

# Crowds grow as museums shake off their dusty image

By CATHERINE FOX

THE gloves are off in the once staid world of museums. No more hushed halls and dusty displays — today its “edutainment”, market research, television advertising and aggressive competition to attract visitors.

The effort to boost funding has seen museums diversify into sponsorships, member programs and the lucrative function business.

And while tourists remain important customers, it seems Australians are taking to their museums in far greater numbers than many other countries.

Sydney's trendy set are often seen at the Museum of Contemporary Art, which has successfully become a major function venue as well as exhibiting a collection of modern art. And the Australian National Maritime Museum (ANMM) in Sydney, one of the newest museums in the country, has built up attendances to 405,000 in the past year.

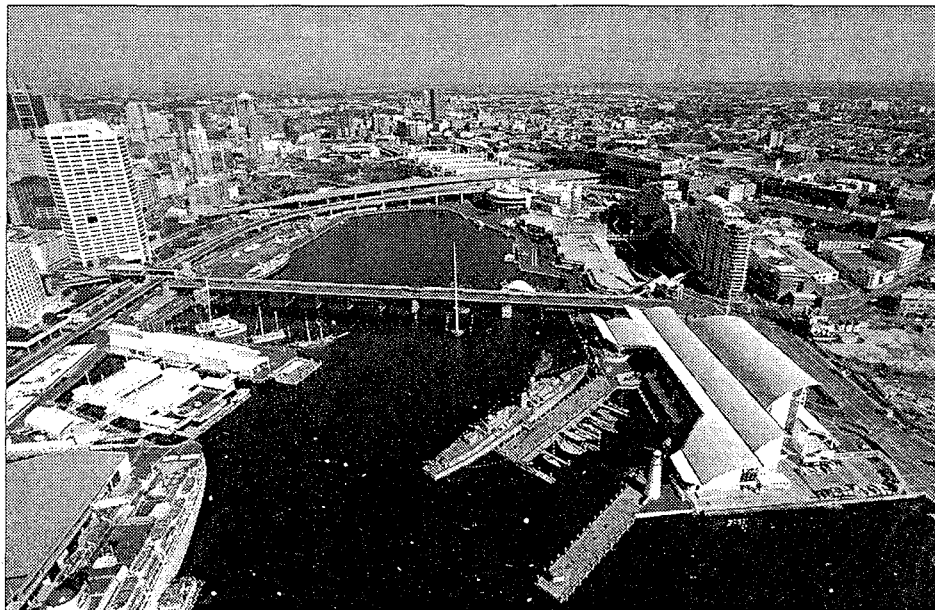
The ANMM's assistant director, commercial operations, Mr Max Dingle, said a series of temporary exhibitions including the Mary Rose, whales and the new pirates exhibition, had effectively broadened the appeal of the museum.

“It turned it around from a museum with a niche audience to one that is now on the general menu for all Sydneysiders,” he said.

Although half the visitors were from overseas or interstate, the challenge was getting locals to visit.

“As long as you are in the right tourist publications you get the tourists . . . but the decision-maker on family activities in the household tends to be women and women thought it was old boats,” Mr Dingle said.

A limited advertising budget has worked hard in the past couple of years. Although the museum has a \$16 million budget, it has



SEA CHANGE: Attendance is up at Sydney's Maritime Museum (lower right).

to raise a further \$2.5 million to \$3 million and finance all temporary exhibitions. The advertising strategy, handled by The Ball Partnership, has focused on promoting the special exhibitions through print and television, with commercials for the peak periods such as school holidays.

The quirky advertisements are aimed at broadening the museum's image and prompting locals to visit immediately to catch temporary exhibitions, rather than put off a visit.

The Ball Partnership's Mr Steve Sheppard (who originally won the account at his own agency, Sheppard Griffin) said the campaign for the Mary Rose display had helped attract 110,000 visitors, well beyond

the 100,000 forecast. The print only campaign was backed with a limited budget, using media such as weekend newspapers.

Along with main media advertising, sponsorship packages including naming rights to exhibitions have been used. A members program caters to specialist interests and the distinctive building attracts an increasing number of weddings, parties and other functions.

Mr Dingle said the latest attendance figures compared well with overseas museums. In 1994-95, about 405,000 visitors went to the ANMM, compared to the 500,000 who visited the National Maritime Museum in London in the previous year.