

The Single and Singleton Audience at Old Sturbridge Village

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Introduction

During the second week of August 1996 a family of six from California was planning how to spend their free time while visiting with relatives in Rhode Island. By family vote, mom and dad and the four kids decided to visit Old Sturbridge Village, the largest outdoor living museum in the northeast. On many different levels, they were typical of significant segments of the museum's visitors. Like more than 80% of them, they comprised a nuclear family unit, headed by a married head-of-household. Like more than half of our adult visitors, the parents had been to the museum before, having last visited 17 years ago (on their honeymoon). And like most Americans, the father had never won anything in his life — but that was soon to change. As he crossed the museum's entrance threshold with his family, he became the Village's 20 millionth visitor, was presented with generous mementos of the occasion, and likely became one of the Village's most satisfied visitors of all time.

This special milestone in the museum's history was 50 years in the making, occurring in this, our golden jubilee year. Over the past five decades, Old Sturbridge Village has welcomed and introduced visitors to the bygone world of 1830s New England, where costumed interpreters demonstrate the broad panorama of everyday life within a re-created Village setting. Across the years, the majority of museum visitors have come, like our recent celebrant, in married family groups — a pattern which continues to rule the leisure travel industry today. The latest United States Data Travel Center Travelscope data indicate the pattern of pleasure travel — both nationally and in our state of Massachusetts — to be dominated by couples and younger families with average travel group size just greater than three persons. A recent segmentation study of leisure travelers to and within Massachusetts by the state's Office of Travel and Tourism identifies four primary targets — Value Vacationers, Culture/

Families, Young Families, and Active Explorers — all of whom share as common denominators a core group defined by marriage. The travel planner *Getaway Guide*, prepared by the state for prospective visitors, is geared to these very groups (Massachusetts Office of Travel and Tourism, 1996).

Several years ago, Old Sturbridge Village initiated an ongoing program of audience research to help us understand the motivations, expectations, preferences, and demographic profiles of our own key audience segments, as we prepare for the considerable challenges of our next half century and beyond. Analysis of questionnaires systematically administered to large samples of on-site visitors and to current and former member groups is already providing a critical perspective to help us strengthen and enhance the museum visitor experience¹.

While much of our analytical focus has, heretofore, centered upon the married, family visitors — like our 20 millionth and like the majority of travelers within our state — there is much to be gained from an understanding of the nearly one in five visitors who is single: who has never married, is divorced, separated or widowed. With no appreciable difference in the day or even seasonality of their visits, these unmarried visitors are a constant, significant presence on our museum landscape, and they differ in very interesting and telling ways from our married visitor base. We shall, in turn, examine differences between the single and married visitors to Old Sturbridge Village, within the singles group itself, and between single and married museum members. In addition, we shall look briefly at the distinct group of singletons — those who visit the Village alone, or singly — to see how they differ from the great majority who visit with friends and family. A variety of measures, including t-test, analysis of variance, chi-square, CHAID, and factor analysis, have elucidated significant points of contrast within the data.

Understanding the Single Audience

Unmarried visitors to Old Sturbridge Village are, on the whole, a bit younger, more of them are female and are better educated, and they have median household incomes \$20,000 less than their married counterparts. Less than one in five single visitors hold membership in other museums — compared with one in four married visitors. The museums each group chooses to visit most frequently also differ: single

visitors more often visit art museums and attend musical performances. For married visitors, historical sites and amusement parks are the venues of choice. So, too, do the groups differ in their criteria for choosing leisure activities, with single visitors more likely to seek things which allow them to participate actively and have a challenge of new experiences. And they, more than married visitors, frequently engage in activities in which they venture beyond their home setting — going to the movies, shopping, or walking, biking and hiking.

The museum visit group composition of single and married visitors is quite different. Visiting with a friend, a group of friends, or alone are the standout characteristics of unmarried visitors, while more than two-thirds of married visitors come with a spouse only or with members of their nuclear family. Significantly fewer single, compared to married, visitors have been to the museum five or more times. And while children do not factor prominently in their visit groups, out-of-town guests do: singles, nearly twice as often as married visitors, have a guest from out of town in their visit group, a factor cited as more important to them than the married group in motivating their visit to the museum (Table 1).

There is a significant increase in overall visit satisfaction where an out-of-town guest is present in the unmarried-visitor group. Interestingly, a negative association holds true for married visitors. Overall, single visitors rate the satisfaction of their experience and its value significantly less than do married visitors. Some of this is related to the length of the visit — the shorter the visit, the lower the other ratings. It is also related to the company one keeps during the museum visit: unmarried visitors, when accompanied by members of their household or extended family, find greater satisfaction than do those with a friend only (who account for more than 40 percent of single visits). But it is other, more subtle leisure-time indicators that are among the most significant in predicting high visit satisfaction for our single visitors. That satisfaction is highly related to frequency of visits to art museums, for example, and, more generally, to the things deemed most important when choosing what to do in their free time. Single visitors for whom having a challenge of new experiences or sharing the experience with others is very important, or those who attached greatest importance to both having an opportunity to learn something and choosing to come to the Village to enjoy its attractive, friendly environment, are much more satisfied with their visits than any other group.

