After 70 Years of Audience Research, What Have We Learned?

Who Comes to Museums, Who Does Not, and Why?

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Introduction

Two years ago at the Visitor Studies Conference in Washington, D.C., several of us researchers spoke on state-of-the-art of visitor research and evaluation. Later that day I overheard a Texas museum director proclaim, "This is such a young field, the founders are still living!"

Well, the founders are not still living, and today's researchers are the third, or perhaps even fourth, generation in this field. I found the director's comment to be revealing of the general lack of knowledge of our history and of the literature that is relevant to our endeavors. If medicine ignored its literature the way this field has, we would still be bleeding patients and operating without anesthesia!

My research centers around the characteristics of people who do and do not come to museums, what attracts them, and what keeps them away. The literature I draw on is not only museology, but sociology, psychology, leisure science, education, communications, consumer behavior, and marketing.

First, I have to expand the title of this subject to go back 90 years to deal with the reasons audiences are attracted to museums, because one of the first articles I found that treated the museum from the visitor's point of view described the children's room at the Smithsonian in 1901. The article said that the Smithsonian had reserved a small cozy room for children, with pretty things—not too many—but each object was chosen to give a child pleasure. It was so arranged because the child "must be attracted and pleased and made to wonder, for in wonder lie the beginnings of knowledge" (Paine, 1901).

In addition, there were simply-worded labels in large type, so a child was able to read them and not become wearied or puzzled. Though that children's room might not provoke wonder today, at least the intent was to provide something in terms of what the visitors could respond to.

Knowing how to deal with the message is the critical demarcation between visitors and non-visitors to museums. Those who don't come

invariably explain that they don't feel the museum cares whether they attend because it hasn't demonstrated that it will put its message in terms that are meaningful to them.

Research also tells us that for the well-educated person, the museum offers the challenging prospect of expanding his or her horizons and engaging in constructive activity. For the lesser-educated person, the museum is often simply too demanding and daunting in terms of comprehension and communication to make a visit worthwhile (Pommerehne & Frey, 1980).

We know from hundreds of museum visitor surveys that the typical frequent museum visitor, in both the United States and Canada, is in the upper education, upper occupation, and upper income groups. I understand this is true in most other industrialized countries as well. This social class factor applies across the spectrum of museums—from zoos, science-technology centers and children's museums to historical sites, botanical gardens, and art museums. Our frequent visitor base and our volunteers and members normally come largely from this group of people because they are attracted to the kinds of experiences museums offer and they find those offerings and activities to be satisfying.

These folk emphasize three factors in their leisure life: opportunities to learn, the challenge of new experiences, and doing something worthwhile for themselves. The occasional visitor, on the other hand, is drawn more to leisure activities that emphasize opportunities for social interaction, participating actively, and feeling comfortable and at ease in his or her surroundings (Hood, 1981, 1983, 1989).

Comfort and Social Interaction Factors

Let me explore more the comfort and social interaction aspects because they are paramount leisure attributes for occasional and non-visitors. There's a wonderfully-illustrated article entitled "Museum Fatigue," in *Scientific Monthly* for 1916, which pictures a man elegantly attired in striped trousers and morning coat bending, stretching, leaning, twisting into a pretzel, trying to view the objects at a typical art museum of the time. The author (Gilman, 1916) uses these illustrations to chastise museums for being so inconsiderate of their visitors' comfort.

Arthur Upham Pope followed with another article on museum fatigue in 1924, in which he wrote "...most visitors to a museum leave rather like discharged patients from a hospital, instead of refreshed and exhilarated." He specifically cited slippery floors, standing, slow walking, dim light, reflections on glass, and no seating as causes. We might ask ourselves, what have we learned over the past 70 years?

When Edward S. Robinson, the first person to carry out extensive and systematic museum audience research, published his original findings in 1928, he concluded that museum fatigue may be more a question of

psychological than physical discomfort. When today's occasional visitors are asked why they don't attend more frequently, they still cite this reason. Though it is amazing how many museums still lack plentiful, comfortable places to sit, it is the mental saturation that more often wears people out. We are still pummeling visitors by overloading them mentally and physically, and then complaining that too few guests read every label, look at every object, or follow the sequence we laid out for them.

Robinson chided museum management in 1931 to make an effort to understand the rank and file visitors, not just the connoisseurs, and advised curators to learn to see the difference between the public mind and their own viewpoint. He asserted that the curator could get help from the professional educator who could introduce observational and statistical processes to develop factual knowledge of the museum visitor. As Robinson said, there is no "*the* museum visitor. There is an average visitor...." The challenge, he suggested, is to set up the museum so each visitor feels it's at his level—providing a setting in which no one is either insulted or overwhelmed.

