ESARBICA JOURNAL

TOWARDS A UNIFORM STRATEGY FOR TAKING ARCHIVES TO THE PEOPLE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Archival institutions in South Africa are faced with a number of challenges, including preservation, meeting standards, giving access to their holdings and reaching diverse users. The fact that archives are managed in order to be used has created a greater interest in public programming. Archival legislation in South Africa makes provision for the national and provincial repositories to take archives to the people. This qualitative participatory action research study reports on the development of a uniform strategy that can be customised by national and provincial archives repositories in order to take archives to the people. The strategy was developed during a three-day workshop with the involvement of 14 archivists from the national and provincial archives responsible for public programming. The presentation and activities during the workshop stimulated discussions in relation to the development of the strategy. It became clear from the workshop that national and provincial archives were unable to reach out and attract people owing to an inadequate outreach strategy, the absence of a consistent message to the public, insufficient resources and limited skills among archivists. In the context of public programming for the whole national and provincial archival community, the need for a single archival language and a consistent message when making the public aware of the existence of archives was identified. As a result, a uniform strategy to be implemented over three years by national and provincial archives repositories was developed. It is hoped that as the archival community begins to convey a consistent message, they will be able to take the archives to the people, provided there is no interference from authorities outside the immediate archival sphere.

Introduction and background to the study

> *Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, 'Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly.' They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves, otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.' But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, 'If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.' Genesis 11: 1-8*

The scripture above, taken from the Old Testament of the holy Bible, underscores what can be achieved when the participants in any activity speak a common language, both literally and figuratively. The current study asks whether the same can be applied to the archival community in South Africa, to the extent that a uniform strategy in taking archives to the people can be developed and implemented by the national and provincial archival institutions. Attempts have been made in the past by a number of archives repositories in South Africa to take archives to the people through various public programming initiatives, but without success. For example, scholars such as Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011), Van der Walt (2011) and Venson, Ngoepe and Ngulube (2014) describe a situation in which public archives repositories in South Africa are struggling to reach out to potential users.

The National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act 43 of 1996 and the legislation governing the nine provincial archival institutions underscore the need for public archives repositories to reach out to the less privileged sectors of society and make known information concerning records by means such as publications, exhibitions and lending of records. Despite this mandate, it would seem that owing to a lack of resources and skills, public archives repositories in South Africa struggle to reach potential users.

This is not limited to South Africa, however, and a similar situation pertains elsewhere in the eastern and southern African region, as scholars such as Kilasi, Maseko and Abankwah (2011) point out with regard to Swaziland, Murambiwa and Ngulube (2011) with regard to Zimbabwe, Njobvu, Hamooya and Mwila (2012) with regard to Zambia and Saurombe (2016) with regard to eight countries in the East and Southern Africa Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (ESARBICA) region.

A failure to reach out to users would mean that most people may never make direct use of provincial and national archives facilities (Harris 2007; Ngulube 2009), and in consequence the archives facilities will be used by only the small percentage of the population that is aware that archives are open to the public (Harris 1993). Therefore, people who could benefit from using archival holdings do not even know that these repositories contain the type of information they seek (Pugh 1992). In South Africa, these include people who would like to consult records for the purposes of instituting land claims, researching chieftainship and seeking proof of identity. In order to fulfil their mandate and the responsibility of making archives known, archival repositories must develop and implement user-centred marketing strategies that publicise their products and services (Harris and Van der Merwe 2009).

This study reports on the development of a uniform strategy that can be customised by national and provincial archives repositories in order to take archives to the people in South Africa. The strategy was developed during a three-day workshop involving 14 archivists responsible for public programming from the national and provincial archives in South Africa. The presentation and activities during the workshop stimulated discussion relating to the development of the strategy. The workshop was part of the archival public programming project sponsored by the National Research Foundation and the University of South Africa. Archival public programming in South Africa seems to be the Achilles heel of the national and provincial archives, hence the need to adopt a unified approach in relation to public programming for the whole national and provincial archival community in South Africa in order to make the public aware of the existence of archives.

