

IT'S GOOD FOR YOU!

by D. Neil Bremer

Why don't many museums get it? I mean really bother to get in the heads of their visitors? In conversations over the years with some of the original founders of the Visitor Studies Association, I've heard, again and again, the frustration borne out of the apparent inability of many museums to appreciate hard data about visitors. I've often wondered exactly why some museum professionals claim to make decisions based on what is best for the visitor and then exhibit glaring omissions of common sense that could have been avoided with the smallest bit of empathy.

Empathy is the key and, in my opinion, the only way to create a true dialogue with a visitor. The soliloquies presented as exhibition by so many museums are failing to engage a large part of the populace and continue to support claims that museums are elitist. It is entirely possible to engage the public in a cultural dialogue without lecturing to them. The question really is; Do museums want to?

You can ask any curator or museum director about mission and get in return concepts like "collect" and "preserve." As visitor professionals, we need to push the museum decision-makers another step. When we ask them to explain their purpose we can no longer accept words describing a process as an answer. When Mr. or Ms. Curator says our "purpose is to collect and preserve" we must ask, "For whom?"

"Well, of course, for society!"

"Ahh! And who makes up this society?"

"Everyone."

"Everyone? You mean even the visitors who come through the front door?"

"Yes."

At this point we must smile, ever so subtly to ourselves, and think, "GOTCHA! Now, on to step two."

"Tell me again what you think your purpose is?"

"I told you, to collect and preserve."

"Oh, I see. I misunderstood. You see, collecting and preserving aren't really the purposes. Those are the processes. Exactly WHY do you collect and preserve?"

"To keep our culture, history, art, and truth for future generations."

"Oh. Why?"

"How are we going to help society better understand itself when we seem to not care whether or not they even understand the museum?"

"What do you mean WHY? So that society may better understand itself."

"I see. The purpose isn't really to collect and preserve, it's to help society better understand itself. The collecting and preserving are the steps the museum takes to achieve this purpose."

"Yeah. Right. Excuse me, I have to take a call from an important donor."

At this point the curator leaves. Maybe getting it. Maybe not. Of course this scenario was depicting an ideal conversation with a somewhat enlightened museum professional. Actual discussions of this nature may



take much longer than you care to spend in a museum office.

How are we going to help society better understand itself when we seem to not care whether or not they even understand the museum? It is true that there are many mature museum-goers who can focus on a small selection of objects or a specific concept and really dig for meaning. They do not fall into the cultural window-shopper definition. The difficulty lies in the fact that there simply are not enough of them in society to sustain many cultural organizations. I've said in many AAM presentations that we are at great risk of losing some small and medium-sized museums in this country because funding will continue to shrink and the earned income will not support the institution. Large institutions with equally large endowments will scoop up the collections of these smaller museums playing the role of the object-hero while the number of works sitting in storage grows and grows. I think of the recent scare in Virginia where the state govern-

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APRIL AWARD LUNCHEON SET FOR AUGUST 6, 1999

by Marilyn Hood, April Award Committee Chair

The recipient of the third April Award Travelship will be honored at the Visitor Studies Conference luncheon on Friday, August 6, 1999. The award, consisting of a waiver of the conference registration fee, will assist a junior VSA member to attend his/her first VSA conference. The luncheon raises funds to support the travelship.

Highlighting the event will be VSA's own Neil Bremer, who delighted VSA members at the first April Award luncheon with his irreverent comments about life in the museum world. Neil will be back to continue his commentary at the 1999 luncheon by asking, "What if You Opened the Museum and Nobody Came?"

In his insightful, and at most times humorous, commentary on the state of museums and their visitors, Neil emphasizes paying attention to what visitors need and how to think like a potential visitor. He'll talk about the choices museums make regarding their visitors and the use of "all those visitor studies and other research that
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IT'S GOOD FOR YOU! (CONT.)

ment proposed cutting ALL funding for any museums that were not state run museums. Some smaller institutions received a very large part of their funding from the state.

As I write this, I read in my clipping service about the Ringling Museum in Florida. This is an excerpt from the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune*:

"Ringling Museum Foundation directors have quietly established a bank line of credit to cover cash flow shortfalls at the state-owned art museum. It is the first time since the museum became state property in 1946 that administrators have had to borrow money to cover operating costs."

The museum foundation has raised more than \$2 million in donations that, coupled with more than \$6 million in state appropriations, will pay to restore the mansion. But those donations are marked "restricted," meaning they can only be used for the specific purpose intended.

Unrestricted funds—income from admissions, gift shop profits and general donations—have been a scarcer commodity. Paid museum attendance, which provides the bulk of unrestricted funds, has been flat since the beginning of the decade, despite efforts like the museum's well-publicized 50th anniversary celebration and exhibits in 1997.

I wonder—if museums really had

to dig for unrestricted funds and earned income, would they then miraculously be imbued with a desire to understand how visitors see the museum experience? The key is empathy. What does it feel like to visit your museum? What challenges are hiding, waiting to leap out and destroy a visitor's museum experience? The sad fact remains, and I've seen this again and again in my consulting, so many museum professionals are so busy at being "professionals" that they've forgotten what it is like to visit a museum. They've forgotten that the experience is taken as a whole, even if single objects cause emotive responses. They've forgotten that simple, less than satisfactory encounters with staff can seriously diminish a museum visit. They've forgotten that intuitive and anticipatory wayfinding assistance can alleviate the natural fatigue that can permeate a museum visit and douse the spark of real learning. They've forgotten that they may not hold the best objective opinion because they've walked those galleries and museum halls countless times and have long lost the sense of discovery for that particular space.

A recent architectural faux pas at a major art museum is an amazing example of less-than-empathetic behavior. You'd think that for a billion dol-

lars, they'd get it right. A quote from a director spells out the "I know best" museum syndrome:

"A lot of it has to do with human behavior," she said. "We put in a huge bathroom at the tram station, thinking that guests might want to use the restrooms before they began their visit. But people just wanted to get on the tram and not make a pit stop."

Hey, some people go before they leave, some people wait until they get there. Doesn't just a little bit of empathy help us to remember that we are forever telling our children "to go before we leave" and then our kids always seem to have to go after we get there anyway? What's with this museum? Their misunderstanding of simple human needs makes them come across as the quintessential parental museum, admonishing us to "go before we leave."

And we wonder why some museums are accused of being elitist. Maybe it will be the Visitor Studies Association that finally helps museums to use empathy and understand their visitors.

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