

Multicultural Pluralism and Visitor Evaluation

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"When they enter museums they do not leave their cultures and identities in the coatroom. Nor do they respond passively to museum displays. They interpret museum exhibits through their prior experiences, culturally learned beliefs, values and perceptual skills as well as membership in multiple communities."

(p. 79, Karp & Lavine, 1993).

"... museums must achieve greater inclusiveness. Trustees and staff must acknowledge and respect our nation's diversity in race, ethnic origin, age, gender, economic status, and education, and they must attempt to reflect that pluralism in every aspect of museums' operations and programs."

(p. 262, AAM Task Force on Museum Education, 1992)

As indicated by the quotes from Karp and Lavine (1993) and the AAM Task Force on Museum Education (1992), there is increasing awareness by museums that they must address issues of multicultural pluralism. The AAM Task Force concluded that:

- Many museums have not made a strong enough commitment to an expanded public dimension that makes them true centers of learning for the diverse audiences they are responsible for serving.
- Some members of the public feel that museums have no relevance to their lives. Some people do not feel welcome in museums; others visit museums only to leave feeling inadequate.
- Some museum staffs and boards of trustees are not adequately representative of our pluralistic society, and the voice of the community is not widely heard in museum decision making.

While many museums are eager to increase their appeal to multicultural audiences, they either do not know what to do or how to assess the impact of their attempts to attract new audiences.

This issue of *Visitor Behavior* reports on visitor studies related to multicultural audiences. Marilyn Hood's article (pp. 5-10) identifies many of the problems museums face in attracting minority audiences. John Falk's article (pp. 11-12) describes two studies, one comparing African-American and Caucasian visitors to science museums and the second study involving 333 interviews with African-Americans in their

home communities attempted to identify factors that predicted museum visitation. On pages 13-14 a study is reported that was conducted in Puerto Rico comparing local and international visitors to El Yunque rainforest. The study found that local and international visitors to the Caribbean National Forest differed in many ways, suggesting strong cultural differences in these groups. The summary of Don Adams' article (p. 15) is an excellent example of how visitor research can be applied to an exhibit project. Finally, on pages 16 and 17, a study summarizing museum visit ratings of African-American and Caucasian university students suggests one way that cultural differences may influence the museum experience.

A Suggested Program for Multicultural Pluralism

As indicated by the studies in this issue, there have been many attempts to identify and address the problems of multicultural audiences. The literature suggests that a simple plan involving only one activity (e.g., publicizing a special exhibit) will be inadequate to solve complex multicultural problems. We believe that the following four-step process is implicitly suggested by the literature.

1. Change negative perceptions of the museum.

Perceptions of museums. As indicated by several investigators (e.g., Hood and Falk in this issue), nontraditional audiences often have negative perceptions of museums.

The role of visitor evaluation. Audience research studies can be useful tools to assess museum perceptions. Nontraditional audiences can be targeted for study to determine why they do not visit and what might increase their chance of visitation. If Hood (1983) is correct, one must consider the relation of leisure goals to visitation. Leisure goals may be at least partially culturally connected.

Examples. Adams (1993, see page 15) offers an example of how a nontraditional audience can be targeted. It is not clear how effectively community attitudes toward a museum can be changed.

2. Provide culturally relevant programs and exhibits.

Cultural relevancy. When a museum (or other visitor facility) provides culturally relevant programs and exhibits, these audiences are more likely to visit. Cultural relevancy includes the language used for interpretation (labels, audio tours, pamphlets) and the subject matter itself (e.g., African culture or art). Programs and exhibits should not be temporary if the museum expects the audience to return (Hood, 1993). African-Americans often visit museums during Black History Month to see special exhibits or participate in special programs, but don't visit the rest of the year because there are no relevant programs/exhibits.

Role of visitor evaluation. A visitor study can be used to determine needs of multicultural audiences. Studies may ask: How many non-English speaking people visit? What subject matters generate the highest interest from each target group?

Examples. Bitgood (1993a; pp. 13-14 of this issue) reported a study of Puerto Rican and international visitors to the El Yunque rainforest. Puerto Rican, more than international visitors, were interested in the importance of the El Yunque rainforest's cultural context, e.g., religious significance to natives, value of the rainforest to the city of San Juan). In another study reported in this issue, African-Americans show higher interest in African culture than Caucasian visitors (Bitgood, 1993b; pp. 16-17).

3. Involve multicultural audiences in decision making.

Involvement of multicultural audiences. Involvement can include placing minorities in decision-making positions on the museum's board of trustees, having minorities in management positions, and including community representatives from cultural minorities on exhibit/program committees.

Role of evaluation. Evaluation can be built into any project. Minority recruitment and training projects can be evaluated for effectiveness in a straightforward manner.

Examples. Don Adams (1993, see page 15) at the Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village reported a project that involved minority involvement at all levels of exhibit development. Another example is provided by a collaborative of science museums who have been implementing the Career Access Program for recruiting and training minorities (Crandell, 1992).

4. Provide an environment that is psychologically and physically comfortable to the target audience.

Comfortable environment. Visitors must feel welcome at a museum or they will not return. Visitor orientation is particularly important as visitors enter the facility. Those who are unfamiliar with the museum may not know what there is to see, where to go, or where to find the rest rooms, especially if signs are in a language they cannot read. Another critical aspect of psychological comfort is interaction with the front-line staff (receptionist, security guards, etc.). If a guard yells at a visitor for getting too close to an object, the visitor is likely to feel unwelcome. Physical comfort is also important. Places to sit, food, temperature control, and control of ambient noise lead to increased physical comfort.

Visitor evaluation. Perceived comfort can be assessed through various self-report methods including survey and focus groups.

Examples. There is little doubt that providing a "visitor friendly" environment for nontraditional cultural audiences

increases visitor satisfaction while an unfriendly environment decreases satisfaction (e.g., Hood, 1993b).

Final Comment

Evaluation can be a useful tool for addressing the problems of dealing with multicultural audiences. The literature suggests that an approach with several elements (such as the four-pronged approach suggested in this article) is more likely than a simple plan to have an impact on the attitudes and behaviors of nontraditional cultural audiences. The problems of multi-culturalism are similar to more general problems faced by museums — i.e., the problems of attracting nontraditional visitors to the museum and creating a satisfying experience once they do visit.

References

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