Problem statement

Archival marketing strategies have the potential to make archives known and increase their utilisation by people at all levels of society. Despite efforts by various archives repositories in South Africa to design public programmes in order to take archives to the people, it would seem that the message is not reaching the intended audience. Van der Walt (2011) posits that the South African archival community is still very far from being able to claim that it has re-imagined and re-positioned the archives. This echoes an earlier assertion by Harris (2000:27) that archives do not do enough to provide ready access to their holdings and to be responsive to their users' needs. Although the South African archives community has done much since 1996 to break down the barriers to access created by the apartheid regime and the alienation from archives of

most South Africans during the apartheid era, more still needs to be done. As Harris (2000:27) argues, archivists must become creators of users, and they need to take the archives to the people. It was in this context that this project was undertaken, with a view to developing a uniform strategy that may be customised by public archives repositories in South Africa in order to increase the utilisation of public archives by the people of South Africa.

Inadequate utilisation of the public archival material defeats the purpose of the national archives, compromises the rights of citizens, and reduces the national archives to a "graveyard of government records which lacks reputation" (Jimerson 2003:13). Therefore, the mandate of national archival institutions to take archives to the people must be fulfilled.

Research purpose and objectives

The purpose of the study reported on was to report on the development of a uniform strategy for taking archives to the people in South Africa. The specific objectives were to:

- Outline the discussion points and points of agreement regarding the public programming strategy.
- Develop a plan to improve public programming in public archives.
- Identify the critical success factors for the implementation of an archival public programming strategy.
- Identify the resources that may give public archives repositories in South Africa a sustainable competitive advantage over other institutions offering similar services.

Brief literature review

Archives are records of enduring value that play a critical role in the decision-making processes of various spheres of our society (Ngulube 2002; Venson et al. 2014). The context of this article implies that the public records kept by the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa (NARSSA) and South Africa's nine provincial archives are of importance to the citizens of South Africa. Moss (2005:115) articulates the history and purpose of public archives as follows:

> The concept of the public archive is deeply embedded in western culture dating back to classical times and gained renewed legitimacy during the French Revolution. In this context the archives enjoys an independent fiduciary function where records are

> preserved for the benefit of community, which has rights of access, and users have confidence when they consult them.

In light of the description by Moss (2005), it is apparent that NARSSA positions itself as an archival service that strives to satisfy the information needs of South African citizens and other interested parties (About the National Archives... n.d.). However, as already indicated, it would seem that only a small section of South African society benefits from the services rendered by NARSSA, and, consequently, more effort needs to go into raising awareness about this institution (Harris 2007; Ngoepe and Ngulube 2011; Sulej 2014; Van der Walt 2011). According to the literature, outreach and public programming initiatives can play a significant role in facilitating access to and encouraging greater use of the archives (Blais and Enns 1991; Craig 1991; Ericson 1991; Kamatula, Mnkeni-Saurombe and Mosweu 2013; Saurombe 2016).

The history of South Africa is reflected in the archival holdings of NARSSA. Ngoepe and Keakopa (2011) explain that the history of NARSSA's holdings dates as far back as 1652, when the Dutch East India Company set foot on the shores of South Africa. Later on, between 1806 and 1901, record keeping practices were influenced by the prevailing British rule. Subsequently, apartheid had a significant influence on the acquisition of records and who had access to them (Kamatula et al. 2013). Callinicos and Odendaal (1996:2) state that:

> The South African archives have been highly politicised revealing the historical biases of colonialism, segregation and apartheid. Apartheid in particular, grossly distorted the acquisition of records, the destruction of records and the administrative structures for the management of archives… archives were a part of the broader system which negated the experiences of Black South Africans.

Sulej (2014) reports that transformation of the South African archives started in earnest around the year 1990. The main emphasis in this process has been on institutional transformation, freedom of information, outreach programmes, projects with public participation and promotion of people's history (Sulej 2014:25). In 1996 the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act 43 of 1996 was promulgated. This Act states, among other things, that NARSSA should "promote an awareness of the archives and records management, and encourage archival and records management activities". These values are also stipulated in the International Council on Archives (ICA) Principles of Access to Archives (ICA 2012).

Although NARSSA strives to facilitate access, Harris (2007) and Sulej (2014) point out that for a number of reasons this has not been easy. These reasons include the inadequacy of NARSSA's

holdings, a lack of funds and expertise, inconsistencies in the electronic records system, a lack of leadership, the lack of understanding by politicians of the role and significance of archives, and the lack of recognition and proper protection of the records of formerly excluded communities. Ericson (1991) and Reid (2010) explain that most archival institutions worldwide encounter difficulties, and they argue that public archives such as NARSSA should nevertheless remember that the goal of any archival service is use. For that reason, such institutions should not let these problems dissuade them from doing what makes the archival profession a noble profession, namely the protection of records and facilitation of access to them.