Robinson wrote in 1933 that one of the problems in assessing how visitors responded to museum offerings was that he at first accepted the museum's objectives, assuming they were well thought-out. Then he realized he must confront the institution by telling it: If visitors can't discern the museum's philosophy, the philosophy must be changed and the outlook of the curators must change. A true visitors' advocate, Robinson realized that when visitors were confused about what the museum intended, that contributed to both mental and physical fatigue, to their reluctance to return, and to the diminution of their satisfaction—as measured by *their* expectations and objectives.

Louis Powell, director of the St. Paul Science Museum, was the first to report on changes in visitation by season, something that even today is overlooked by museums when they plan programs, and even by some researchers when evaluating visitor response. His 1938 report on a six-year study showed recurrent seasonal patterns of attendance by general visitation, tour groups, and local vs. tourist guests.

Leisure and Communications Research

Though there's a paucity of literature from the late 1930s to the early 1950s on characteristics of museum visitors and non-visitors, much was being published in other fields that relates to museum audience research. Two areas are of particular relevance to us: research on leisure and research on communications—specifically persuasion techniques.

The first studies of leisure were an adjunct to studies of work, when leisure was defined as "all the time in a day when the individual is not sleeping, eating, or working" (White, 1955). Today we define leisure as time when we voluntarily choose to do whatever gives us satisfaction and

enjoyment. The essential word is *choice*. People choose to come to museums, to find experiences that reward their investment of time, effort, attention, and sometimes money. And they choose not to come if they find the rewards don't meet their expectations or are less than they can attain in alternative offerings.

As long as most people worked long hours (the five and one-half or six-day work week was common through the 1940s), there was little time for leisure activities. However, as unions won concessions for shorter work weeks, the eight-hour day, and longer vacations, the shift in thinking about leisure became one of alarm. A major book of 1958, *Mass Leisure* (Larrabee & Meyersohn, 1958), reported that corporations, politicians, and planners watched apprehensively as the four-day work week loomed on the horizon and they worried how people would find enough to occupy a three-day weekend.

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., asserted that "The most dangerous threat hanging over American society is the threat of leisure...and those who have the least preparation for leisure will have the most of it" (Swados, 1958). The problem of what two hundred million Americans would do with their increased leisure time was "so awesome in its magnitude as to be terrifying," Harvey Swados claimed (Swados, 1958).

As we know, their fears did not materialize. Instead, since 1973 we have had a precipitous drop in the number of hours of leisure. From 1973-87, the average number of leisure hours for Americans declined 37%, according to Louis Harris, who has repeatedly polled on this subject. This fact still comes as a surprise to most museum staff, who erroneously believe that leisure hours are still increasing and that museums can capitalize on that opportunity (*Americans and the Arts V*, 1988).

Now a word about how communications research has benefitted museums. During World War II, there was a concerted government effort to research how people receive and act on communications, especially propaganda or persuasion. What kinds of messages, delivered in what manner, would cause people to change their attitudes and behaviors? The voluminous reports produced by a sizeable body of sophisticated researchers studying the flow of communications, including resistance to unwelcome messages and vulnerability to persuasion, provided subsequent researchers with a library of solid information that can be applied by any organization wanting to influence others to adopt its viewpoint, program or service.

This impetus led to the field called *diffusion and personal influence* research, which included the recognition of the importance of "word-of-mouth" communication. Museums are not alone in regularly employing the techniques of diffusion and personal influence. We all seek out the recommendation of those we consider to be knowledgeable about a subject or place, and organizations endeavor to influence community opinion leaders, who in turn disperse ideas to their primary social groups.

Advertisers and public relations practitioners use persuasion techniques to influence our purchasing and other behaviors.

The process of *diffusion of innovations*—how new ideas, behaviors, and purchases are adopted— has been defined primarily by Everett M. Rogers, whose book by that title was published in 1962. Rogers identified five types of people in the adoption of any entity—innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards—and noted that different approaches are required to reach each type.

Understanding how the habit of museum-going is adopted by a group of infrequent visitors requires special comprehension of the diffusion process. This is particularly true when trying to interest non-white, immigrant, or less-educated audiences. Someone from that group must vouch for the museum, or act as a liaison, because these people will rarely seek out the museum. This then leads to the study of primary and secondary reference groups and their influence on the adoption of new behaviors. Since Adrian Aveni covered that topic in his 1990 Visitor Studies Conference paper, I refer readers to those *Proceedings*, except to say that an understanding of the influence of primary and secondary groups on choices of leisure activities is absolutely critical to a museum's outreach efforts.

