introduced a new identity that ditched its previous all-capital letters and griffin mascot; and Mural Arts Philadelphia in 2016 changed its name and adopted new visual assets.

PLEASE TOUCH MUSEUM’S PERFORMANCE

The institution recently closed the second quarter of fiscal 2018, “meeting every revenue and target we set for ourselves,” said Wellenbach, who said revenue is up 5 percent over the same time frame last year.

“We are running the business on 88 percent earned revenue,” she said. “We are growing in all of our areas,” including memberships and daily visitors.

Please Touch in fiscal 2017 had revenue of over $7.7 million, exceeding its goal by nearly 5 percent, according to information provided to the Business Journal by the institution. Attendance was over 490,000, exceeding the goal by nearly 1 percent.

And, last year, about 18.5 percent of visitors came to the museum free of charge or for only $2, as part of the Art-Reach Access program, Wellenbach said, representing an operating loss of unrealized revenue of $1.6 million.

That means the museum’s revenue would be nearly $2 million more if those attendees paid. But there are no plans to back away from that commitment, Wellenbach said.

Revenue in fiscal 2016 was $15.3 million, 15 percent over its goal, and attendance was over 480,000, about 1.5 percent over budget.

The significant decrease in revenue from fiscal years 2016 and 2017 was related to the Chapter 11 filing.

A brand identity, mission and promise, which includes further articulating children’s museums’ role in childhood education, could be an effective tool to gain more support – an ongoing challenge for cultural institutions.

There are a donors in Philadelphia, but there is a misconception among them, who are largely unaware of the intersection between the arts and causes they care about, or that they lack social impact.

Education was a top priority for art donors, according to the Cultural Alliance.

Please Touch’s new approach emphasizes interconnectivity between education and cultural institutions.

“When people think of education, they’re thinking of education in the format of schools,” Lyon said. “Education is broader than that; it’s hands-on learning that Please Touch does. Also, they’re about life-experience learning. ... What museums do is broaden education beyond the academic, make the bridge to the practical and connect those dots.”

Simply rebranding is not enough; branding must be “backed up by the reality of the programming you do and the experiences you offer,” Lyon said.

MORE EXPERIENCES

There are plans to add more educational experiences for children and families at Please Touch Museum: the Creative Arts Studio and Cents + Sensibility.

The Creative Arts Studio will be an “immersive, art-making experience” in a heavily trafficked area of Please Touch.

Cents + Sensibility, part of Please Touch’s larger “Healthy me, Healthy Family, Healthy Community” exhibit gallery renovation – a six-figure investment from Bimbo Bakeries USA.

The space will focus on good food choices; having, saving, valuing and donating money; environmental sustainability and being “good stewards to the family,” Wellenbach said.

The exhibit will open in January 2019.