Never-Married, Divorced, and Widowed Visitors

Some very interesting differences within the unmarried-visitor group skew along lines defined by marital status — among the nearly two-thirds who have never married, the nearly one in three who are divorced or separated, and the better than one in ten who are widowed. The most significant defining attribute of the three groups is age — never-married are the youngest, and widowed the oldest of the three groups. Other demographic characteristics further define the three: the divorced and widowed who, in general, live a bit farther away from the museum than do the never-married visitors and include a greater percentage of females than the never-married group. Although income level provides a bit more comfort for the widowed group than the others, they are the least educated of the three (39 percent of the group is college educated compared with 68 percent of the never-married group).

The widowed visitors, nevertheless, outpace the others three to one in terms of percentage who belong to other museums (nearly half). And they, as well, are the standout group in repeat visitation to Old Sturbridge Village, with 60 percent having been to the museum before. Widowed and divorced visitors are accompanied by children nearly twice as often as never-married visitors. And nearly half of the widowed group, greater than the others, is in the company of an out-of-town guest when visiting Old Sturbridge Village (Table 2). The composition of the visit groups also differs significantly: although never-married visitors, more than others, visit with friends, the divorced and widowed tend to visit in household and extended family groupings, respectively, which — it should be remembered — were associated with higher visit satisfaction for the unmarried group at large. All told, the divorced and widowed visitors are the most satisfied — both in terms of value and the overall visit — and warrant further attention.

Single Museum Members

The data from surveys to a sample of more than 8,000 of our members in the family, individual-plus-one, and individual categories also suggest a membership subgroup — singles — which we would do well to court. Again, by marital status, there are some key differences within the membership group based on their motivation to join the museum in the

first place. Single members, more than married, join to support a worthwhile institution, because of their interest in the museum's architecture and collections, and the discounts — which bodes well for a longer-term relationship with the institution. Married members, in contrast, are motivated more by the museum as a place for family outings and by the admission pricing advantage the membership option holds for larger families — the latter being the most important factor in the high attrition rate among family memberships after the first year.

Consistent with their motivations, single members bring guests (at a discount) and visit the gift shop nearly twice as often as do married members. While less likely to use the picnic grove, they eat at the museum tavern more frequently. The financial implications of these findings are obvious and assume added significance considering the high satisfaction rate among individual-category members as seen in both survey response rates and in the percentage of those in the survey who chose to renew their membership within the following year. Moreover, individual members — most of whom are single — have much greater persistence rates from year to year. More than 40 percent of individual memberships have been held for 15 years or longer. Length of association, as we know, helps solidify the affinity members have with the institution and bolsters their participation as donors. The comments of a single female member of 11 years are typical: "I am very pleased with my membership. I always like to bring friends or visitors to the Village. I also try to contribute at special times to the Annual Appeal."

Moreover, as members pass through life-cycle stages, including the loss of a spouse, the museum still holds a special place in their hearts. "I enjoy the Village on my own a lot now and enjoy remembering the family visits. Now I also bring grandchildren at times," writes a widow. "I used to visit the Village every year and greatly enjoyed every visit," writes a 94-year-old widower, now living in Virginia. "Supporting the Village as always is most important to me. It is the only thing I have left." While he hasn't visited in the last 20 of his more than 30 years of membership, his memories are ever strong and he greatly values keeping abreast of the museum through the member magazine.

Interestingly, it is the transition in marital status — from married to divorced — which accounts for a considerable proportion of attrition among family membership holders after the first year. "Divorce, personal upheaval, limited finances" is a typical comment from within this group.

The Singleton Audience

Lastly, we examine the singletons and their experience visiting the museum. This group is not defined by marital status, for exactly half are married and half are distributed among the single categories. Rather, this very small group, comprising 2 percent of all casual and member visitors, chooses to visit the Village alone. When we compare them with the majority of casual visitors and members who visit with groups of family members and friends, we find some fascinating differences .

Singletons are, on the whole, a bit older and have median household incomes \$10,000 less than those who visit with others. While visitors in groups are well educated by any standard, a remarkable 81 percent of singletons are college graduates. Moreover, more than one-third are business executives or higher-level professionals, compared to one in four of the others. Singletons, much more than accompanied visitors, are members of other museums and differ significantly in how often they participate in cultural activities, frequently patronizing visitors art and history museums and musical performances.

Singletons, as a whole, make more spontaneous decisions to visit Old Sturbridge Village than visitors in groups: 52 percent of singletons decide to come within 24 hours of their museum visit. In some ways, this is related to the fact that the context of the museum visit for one-third of them is as a side trip while on business. Combined with those who come to the museum as a day trip, they account for 70 percent of singleton visits. Singletons have significantly shorter museum visits, with a mean visit length of 3.1 hours versus 3.8 hours for those visiting in groups. In fact, nearly half of singletons visit less than three hours. But they are no less satisfied with their overall visit than visitors in groups.