For a long time, public programming and outreach have been considered peripheral in comparison with other archival functions (Blais and Enns 1991). Cook (1991:126) explains that this may be a result of most archival theories being based on the record, with minimal emphasis on reference and public programming services. Craig (1991:136), in agreement with Cook (1991), also points out that archival records are unique, and that in consequence, in most cases "their protection precedes availability".

Ngoepe and Ngulube (2011), Mhlanga (2015) and Sulej (2014) state that NARSSA and its services remain unknown to many South Africans. This is worrying, as NARSSA should be in a position to help South Africans to satisfy their information needs, and should therefore be a key player in the current information and knowledge economy. Venson et al. (2014) further argue that an archival service such as NARSSA should be recognised as a key participant in South Africa's National Development Plan. Wilson (2005:539) points out that if public archives such as NARSSA fail to connect people with the archives, they end up defeating the purpose of keeping archives.

Studies worldwide seem to imply the need for archival institutions to facilitate access to their holdings (Blais and Enns 1991; Bradley 2005; Ericson 1991; Kamatula 2011; Kim, Kang, Kim and Kim 2014; Nesmith 2010; Sanford 2011; Saurombe 2016; Sulej 2014). Public programming initiatives are seen as a means to facilitate access to and use of archival holdings. However, public programming initiatives should not be taken lightly (Weir 2004). Proper planning, implementation and evaluation are required to ensure that such programmes fulfil their purpose (Weir 2004). In line with Weir's suggestions, the archival public programming project was seen as a step towards developing an appropriate strategy for the South African context.

Public programming strategies include a variety of methods, such as advocacy, exhibitions, tours, seminars, workshops, newsletters, school visits and the use of social media platforms (Pederson 2008; Kamatula et al. 2013; Liew, King and Oliver 2015). The archival programming workshop offered the participating archivists a chance to determine what would suit the South African context. Designing an effective strategy should also involve determining the needs of South African society. Previous research by Craig (1991), Duff et al. (2008) and Ngulube and Tafor (2006) suggests that this is a matter that many archival institutions tend to overlook. The archivists' skills and knowledge of public programming may also contribute towards the success of public programming efforts (Brett and Jones 2013; Saurombe and Ngulube 2016; Weir 2004). The workshop setting offered the archivists an opportunity to contemplate the skills required to carry out the developed strategy effectively.

Kotler and Lee (2007) advise public institutions such as public archives to tap into marketing strategies in their quest to attract more users to their service. According to these marketing researchers, public archives should move away from the concept of 'making and selling,' and instead focus on 'sensing and responding' to customer needs. Morgan (2010), in agreement with Kotler and Lee's (2007) views, advises archivists to focus on the customer, ensure a satisfactory service, and evaluate services regularly. According to Hallam-Smith (2003) and Morgan (2010), applying principles such as determining the right marketing mix based on the four Ps (place, product, price and promotion) could help archivists to establish an appropriate public programming strategy.

The conceptual framework that assisted in data collection and the interpretation of the findings is discussed next.

Conceptual framework

In line with the suggestion by scholars such as Antonenko (2015), Grant and Osanloo (2014) and Ngulube (2018a) that a conceptual framework may be derived from one or more theories, the study was conceptualised using the theory of communicative action (Habermas 1987) and resource based theory (Esteve-Pérez and Mañez-Castillejo 2008).

An aspect of the theory of communicative action postulated by Habermas (1987) that is important for our purpose is the attainment of a voluntary agreement about what to do in a particular practical situation in which they find themselves (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005;

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Ngulube 2018b). People interpret what they are doing (their practices) and agree on a course of action to take based on their knowledge, skills and ethical considerations. This fosters solidarity and opens up communicative space between participants (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005:578). Action research creates an environment where people can pursue collaboratively "more comprehensible, true, authentic, and morally right ways of understanding and acting in the world" (Kemmis and McTaggart 2005:578).

Communicative action assisted participants to open communicative spaces in which to explore their knowledge of practice and learn from one another before agreeing on a course of action. Putting together a public programming strategy required communicative spaces, and the theory of communicative action assisted us (the outsiders) in building rapport with the participants from the archives (the insiders). Readers are referred to Chandler and Torbert (2003) and Ngulube (2018a) for further discussions on the positionality of researchers in action research. In short, communicative action assisted in openly exploring the nature of public programming, the conditions under which it was conducted, and possibilities for change in South Africa.