Museology Research 1950-1969

Returning now to museology research—studies of reactions to an exhibit of Japanese art shown in three American cities in the mid-1950s documented differences in satisfaction with the exhibit, depending on the amount of advance publicity the show received and the education level of the visitors. In Chicago and Boston, where there was no unusual hype about the exhibit, research showed that the typical museum audience attended and there was no dissatisfaction with the exhibit as related to educational level (Bigman, 1956a, 1956b). In Seattle, a publicity blitz drew thousands of people who had little background or interest in Japanese art, and who were bewildered and disappointed by their visit. Greater promotion, therefore, requires a museum to offer extended interpretation to a larger proportion of visitors who are unprepared to understand the content.

Arthur Niehoff recognized the importance of comfort factors when he described the proposed new (now extant) Milwaukee Public Museum in 1956. He said it would be entirely accessible to the elderly, the handicapped, and those with strollers. It would have escalators and an elevator, floor surfaces that would ease leg and foot fatigue, attractive lounges spaced at intervals for rest, air conditioning, lighting without glare, restrooms on each floor, a lunchroom, a checkroom, an information desk, and a sales counter. Thirty-six years later, these visitor amenities and services are still missing from many museums. Niehoff also reported on the demographic differences between summer and winter visitors to that museum (1953, 1959), following up on Powell's earlier research (1938).

Duncan Cameron initiated a comprehensive and lengthy audience research program at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in 1956. His 1960 article on "Visits versus Visitors" caused thoughtful museum administrators to re-evaluate their attendance figures, for Cameron found that because of high repeat visitation, his attendance total should be reduced by half to represent the actual number of individuals who visited the museum in one year. The fact that visit*ation* does not equal visit*ors* is still overlooked by museums.

Cameron and his colleague David Abbey (1960) offered many more pertinent analyses of the museum visitor and recommendations for improving visitor interaction with museums. Results of their extensive audience research and evaluation program have appeared in ROM publications and museum journals. They wisely urged researchers to investigate the motivations underlying museum visitation, to help the museum understand the discrepancies between its self-image and the public's image, between its defined objectives and role in the community and the role it's actually playing—good advice today as museums re-examine their roles.

Cameron and Abbey deplored the state of audience research, which was usually inadequately carried out without appropriate social research methods (including sampling and statistical techniques) and the lack of publication of results, which caused other museums to duplicate efforts. In 1961 they proposed investigating why some people attend and some don't by sampling a large number of Toronto households, a process which they hoped would allow them to divide the respondents into frequent, occasional, and non-visitor categories. With this data base they could examine respondents' use of leisure time, attitudes toward cultural institutions, and frequency of museum visitation (Cameron & Abbey, 1961). The recommendations in that *Museum News* article greatly influenced the design of my subsequent research on motivations for participation in leisure pursuits, including museum-going.

Leisure and Museology Research 1969-1979

Three important publications appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s: *The Journal of Leisure Research, Leisure Sciences*, and the book, *Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations* by Philip Kotler. Though none of these deals predominantly with museums, all offer relevant information and should be considered essential to any audience researcher's reading list.

The journals examine a variety of audience variables in light of several leisure theories. The hypotheses upon which the studies are conducted are generated from knowledge of previous literature and theory. These articles are much farther along in their theoretical base, methodology, analysis, and interpretation of applicable results than those which are published in most museology publications. I cite these journals because, as Ross Loomis observed in 1974, museums haven't developed a theoretical model of visitor

behavior and little has been written about museums as social institutions or the museum visit as a social or leisure activity. The theory and publications of leisure science might serve us as a model.

For example, in 1970 Witt and Bishop outlined research based on five classic theories of leisure (relaxation/restoration, catharsis, compensation, task generalization, and surplus energy), whereas museology has yet to produce one classic theory from its 70 or 90 years of research. Witt and Bishop's list was not inclusive of all the leisure theories that are bases for research.

Two other researchers (Burdge & Field, 1972) pointed out that the continued lack of response by low-income people to questions about their leisure behavior may be due to the researcher asking about activities that the respondents considered to be irrelevant. This idea counters the popular supposition that these people do not have any such activity. This type of inquiry is still a problem on many museum questionnaires in which visitors are queried only about high culture options (ballet, symphony, theater, opera) while omitting more common activities (sightseeing, picnicking, going to parks).

According to three researchers (Mazis, Ahtola, & Klippel, 1975), those who conduct research into attitudes must investigate respondents' salient beliefs, because if people are questioned about attributes they don't value, and not queried about ones they do value, the interview will offer little useful information about their attitudes and possible future behaviors. This problem also appears in many museum questionnaires, which focus only on what museum staff consider to be important, not on what counts to the respondents.

