

Working Ethically: Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical Dilemma

A military museum contacts the Museums Association in relation to a request made from a gaming company.

The gaming company has requested the use of an iconic image from their commercial image bank to advertise a new war game.

They want to explore how this could be affected by the Code of Ethics before making this decision.

They approach the Ethics Committee for advice.

Response

Museums are increasingly expected to generate their own income. There are many ways of doing this in relation to the collections the museum holds, the expertise within the museum, corporate hire, sponsorship and many more.

Within these commercial imperatives ethical thinking also has its place, so while in relation to this dilemma Principle 2 – Stewardship of Collections may be your first focus – for example, in relation to any stipulations in a donation agreement, Principle 3 – Individual and Institutional Integrity has greater resonance.

The specific point under this principle is 3.6 where museums and governing bodies are asked to:

Carefully consider offers of financial support from commercial organisations and other sources in the UK and internationally and seek support from organisations whose ethical values are consistent with those of the museum. Exercise due diligence in understanding the ethical standards of commercial partners with a view to maintaining public trust and integrity in all museum activities.

Whilst this case isn't about support or sponsorship there is a commercial component and a partnership. A relationship, that by its nature will be highly visible and identifiable.

Any museum decision should be informed by the Code of Ethics; however, it is important to remember that every decision is made in relation to the specific detail and context of the case and the associated consequences. An inclusive discussion from diverse viewpoints can help, in this case the following areas could be explored:

- Existing policy or precedents within the museum that would influence thinking.
- Current issues or recent events in the news or society.
- The reputation, values and track record of the gaming organisation.

There is often no right or wrong answer, each organisation should be able to explain within the context of their business and the Code of Ethics why and how they made the decision they made, and be, where the decision is high profile, ready to defend it under public and professional scrutiny.