The study adopted resource based theory (RBT) to deal with other aspects of the research problem. RBT offers unique insights into the competitive situations that go beyond the traditional analysis of organisational strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) (Esteve-Pérez and Mañez-Castillejo 2008; Pringle and Kroll 2005). An important notion guiding the study was that an institution should possess certain key resources that give it a sustained competitive advantage over other institutions that offer similar services. Realising that NARSSA and South Africa's provincial archives compete for clientele with resources such as libraries, museums, the internet, bookshops and cinemas among other information businesses, it was deemed appropriate to use a theory that emphasises how an institution can survive the competition using its valuable and unique resources.

RBT has the capacity to assist both NARSSA and South Africa's provincial archives in taking archives to the people, thereby increasing access to, and use of, archival holdings. NARSSA and the provincial archives enjoy a sustained competitive advantage over other information providers owing to their unique archival collections that are found in neither museums nor libraries in South Africa.

By definition, resources are physical, human and organisational resources (both tangible and intangible) that assist an institution to effectively and efficiently carry out its operations. Using such resources, and guided by RBT, the project for marketing NARSSA and the provincial archives sought to establish value-creating strategies not being implemented by other information providers, thus gaining a competitive advantage over potential competitors. In the context of RBT, using their key resources, NARSSA and the provincial archives devised and adopted a marketing strategy that competitors were unable to duplicate. This will go a long way towards taking archives to the people and increasing access to and use of South Africa's documentary heritage.

RBT posits that for an institutional asset to qualify as a key resource, it must be valuable and rare, there must be no substitute, and the resource must be imperfectly imitable (Maijoor and Witteloostuijn 1996). What this entails for NARSSA and the provincial archives in their endeavour to expand and reach out to a wider audience is that their human resources, for instance, must be able to contribute significantly to the institution's effectiveness and efficiency. The rarity of some archival collections must be jealously guarded, as this will serve as an incentive for retaining current users while attracting other potential users. Failure to maintain the perceived unique value of archival material negates the competitive advantage that archival institutions have over other information centres such as libraries and museums. NARSSA must therefore ensure that there is no substitute for its resources, and should seek to remain the sole repository for public records of enduring value. In view of RBT, the other key resources that NARRSA and the provincial archives must strive to maintain include their skilled workforce, positive reputation and implicit knowledge of how to tap into the rich information contained in the archives.

In light of the mission of taking archives to the people, RBT emerged as appropriate for this study because it seeks to identify the resources that may give an institution a sustainable competitive advantage over other institutions offering similar services.

The next section outlines the methodology that was applied in developing the public programming and marketing strategy.

Research methodology

This qualitative study utilised participatory action research to develop a uniform strategy able to be customised by national and provincial archives repositories in taking archives to the people. It is important to emphasise that our research approach was not informed by action research from the outset: it was only after engaging with the management of the archival institutions in South Africa that we realised that action research was going to be the most appropriate research approach. As Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy (1993: 176) note:

> No one may mandate in advance that a particular research process will become a fully developed participatory action research project. Participation is a process that must be generated. It begins with participatory intent and continues by building participatory processes into the activity within the limits set by the participants and the conditions.

The ultimate goal was to understand the context of public programming in South Africa and "bring about practical improvement, innovation, change or development" of practice (Zuber-Skeritt 1996:83) so as to try and change the situation. The action research approach allowed the researchers to understand the complexity and nuances of public programming practices in public archival institutions in South Africa through lenses that "liberate the concept of research from domination by science" (Eisner 2006:10) and to support research that brings to life the sights and sounds of practice in an "inextricable combination of observations, thoughts, feelings, intuitions, trials, errors, and discoveries" (Stout 2004:196). The change was not to be done "to" or "on" communities, but was to come from them (Townsend 2013:11).

The history of South Africa, resources, users, and public programming expertise, among other factors, were considered in the development of a uniform public programming strategy for NARSSA. This section outlines the methodology that was applied to develop the strategy. A SWOT analysis provided a framework for applying the action research approach as research strategy.

The concern was with embedding the action into the way that public archives worked in relation to public programming. The research we undertook helped us to make informed actions, and we were therefore able to connect research and practice. As we connected research and practice, our actions progressed through the phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. We identified a problem, collected and analysed data, and then formulated solutions to the problem. The aim of the research was not only knowledge discovery, but also action and raising

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consciousness. In the true action research tradition, the research sought to empower participants through constructing and using knowledge. The objective was to develop practices through reflexive inquiry and develop the participants professionally (Townsend 2013). Action research is distinguishable from traditional research by "its additional therapeutic stage after the production of actionable knowledge" (Ngulube 2018b). The change is achieved through a cyclical process.

