

Getting Serious About Lifelong Learning



We know that giant screen films put viewers in places where they have never been, show them amazing things they will never see in everyday life and engage them in a visceral way as no other film experience can. But this is not enough. How can giant screen films combine popular appeal with powerful lifelong learning experiences?



By Robert L. Russell and John W. Jacobsen

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we start taking the GSTA's mission of lifelong learning seriously, a number of management questions arise in many of our industry's key organizations. Film producers, distributors, theater operators and museum leaders have critical questions about why and should they develop the learning dimensions of the giant screen films we produce, distribute, screen, promote and interpret. The central management question is this: How can we make giant screen film packages both an even more popular medium and a more effective learning resource? Or more urgently: How can we get better at what we do before the free ride of novelty wears off?

The GSTA community will benefit from a framework for thinking seriously about this subject.

THE MISSION OF LIFELONG LEARNING

After much saber-rattling in the '90s, the specter of savvy commercial entertainment ventures stealing audiences from naïve nonprofit museums has retreated for now, leaving museums wise though somewhat battered survivors. Some commercial giant screen theaters have closed or been sidelined; even Club Disney and Disney Quest have

joined other for-profit science centers and children's museums in closing. A decade later, the nonprofit museums and their theaters are the ones still standing, and films with a commitment to learning are still a mainstay of annual box office revenues. Museum researcher Lynn Dierking reports that "one of the current major trends is that people are seeking meaning, and learning is a big part of that. We all have different learning profiles, and free-choice learning organizations have to engage learners' personal interests."¹

In our view, there are four initial research areas that are useful breakouts of the central management question. Each is discussed in the following sections. Some questions posed here may never be answered, but all can be started on soon, with immediate and direct benefits in new film development, marketing and packaging:

1. How do we determine our community's learning needs? Which ones are we most capable of addressing?
2. Who goes (and who doesn't go) to giant screen films and why? Will learning sell?
3. How do viewers experience films, and how do they learn from the experience?
4. How can giant screen films support lifelong learning?

HOW DO WE DETERMINE OUR COMMUNITY'S LEARNING NEEDS?

We have different developmental needs throughout life, and any serious commitment to lifelong learning should be informed by understanding those needs from toddler to very old age.² Giant screen films have among the widest effectiveness, working at some level from ages 6 to 74. Some films may be better suited for some age groups than others, but experienced giant screen filmmakers try to layer information and concepts to communicate on several levels—that way their films reach more people.

Given the great investment needed to produce a giant screen film, the current size of the market and the global diversity of the theater network, it makes the most sense to produce films as learning experiences for the widest possible audience—many ages, many learning styles, many ways to connect. If the film experience itself should strive to be universal, then it is through the advance organizers (marketing) and the constructivist framework building that follows (learning) that we relate to each theater's specific audiences. Good educators can work with a film meant for global audiences and customize the overall experience for specific learning needs by building specific bridges—teacher and family guides, related exhibits, places to visit, etc.—out from the same film to each audience.

Piaget, Vygotsky, Erickson and Gardner have helped us understand that people bring

individual learning styles, interests and knowledge to the film experience, but do we know what types of learners are attracted to giant screen films? And what they are learning? Here are some questions the industry should ask to help define the learning needs of current and future (larger and more diverse) audiences:

1. What learning theories are most relevant for designing of giant screen films?
2. What are the learning needs of viewers, considered developmentally?
3. How can the qualities of giant screen films and related learning resources be linked to the developmental learning needs of viewers?

WHO GOES TO GIANT SCREEN FILMS?

We estimated worldwide annual attendance in 1999 at 90–100 million viewers in 327 theaters.³ For this article, we are focusing on audiences that come to giant screen theaters in institutional and educational settings⁴ that have commitments to learning—other audiences can and should be studied, but this audience is still the largest share.

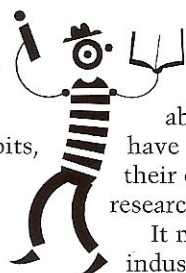
There is little doubt that giant screen audiences are larger than they were 10 years ago, because there are more theaters and more films. But who are these viewers and what kinds of films (and related marketing) have drawn new audiences?

The giant screen industry can use museums' experiences in setting an audience research agenda. Within the museum field, there is a growing body of research investigating the psychographic characteristics of museum visitors. The classic study, conducted by Molly Hood⁵ at the Toledo Museum of Art nearly 20 years ago, revealed three distinct types of museum audiences: frequent participants, occasional participants and nonparticipants. Hood looked at six leisure attributes (being with people, doing something worthwhile, feeling comfortable, having a challenge, learning and participating actively) to describe the psychographics of visitors. Her findings were quite detailed, but she found that frequent visitors valued opportunities for learning, doing something worthwhile and having a challenge, whereas nonparticipants more highly valued using their leisure time for social interaction, participating actively and feeling comfortable in their surroundings. She recommended that museums that want to expand their audiences by attracting

nonvisitors should emphasize museums as comfortable places with rich opportunities for social interactions.