Participation in an activity depends on the potential participants' perception of benefits provided by that activity, and not on their making an objective evaluation of the ability of the activity to satisfy their motives, needs, or preferences (Hendee & Burdge, 1974). Consequently, a person acts on his or her perception of reality, rather than on the actual reality—that is, on his or her interpretation of the benefits of a museum visit, and not what the museum actually offers. This factor is often overlooked by museum planners.

Several articles in the 1970s indicated there was a direct effect of a person's childhood level of participation in recreation experiences on his adult involvement in the same patterns of activities (Yoesting & Burkhead, 1973). These articles prompted me to investigate the "carryover" effect of childhood museum attendance on adult participation.

The flip side of carryover is that those who did not recall childhood visits as enjoyable were not adult participants in museums. Dixon, Courtney, and Bailey (1974) found that non-visitors were more indifferent to the museum experience than they were frustrated by or hostile to it. In their studies, it was found that at least half of the non-goers did not recall school visits as enjoyable, had trouble finding their way around museums, were not

interested in museums, and thought museums were always the same. These authors recommended that museums should concentrate on developing the infrequent visitor, whose motivation is present and needs to be cultivated. This is sensible advise for a serious audience development program.

Eisenbeis (1972) offered an outline of what should be investigated in order to develop what he called a *sociology of museums*. This area of study addresses how people spend their free time, the leisure activities in which they participate, their use of cultural facilities, those segments of society which visit museums, the socio-cultural prerequisites and motivations for visiting and not visiting, and the image of the museum and of museum visits as held by various strata of society. Adopting such a holistic approach to audience research and audience development would advance the field tremendously. Too frequently, museums still conduct extremely limited studies on minute subjects which lack generalizability to any other setting.

Another model predicted that people rate leisure to be at its best when the freedom to participate is high, the activity is intrinsically motivated, and the activity is engaged in for its own value, rather than to achieve another goal (Neulinger, 1974). Conversely, the perception of a "worst" leisure activity is accorded to one in which freedom to participate is low, the activity is extrinsically motivated, and the activity is performed for the sake of achieving another goal. When we measure school trips against these leisure values, we can see why many adults have unfavorable memories of those experiences. When Iso-Ahola (1979) tested this model, he found that freedom and motivation were the two most important dimensions of respondents' definitions of leisure.

William Ruder, president of Ruder & Finn, reported in 1976 that fewer than one-third of American museums surveyed a couple years earlier were making any effort to reach five audiences that were lowest in attendance and most in need of services: senior citizens, African-Americans, Spanish Americans, the disadvantaged, and all other minorities. He recommended approaching an organization like the plumbers union for money to develop an exhibit on liquids and viscosity in the science museum or to create a welded sculpture at the art museum. Do something special for the plumbers, he urged, and that usually non-museum visiting group will give back to the museum. Museums are still not making the most effective connections with most union or trades groups or with the five underserved audiences that Ruder identified.

Conclusions

This review of audience research takes us through 1979. Time and space do not permit me to cover the period 1980-date, but the publications which cover that time are more easily accessible to pursuers of enlightenment than is the earlier literature. From this review, we find that

our forefathers and foremothers have already confronted many of the problems we still face. We can learn from their experiences and wisdom if we only read the literature.

For instance, if we followed all their good advice, would we be building places like the new Seattle Art Museum, which has been widely criticized for its lack of washrooms, slow elevators, inaccessibility for the handicapped, inattention to the needs of parents with young children, haughty guards, and unreadable, poorly-placed labels? After a Seattle newspaper's art critic wrote about its user-unfriendliness, letters to the editor flowed in, with comments such as: "From the standpoint of a wheelchair user, I believe a museum visit will lead to great frustrations. The lack of accessible restrooms on each floor is absolutely appalling!"; "Our unhappiness with SAM centered on issues related to bringing our seven-month-old infant with us... It seems a shame that families and young people are ignored in the planning and treated hostilely when they do show up."; "Three of us, all senior citizens, went for a look-see. The exhibits were superb. But none of us could read any of the captions—too low to the ground— too small print."; "It is incomprehensible that any modern public building could construct a gift shop which is inaccessible to people with disabilities... The museum is missing the point of serving the public when it provides facilities without access."; "The building design of the museum is commendable. Now, let's spend another few thousand dollars to buy some chairs and benches so people can enjoy it."

People do care about how we treat them and they do make up their minds on whether to visit us based on how we show we care about them. Studies have demonstrated that most of the things people object to in museums are related to amenities and services, or lack of them, rather than to the collections, exhibits, or programs.

We are more likely to find answers to some of our museum audience dilemmas in sociology, leisure science, consumer behavior, and psychology literature than in the usual museology publications. If we broaden our perspective, we can benefit from a long history and a vast body of literature that can offer us direction and lead to positive experiences for our audiences.

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