As with the unmarried group, there are several factors which substantially heighten visit satisfaction for singletons. Visit satisfaction is given an extra boost for the one in three who view the orientation film — much more than for the one in five visitors in groups. And it is elevated still higher for singletons who place great importance on participating actively and sharing the experience with others when choosing leisure-time activities. Singletons, overall, have very strong visit experiences. A greater percentage of them, compared to visitors in groups, will recommend the Village to others, and, as well, will plan their own return visit within the coming year. Sixty-three percent of singletons who are, themselves, repeat visitors have been to the Village more than five times

and this, more than any other variable, serves to define and even predict membership within this key visit group (Table 3). It is truly a group which, again, deserves our nurture and attention.

Conclusion

In towns and villages of the era we portray at Old Sturbridge Village, single people living alone would have been a rare sight, indeed. As the enumerator for the federal census went from home to home in the central Massachusetts town of Shrewsbury in 1820, for example, he only encountered two people living singly. One was a spinster named Mary Garfield. While the town chronicler recounted that she “did good work in spinning for her neighbors,” most townspeople were shy of her and called her “Old Mar Garfield the witch.” Living alone in that era was socially proscribed and was, at times, a sign of eccentricity, or worse, madness.

Up to the middle of the 19th century, 40 percent of Americans lived in households with eight or more members. Since that time, “reflecting a long and pervasive decline in childbearing and shifts in living arrangements, American households have steadily become much smaller” and more diverse (Larkin, 1988: 11). In contemporary society, people are living by themselves in rapidly increasing numbers. Nearly one-fourth of households in 1994 were comprised of people living alone. Between 1984 and 1994, single-person households increased 18 percent and those of single parents 31 percent. Women living alone — most being elderly widows — comprised 15 percent of all US households (Francese, 1995). Projections for the year 2000, just four short years away, suggest that married-couple households will comprise a smaller share (53 percent) of all US households, and those with children headed by unmarried women will continue to outpace other household types, growing by 1.5 million (Stewart & Cook, 1990; Furstenberg, 1996). This thumbnail situation analysis is reason alone to lend a sense of urgency to our focus on single visitors to Old Sturbridge Village.

Moreover, recent research by the Americans’ Use of Time project and by the National Center for Health Statistics suggests that Americans are feeling more rushed than they were 30 years ago, are experiencing higher levels of stress than they were 10 years ago, and perceive that they have less, rather than more, free time. By marital status, those highest on the time-crunch scale and those claiming highest levels of stress are the

never-married and the divorced (Robinson & Godbey, 1996). The Village helps provide an antidote. Writes a single, individual member participating in a survey of our membership:

“The Village is, for me, a place of delight — a place to visit, to enjoy, to learn, to dream, to reconnect with our past. It is also a haven of peace for a mind battered by our noisy, discordant present — in which I can experience the healing of peaceful and mostly silent surroundings, and remember important and basic values.”

Let us hope that through continued exploration of our data we are more successful in targeting, attracting, and serving our single and singleton audiences, and providing them with satisfying museum visit experiences and personal rejuvenation.

References

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Footnotes

¹ Data provided by: 1993 mail questionnaires to random samples of then-current museum members (N = 632, response rate (RR) = 63%), and members who had lapsed after 1 year of membership (N = 654, RR = 47%); and a 1993-1994 four-season questionnaire randomly administered to exiting museum visitors (N = 2,753, RR = 75%).

Table 1
Single and Married Visitors to Old Sturbridge Village

	Single	Married
Mean Age:	39	44
% Female:	62%	54%
% College Graduates:	60%	52%
Median Household Income:	\$40-50,000	\$60-70,000
% Members of Other Museums:	19%	25%
% Having Visited 5 or More Times:	26%	42%
% with Children in Visit Group:	21%	46%
% with Out-of-Town Guest in Visit Group:	33%	17%

Table 2
Unmarried Visitors to Old Sturbridge Village

	Never-Married	Divorced	Widowed
Mean Age:	34	44	61
% Female:	56%	70%	77%
% College Graduates	68%	55%	39%
Median Household Income:	\$40-50,000	\$40-50,000	\$55-65,000
% Living within 75 Miles:	62%	49%	49%
% Members of Other Museums:	15%	17%	48%
% Repeat Visitors:	52%	57%	60%
% with Children in Visit Group:	15%	34%	28%
% with Out-of-Town Guest in Visit Group:	35%	24%	45%

Table 3
Singletons and Visitors in Groups to Old Sturbridge Village

	Singletons	Visitors in Groups
% Married:	50%	83%
Mean Age:	46	43
% College Graduates:	81%	60%
% Business Executives:	36%	26%
Median Household Income:	\$50-60,000	\$60-70,000
% Members of Other Museums:	33%	24%
% Plan Visit Within 24 Hours of Arrival:	52%	38%
% Visit a Side Trip While on Business:	33%	3%
% with Out-of-Town Guest in Visit Group:	33%	17%
% Having Visited 5 or More Times:	63%	38%