There is also a body of existing research about giant screen audiences, as many theaters have conducted extensive audience research in their own markets over the years, but little of this research has been made available to external users.

It makes good business sense for the giant screen industry to conduct some fundamental audience



research on an industry-wide basis, and to make the results available to the industry at large. Here are some basic questions we believe this area of research should address:

1. Who currently attends giant screen films? Who doesn't? What are the learning styles and psychographics of frequent giant screen filmgoers, occasional filmgoers and those who never go?
2. What do we mean by learning, and what do our viewers think of the process and the word itself?
3. What do giant screen film viewers want that the films aren't giving them (that is still in keeping with the Giant Screen Theater Association's lifelong learning mission)? For example, Barbara Flagg's⁵ research indicates that viewers, in fact, want better stories and more educational value than we are currently delivering. Are there other qualities that viewers seek that giant screen films are not delivering?
4. What marketing approaches work to attract audiences to giant screen films? How can we more effectively market individual films? Does it make sense to consider any generic advertising for the industry or national advertising with the release of a new film?

A key issue is whether viewers come to giant screen films *because* of the learning or *despite* the learning.

HOW DO VIEWERS EXPERIENCE GIANT SCREEN FILMS?

We promise viewers an *experience* in our marketing, and we recognize that we are part of the experience industry, offering *transforming experiences* as our product. But do we know what our visitors are really experiencing in our theaters? How does the giant screen influence our brain's receptors? How does visual immersion trigger awareness and keener observation? How does the mental disconnect between sitting still and yet seeming to move affect not only our stomach but also how our brain processes information? There's the film's content, its story structure, our relationships with the on-screen characters, the beat of the music, the poetry of the words, all the weird and wonderful places we get to go, the gorgeous cinematography and the experience of movement and immersion. How does the brain sort it all out?

Film evaluator Barbara Flagg reports that a "wonderful learning experience" is among the top three features that audiences like about giant screen films.⁷ While viewers value the thrills and sense of immersion that are fundamental to the giant screen experience, they also look to giant screen films for their educational values and inspirational qualities. How can we develop giant screen films that fully engage viewers and support learning experiences?

One perspective might be to design films that stimulate what psychologist Donald Norman⁸ calls

the "experiential" and "reflective" modes of thinking. Experiential cognition is when we "perceive and react to the events around us, efficiently and effortlessly," while reflective cognition is when we consider, compare and contrast, make decisions and develop new ideas.

We know that giant screen films take us on roller coaster rides, put us in the rain forest or outer space, or take us on a walk over an icy crevasse. Such scenes, when well done, can engage viewers viscerally, aesthetically or in some other powerful and experiential sense. Can films make these kinds of scenes even more effective, and then, take a step beyond? Can giant screen films be designed to provoke Norman's "reflective" cognition?

Here are at least a few general issues that, when investigated through audience research, can help film producers and others design higher impact giant screen films (both in audience size and in educational impact):

1. What do viewers experience, moment by moment, in different types of giant screen films?
2. What are the most compelling moments of giant screen films? How do these moments contribute to learning? How do different types of films support different learning styles, intelligences or different types of cognition (e.g., experiential vs. reflective)?
3. What kinds of narrative structures are most effective in attracting audiences and educating?
4. How does the experience of seeing a high-quality educational film resonate in our memory and inspire conversations? What do visitors talk about after a film? Its content? Its story? Its imagery? Its characters? Or the experiential rides?
5. Are there relatively untested approaches, such as handing out provocative discussion questions to exiting audiences, that can provide new incentives to attract audiences and deliver on our educational mission? Can alternative narrative styles be tested with the same film (e.g., narratives designed for a school audience vs. a general audience, etc.)?

HOW CAN GIANT SCREEN FILMS SUPPORT LIFELONG LEARNING?

In September 1999, before the annual conference, GSTA held a symposium entitled "Giant Screen Films and Lifelong Learning" and published the complete conference proceedings under the same title.⁹ In his presentation, Christopher Palmer came the closest to providing a definition of lifelong learning, namely, "significant, self-directed learning throughout our lifetimes."¹⁰ At the same symposium, John Falk made the important point that "learning is rarely an instantaneous event, but rather a time-consuming cumulative process." He further stated that "individuals acquire an understanding of scientific concepts through an accumulation of experiences, normally deriving from many different



sources at many different times."¹¹ In brief, we shouldn't be asking what specific items of information viewers pick up from viewing a giant screen film; instead, we should ask how viewing the film supported the viewer's lifelong learning processes.

