

Chapter 5: Understanding and Influencing Word-of-Mouth

G. Donald Adams
Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village
Dearborn, Michigan

Introduction

Positive word-of-mouth is one of the most potent forces motivating attendance at museums and other visitor attractions. "A conversational suggestion to visit a museum may well constitute the museum's single most effective source of publicity and public relations," Dr. Ross Loomis (1987) asserts in his book Museum Visitor Evaluation. "Word-of-mouth influence continues after the visit when visitors pass on to others their evaluation of their visit experience. This evaluation is the most significant form of museum evaluation made where visitors are concerned," Loomis suggests.

Since 1984, when focus groups and mailback studies were started at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, visitors have consistently cited recommendations by word-of-mouth as the principal reason for visiting (Newman Research Associates, 1984).

Although there is no magic formula that will assure that visitors' word-of-mouth always will be positive, I propose that visitors' on-site experiences and their resulting impressions can be useful in developing pre-visit communication and on-site programs that will help lead to positive word-of-mouth.

Museum word-of-mouth broadcasts fit into several categories:

- Those who visit and then over the next several weeks convey their impressions to others.
- Those who tell others about a visit that occurred in the more distant past. They may either not remember or wish to tell how long ago they visited and changes may have occurred at the museum that not only make their impressions inaccurate, but also can lead others to base their expectations on false promises.

- Those who have never visited, but are enthusiastic broadcasters of word-of-mouth based upon such factors as their personal interests or their situations. For example, car collectors talk about car museums; city dwellers tell outsiders about their community's attractions; neighbors of museum employees convey what they've heard. Although these non-visiting word-of-mouth agents may be inaccurate, they can be perceived as credible by those with whom they are talking.
- Those who repeat what they have heard conversationally, independent of whether they have visited or not or whether they have a special interest in the museum. Often a negative story is involved in such circumstances and it is likely to travel far and fast through the conversations of these word-of-mouth broadcasters. When word-of-mouth is negative, source credibility is less important to its being accepted and passed on. Word-of-mouth accuracy probably is lowest when negative stories are being passed on by this category of broadcaster.
- Those who tell others what they have learned from secondary sources such as the media. By personally calling a story about the museum to someone's attention, the word-of-mouth agent may enhance the story's credibility.

Many other circumstances, such as the proprietary interest of a museum member or the special status of a former museum employee, can affect the quality and movement of word-of-mouth messages.

For this paper, I have selected one word-of-mouth situation for discussion: a person visits a museum for the first time and, over the next several weeks, conveys his or her impressions to others. I have developed a model to illustrate how the impressions that these visitors will broadcast by word-of-mouth are generated. I will discuss how assessments made at various stages in that process can help a museum plan public programs that will create positive impressions (Adams, 1983).

The model is comprised of three sections: pre-visit messages, on-site messages, and post-visit impressions.

Pre-Visit Messages

Pre-visit messages consist of the whole universe of knowledge that a prospective first-time visitor brings to the decision of whether to visit.

These messages are of three types: word-of-mouth, publicity, and advertising.

Word-of-mouth is nearly always present, very influential and not subject to planning or control. Advertising, although most controllable, can lack in credibility and is too expensive for most museums. Publicity is the principal vehicle used by most museums to convey controlled messages. Not only is publicity affordable, it can be influential, a quality enhanced by the perceived "objectivity" of news coverage and by a sense of third party endorsement by the media outlet covering the story.

Having synthesized and reflected upon these pre-visit messages, and having taken into account such additional and diverse influences as personal knowledge and interests, the day's weather, pressure from family members, and ease with which the experience can be postponed, an individual now is ready to decide whether visiting the museum is worth the cost in energy, time, and money. Unless a person is simply going along with a decision made by others, he or she decides to visit only because the museum will provide some desired benefits.

Focus group benefits tests can help a museum become aware of the benefits that are being sought by its visitors. These benefits can then be the basis for developing a publicity and advertising theme that will position the museum in the marketplace.

Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village tested several possible benefits to help determine the ones its visitors were seeking. Family fun and togetherness, importance in childrens' education, enjoyment of history, safe environment, and a good place to take guests scored high. Inspiration from learning about famous Americans and patriotism inspired by seeing examples of American ingenuity scored low (Newman Research Associates, 1987).

Based on this information, combined with the conclusions of a telephone interview study of Detroit Awareness and Image (Newman Research Associates, 1983), a review of mailback questionnaire studies, and visitor observation cards, it was determined that the principal benefits sought by Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village visitors are the experience of visiting a great museum and the opportunity to have fun. Finding things to do that everyone in the family will enjoy; enjoying an attractive, friendly, safe environment; seeing something that you have not seen before; having an opportunity to do more than just look at things,

but rather to get personally involved, were among expectations cited by visitors (Newman Research Associates, 1983).

Armed with a better knowledge of benefits that its visitors were seeking, and now having a sense of their specific expectations, Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village developed a concise statement to define their niche in the marketplace: "Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, the great American museum that's also great fun." This position statement consistently was incorporated into advertising and publicity to more clearly communicate an appealing pre-visit promise.

On-Site Messages

The second section of the model comprises the visitors' on-site experience, which they perceive as the museum's product. A museum's product is presented through its use of its collections in its public programs such as exhibits, lectures, and demonstrations. Successful public programs require a coherent use of people and objects to tell focused stories. This intellectual focus, sometimes referred to as the museum's mission, develops from research and evaluations that look inward and assess the museum's resources.

At Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village a committee was established to inventory and evaluate resources. They concluded that the Museum's collection objects and staff expertise could best support a focus on how America changed as a result of technology, especially in the period from 1850 to the present time.

Such a broad mission can be communicated to visitors in many ways. How to present it in a way that would satisfy the visitors' expectations of a great museum where they could have fun was the subject of several evaluative studies.

Some of the assessments were general in nature based on additions to the on-going random mailback questionnaire, such as rating scales for adult, teenage, and children's enjoyment, and questions about whether anything was expected that was not found at the Museum and Village (Newman Research Associates, 1987). It was found that "fun" often translated into personal involvement with other people and with objects. This finding contributed to the decision to talk to more people who historically were associated with some of the Museum's major collection objects, to teach historic games on the Village Green, to enlarge upon an activities center where youngsters could operate a miniature assembly line

and pedal a highwheel bicycle, to add personal visitor involvement in weekend special events and to develop new events such as "Great Escape Weekends," held indoors in the winter, where visitors could dance the dances, eat the foods, and enjoy the conviviality of past decades. The success of these programs was seen both in attendance increases and positive visitor comments.

Some Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village studies were product specific. For example, eight focus groups were conducted to explore visitor attitudes toward a current and a proposed Henry Ford Museum automobile exhibition (Newman Research Associates, 1986). Also, a self-administered "hand-back" survey, along with a brief personal interview combined with a self-administered mailback questionnaire, was used to guide planning for a new interpretation of Thomas Edison's Menlo Park Laboratory complex in Greenfield Village (Newman Research Associates, 1988). Conducted while the visitor was at the complex, these studies revealed visitors' expectations and the Museum's performance in fulfilling them. The study assessed visitors' physical use of the Menlo Park buildings, exhibits and interpretive devices, established the length of stay, and recorded visitors' overall evaluation of the exhibit. Perception of changes was of special interest where repeat visitors were involved. A facts test established visitors' pre-visit knowledge about subjects covered at the complex and revealed whether they had gained knowledge or interest in these subjects as a result of their visit.

The results of these studies informed the process of planning and refining the automobile exhibit and the Menlo Park Laboratory Complex interpretation.

Throughout the Museum's evaluative work, it was clear that the fulfillment of visitor expectations goes far beyond traditional concerns. Directional signage, the neighborhood in which the museum is located, the availability and convenience of parking, the overall appearance of the Museum's building and grounds, the explanation of available admission tickets, the appearance, friendliness, and helpfulness of all the Museum's public contact employees, the convenience and cleanliness of the bathrooms, the provisions for handicapped visitors and others with special needs (such as non-English speaking tourists and guests who need to change a baby), the dining and shopping opportunities, even just a convenient place to sit and rest are perceived by visitors as important dimensions of the museum's product.