In the context of this project, the first cycle involved a broad consultation to establish the current state of public programming in public archives in South Africa and the problems encountered in taking the archives to the people. The consultation took the form of a workshop involving 14 archivists from national and provincial archives in South Africa responsible for public programming. These were the "insiders". The "outsiders" were three researchers and four postgraduate students from the University of South Africa. The relationship between the two groups was underpinned by communicative action theory, which was discussed earlier. The presentation and activities during the workshop stimulated discussion. This ensured collaboration between researchers and participants in defining the problem and how the outputs of the workshop were going to be utilised. Participants and researchers were active and equal partners in all phases of the project.

The first cycle identified the problem on the participants' terms (that, is the archival community and context). The participants were given an opportunity to explore, reflect and discuss issues. This was a way of examining their understanding, skills and values in relation to public programming in order to understand how their knowledge influenced their action. It was also a way of motivating their choices by the force of argument in the Habermasian sense. Data was recorded through photographs, notes and audiotape. Thematic data analysis was partially done with the participants, and finalised by the research group. Facilitators from the research group were considered to be co-participants, although their contributions belonged more in the area of theoretical expertise.

The second cycle entailed the interpretation and analysis of what was learnt in the first phase. The third phase involved planning, implementing and evaluating based on information collected and interpreted in other phases. In other words, the second cycle resulted in the development of a public programming strategy. The third cycle involved taking action and building the competence of the team, and developing the key public programming skills. At the end of the

cycle the project returned to the planning stage and fact-finding about the result of the action (Townsend 2013:10). There was also cyclical revision of the research question.

The results of reflecting on the plan in action are beyond the scope of this article. We will monitor and observe the consequences of the intervention and plan the next course of action as it relates to the aspired aims of the project.

Data from the workshops was supplemented by data collected from focus group interviews, documents and participants acting and reporting on the interventions. The systematic search for meaning in the data was conducted through thematic analysis and the help of ATLAS.ti as suggested by Ngulube (2015).

Findings and discussion

After analysing the data and documents such as the National Archives and Records Service of South Africa Act 43 of 1996 as amended and the archival legislation of the various provinces, it was clear that the mission of the public archives is to preserve national archives heritage for use by the government and people of South Africa and to promote efficient, accountable and transparent government. The workshop participants agreed that the mission of the archives in South Africa was going to be achieved through making resources available for acquiring, accessioning, arranging, describing, preserving and communicating information contained in archives.

The participants concurred that the use of archives depends on strategies that make archival holdings known to the public and that will justify their existence. They agreed that the use of archives is fundamental to fostering accountability, promoting democracy and justice, protecting human rights, providing recreational and educational information and nurturing national cultural heritage as envisaged in the mission of archives in South Africa. Having established that fact, they agreed that one of the serious difficulties faced by archival institutions in South Africa lay in making archival resources available to all sections of South African society. The participants agreed that even if there were other competitors in the information provision landscape such as private archives, museums and libraries, archives had a competitive advantage because they contain unique information materials that are available without the payment of any subscriptions or fees. Despite this advantage, participants reported that a lack of funding and training, limited

skills among archivists, inadequate management strategies and infrastructure at the archival institutions, a lack of political will to support the archival endeavour and a high staff turnover were negatively affecting the archival system of South Africa. It was against this background that the marketing strategy was to be built.

The themes that emerged from the data included a need to enhance the visibility of the archives, communicating the content of the archival holdings, capacitating officials responsible for public programming and promoting positive perceptions of archives. The identification of these themes led to the development of the marketing strategy at Appendix I. The key performance indicators are not repeated here, as they are set out in the marketing strategy.

RBT, which formed part of the conceptual framework for the study, was applicable in light of its focus on identifying the resources that may give an institution a sustainable competitive advantage over other institutions offering similar services. The implementation of the marketing strategy that was developed through the workshop requires resources, but archival institutions will be creative and operate within their budgetary constraints. The following questions provided an analytic understanding of the competitive landscape and enabled us to craft a winning marketing strategy.

- What is the target market?

- Through what channels can the target market be reached?

- What is our value proposition (brand)?

- What will differentiate us from our competitors?