For giant screen films to support lifelong learning, films need to address the learning visitors have "in progress." Since viewers bring many different interests, strategies, and knowledge to the viewing experience, film projects need to first engage potential viewers so that they will come. After a compelling viewing experience, viewers need supporting learning resources so they can build upon and pursue new insights and interests.

We suggest a series of research questions:

1. How does the theater's setting and brand identity affect the audience's expectations, experience and attitude about seeing a film in that particular theater? Is seeing *Dolphins* in a museum setting a different experience from seeing it in a commercial multiplex?
2. How can potential viewers become most effectively attracted to the film through marketing and pre-visit educational resources?
3. What advance organizers (e.g., marketing messages, lobby kiosk exhibits, pre-show activities and music, etc.) can help set the stage for the film?
4. What qualities of films most effectively engage viewers, taking into account the personal and social contexts? How do giant screen films affect lifelong learning (e.g., by motivating interest among viewers in the film topic)? What kinds of impacts do different types of giant screen films (e.g., nature films, dramas, etc.) have on lifelong learning?
5. How can the immediate post-film experience be designed to reinforce the impact of the film?
6. How can viewers be encouraged to extend the film experience by talking to their children and friends about it, reading books related to the topic, visiting related places or otherwise pursuing further involvement? Are learning resources (teacher's or family guides, web sites, trunks, etc.) extensively used? What learning resources are most cost-effective in relation to their impacts? What kinds of



educational impacts do different types of learning resources have? Are there new types of learning resources (e.g., distributing CD-ROMs, more elaborate web sites) that should be more extensively used?

A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR MORE POWERFUL FILMS

In this article, we have tried to point out what it might take to get serious about lifelong learning in giant screen films. Over a decade ago, *Excellence and Equity* (AAM Task Force on Museum Education) addressed the need to reach out to every member of the learning community and provide them with experiences that portrayed excellence in both content and accessibility. This inspired museum professionals to consider the cultural diversity of our audiences, but perhaps we could have looked beyond ethnicities and addressed the museum's ability to meet the needs of varied age groups and learning stages as well. Giant screen films probably help museums serve different learning needs from those addressed by their exhibits, but we just do not know.

If the industry believes that audiences are diminishing at individual theaters or at least not growing in proportion to the financial need, and that current economic models for producing educational films are not working, then it is time for some substantial audience research. Since educational films are the product for institutional theaters, the industry needs to have a greater understanding of film design in relation to its impact on lifelong learning. Since theaters depend on box office revenues, the industry needs a more sophisticated understanding of who goes (and who doesn't go) to giant screen films and why, how to attract both of these groups to more films and how to make our medium an even more powerful learning experience. ■

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1 Lynn Dierking, Principal, Institute for Learning Innovation, in a phone interview on 8/03/01.

2 Newman, B.M. & Newman, P.R., in *Development Through Life: A Psychosocial Approach* (Seventh Edition, Wadsworth, 1999), have identified nine developmental stages: toddler, early school age, middle school age, early adolescence, later adolescence, early adulthood, middle adulthood, later adulthood, and very old age.

3 *White Oak Inventory of Large Format Theaters* (2000 edition).

4 Museums, visitor centers, destination theaters, aquariums, education centers, etc.

5 Hood, M. G. (1983). Staying away: Why people choose to not visit museums. *Museum News*, 61(4), 50-57.

6 Flagg, B. Lessons learned from viewers of giant screen films. In *Giant Screen Films and Lifelong Learning: Complete Symposium Proceedings*, edited by E. Koster. Giant Screen Theater Association, 2000.

7 Ibid.

8 Norman, D. *Things That Make Us Smart*. Addison-Wesley, 1993.

9 Koster, E. (Ed.). *Giant Screen Films and Lifelong Learning: Complete Symposium Proceedings*, Giant Screen Theater Association, 2000.

10 Palmer, C. "Educational Criteria for Giant Screen Films." In *Giant Screen Films and Lifelong Learning: Complete Symposium Proceedings*, edited by E. Koster. Giant Screen Theater Association, 2000.

11 Falk, John. "Assessing Learning in a Learning Society." In *Giant Screen Films and Lifelong Learning: Complete Symposium Proceedings*, edited by E. Koster. Giant Screen Theater Association, 2000.