Post-Visit Impressions

The third section of the model focuses on the visitors' post-visit impressions. Throughout their stay at the museum, visitors steadily have been exposed to messages in many forms – labels, conversations, signs, objects, and audio-visual presentations. Many of these messages have been passed by unnoticed. Others have been perceived and promptly discarded. Some have been filed away in the visitor's mind, others are carried around throughout the visit. Some impressions are positive, others are negative.

When the visit is concluded, some of the visitors' impressions will be dominant, others will lie dormant – perhaps never to be recalled. By capturing the dominant post-visit impressions and comparing them to the assessments of pre-visit expectations and on-site experience, the museum can monitor how well it is meeting visitor expectations. As importantly, the museum now has the information to predict what is going to be said about it via word-of-mouth and to anticipate the pre-visit expectations that prospective visitors are developing as a result of that word-of-mouth.

Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village employed a variety of evaluative instruments to monitor visitors' post-visit impressions. Through a hand-out given them when they purchase a ticket, visitors are advised that an observation card is available. They must ask for it, fill it out, and leave it with an attendant at the exit. Each card is responded to by a personal letter from the director of the department most associated with the subject of the visitor's concern. Observation cards tend to not reflect dominant perceptions of the Museum's broader product, but rather specific personal situations such as experience with Museum employees.

The on-going mailback survey is another source of visitor impressions at Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. It is returned in quantities large enough to allow for the spotting of trends, but respondents often resist taking the time to write long answers to open-ended questions. The opportunity to rank/order selections from a menu of possible impressions also can miss the mark.

On-site focus groups and telephone image studies are felt to have been most helpful at revealing Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village visitors' impressions.

In the focus groups, reasons for visiting, expectations versus actual experience, reactions to interpretive methods, and questions on the

purpose of the Museum were probed. Word-of-mouth recommendations continued to be among the most frequently cited reason for visiting, programs that allowed for personal involvement were well-received, the product generally was felt to be larger in scope than expected and, altogether, findings from other studies were reconfirmed. Critical to the support of the Museum's market position was the question, "Was the visit fun?" The answers were inconclusive. The study summary noted: "The overall experience at the Museum and Village was seen as educational, not entertaining *per se*. Enjoyment of the educational experience was often based upon a stated desire for an active experience." One participant suggested "more people doing things. I can relate more to things happening." Or as another participant said, "If you can participate in something yourself, you'll remember it" (Newman Research Associates, 1984). The random telephone survey of Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village visitors and non-visitors was conducted in Detroit to determine perceptions and impressions and reasons for intention to visit or not to visit (Newman Research Associates, 1983). Most respondents expected to see antique automobiles and old homes, the Museum and Village's most popular collections. When asked why they visited, most (30%) said "for the kids." Generally, fun was cited by 16% as a reason for visiting. Cost in time and money were the principal reasons for not visiting.

Whether the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village market position, as expressed through its word-of-mouth publicity and advertising, is creating visitor expectations that are being fulfilled on-site is a question under continuous review. Concerns over not having had their expectations fulfilled have not been common among those visitors who had had the opportunity to express their opinions through participation in the Museum's research studies.

Attendance is up since the new market position and refined public programs focus were implemented. Sales of annual tickets, which are of benefit only to those who want to make repeat visits, are up. But these quantitative assessments can seduce the Museum into thinking all is well when perhaps an undercurrent of negative word-of-mouth simply has not yet had its impact.

The test of a museum's ability to meet expectations lies in what its visitors are actually saying in their daily conversations. None of us is privy to their conversations. However, through being aware of the word-of-mouth process and through evaluating visitor expectations, experiences, and impressions, we can gain a sense of what is being said

about us in our visitors' casual conversations. This will enable us to make adjustments that will better serve the needs of the Museum and its visitors and will help influence a positive word-of-mouth.

References

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ADAMS' WORD-OF-MOUTH MESSAGE
CHANGE MODEL