The marketing strategy will position public archives in South Africa as a professional institution that houses quality, unique, authentic and reliable information and that embraces the values of integrity, trust, accountability, honesty and transparency. The participants agreed to uphold these values and attach them to the marketing campaign and everything they did. This was essential for the success of the marketing campaign, because these are the same values that the target market also embraces. This would connect the target market with the marketing campaign and position the archives in South Africa as desired. The intention was for the marketing strategy to communicate a common message to the public within the resource constraints experienced by archival institutions in South Africa. In line with action research moments, the marketing strategy cycle depicted in Figure 1 will be monitored and evaluated in order to improve change.
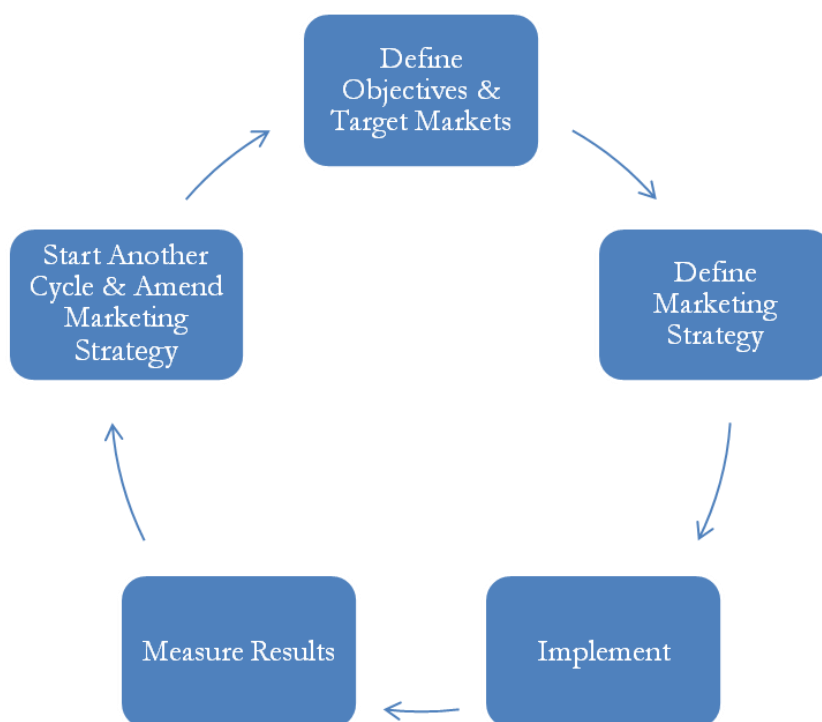
Figure 1: Marketing strategy cycle for the project

Conclusion and recommendations

Archives repositories in South Africa lack visibility. National and provincial archives are unable to reach and attract people owing to an inadequate marketing strategy, the absence of a common message to the public, limited resources and a lack of public programming skills among archivists. During a three-day workshop, a strategy was developed to be customised and implemented by public archives repositories in South Africa. Although action research generated knowledge that was fed back into the setting in question, this knowledge can be transferrable for application in other settings. This implies that other national archival institutions may adapt the prototype marketing strategy presented as Appendix I.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix I: Prototype strategy implementation plan

Key Performance Indicator	Initiatives and resources	Measures	Targets
Enhance Visibility	- Permanent exhibitions - Mobile exhibitions - Landmark signs of the archives - Standard and branded outreach material and facilities - Visually appealing website	- Number of permanent exhibitions - Number of mobile exhibitions - Discussions on the erection of landmarks - Percentage complete on the website	4 permanent exhibitions 1 mobile exhibition - Discussions complete by - Erected landmarks 80% complete website by next workshop
Content of the Archives	- Design/Develop a toolkit that satisfies different customer targets needs - Design/Develop packages in line with commemoration events - Develop a general toolkit for accessing the archives	Number of toolkits developed	1 general toolkit 2 toolkits addressing different needs 1 toolkits on commemorative events - All completed in March 2017
Development of officials responsible for public programming	- Workshop - Training - Mentorship programmes - Social networks - Qualifications in public programming	- Number of workshops, training, mentorship programmes - Active social network group	2 workshops, training sessions per year - Mentorship programmes - Ongoing activity on social network page (National Archives Facebook page)
Promotion of positive perception about archives	- Develop advertising and communication material (brochures, articles, radio talks, etc.) - Establish partnerships with stakeholders (radio, Unisa radio, community radio, newspaper, etc.) - Publish material to print media - Revive the archives news publications - Organise press release for workshops	- Number of advertising and communication materials - Number of partnerships with stakeholders - Active NARSSA archives newsletters - Number of press releases per workshop	2 articles per year 2 press releases per year - Active NARSSA newsletter