

# Becoming More Publicly Oriented Inside and Outside the Museum: Comparisons of Attitudes of “Inside Publics” with Community and Visitor Attitudes

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Sometimes we assume that the words “public relations” refer only to those publics outside the museum, those with whom we might have “external relations.” However, we do have several important publics inside the museum with whom we need to be concerned in our “internal relations.”

Serving both internal and external publics requires attention to *their* values, expectations, and satisfactions, not just what decision-makers *think* they should want or expect from the museum. This paper will present data from two recent audience research projects. These studies reveal that even within our institutions, our internal publics may hold distinctly different views and preferences, and that these may contrast with those held by our visitors and the community. These data offer guidance for improving internal relations with these publics.

First, some general background on our “inside publics.” A museum’s employees are a very important public, as are our volunteers, our members, and our donors or financial supporters. All of these are considered to be “inside publics” because all are willing to make some commitment to the museum, albeit in different ways. In addition, each public has varying expectations of the museum as far as satisfactions received.

Interacting with these inside publics are the visitors, some of whom may also be volunteers, members, and/or donors. Depending on a variety of factors, some of which were covered in my *Museum News* article, “Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums” (Hood, 1983), visitors have differing expectations among themselves of what will be a rewarding museum experience. These expectations and rewards are not always what the museum plans for them, however.

I’ve conducted numerous visitor and community studies with many types of museums over the past 17 years, but it wasn’t until three years ago that I decided to carry out similar mini studies with two of a museum’s “inside publics”—its staff and its volunteers. I wanted to know several things: How well did the visitors’ and the community’s psychographics—

their lifestyle characteristics, attitudes, values, opinions, and expectations—match those or cohere with those of the staff and volunteers? Did the staff and volunteers share similar values? Were these three groups traveling along the same path, sharing the same mindset about the museum and its offerings? And did possible gaps in their cohesion identify places where museums need to concentrate on making better connections with these publics?

We acquire the most reliable and useful information about people's perceptions of museums when we embed museum-related questions into a leisure framework. These queries reveal respondents' attitudes about learning or socializing in leisure. They tell us how some people prefer activity and others seek quiet and rest in leisure time. Probing underlying values by psychographically-based questions, and defining leisure activities as anything one chooses to do voluntarily in one's free time, give us the most accurate and dependable measures of how people feel about museums.

Research has shown over the years that until we understand *why* people choose to participate in museums—as employees, volunteers, or visitors—we can't plan effectively to engage and maintain their attention, their involvement, their support. In order to communicate successfully with a variety of internal audiences, we need to know how they view the museum and its visitors. Then we can create circumstances in which their expectations and satisfactions mesh, rather than conflict.

One of the research projects to be discussed here was a community study and the other was an on-site visitor study. For each of these the characteristics, values, and preferences of three audiences will be summarized.

## The Community Study

First, in the community study, data were collected from respondents during telephone interviews lasting 20 minutes. Using four sections from that long questionnaire, responses were then solicited from random samples of both staff and volunteers at the sponsoring museum.

When we look at the psychographic characteristics of these three audiences—staff, volunteers, and community residents—we find some interesting contrasts, which *should* affect how the museum evaluates its relationships with these publics.

The volunteers in this museum were the ones who most sought challenging experiences and constructive activity in their leisure life—one reason why they were offering their services to the museum. Interestingly, the staff was the least interested in these aspects of leisure. Instead staff members were most likely to seek a quiet leisure place offering solitude, rest and relaxation away from other people and daily life and work. Volunteers, on the other hand, were mostly older people who least desired these qualities.

Volunteers wanted to be where they would meet people of similar interests—which they do in museum settings—and the staff was the least interested in such a leisure prospect. Also, as older persons who may have been retired, the volunteers probably had too much quiet and solitude in their lives already. The busy, pressured staff, on the other hand, just wanted to get away from daily chores and to refresh themselves in leisure. These are two very different attitudes toward how to spend one's leisure time. If the museum decision-makers project their values onto everyone else, you can see how the different groups might not be in sync.

Another interesting contrast was that the very type of programs that most museums offer—tours, lectures, demonstrations, films, interactive experiences—was not the activity that the staff members sought in their leisure time. In fact, 45% of the staff said they disagreed/strongly disagreed with preferring such prepared programs for learning in their own leisure time, and only 9% strongly agreed with this option. The volunteers, who wanted constructive, challenging leisure activity, also sought these prepared programs for learning—another explanation of why they are our devoted paraprofessionals.

Similarly, the staff cared little for sampling casual learning experiences in leisure. Though we usually think of educational opportunities as essential ingredients of a museum's typical offerings, these staff members generally did not choose such programs for themselves in their leisure time. What many of them were creating and purveying as good experiences for other people was not a preferred leisure activity for themselves. This fact should be kept in mind when the findings at the other museum are discussed below.

Another interesting contrast between the staff and volunteers was in the value each placed on doing service for others or sharing their skill and knowledge with others in leisure. Volunteers ranked this very high, as we would expect, since that's exactly what they're doing for us, but nearly one-third of the staff disagreed/strongly disagreed with this premise.

Also diverging from staff preferences on some factors were the citizens of the community. A leisure activity that was primarily socializing with other persons was important to them. In other words, the interaction with people they cared about was more important than the leisure place or activity they went to. Also, they liked to be in leisure places where people of all ages could participate, they preferred a place that offered entertainment as well as learning opportunities, and they very much liked to go places that provided something they could tell their friends about afterward.

In contrast, more than one-quarter of the staff disagreed/strongly disagreed with preferring a leisure place or activity they could tell their friends about. This factor is very important, and one that most museums overlook. If museums don't offer the members of the general public something they can talk about positively afterward, which thereby justifies the time, energy, money, and travel hassle they have invested, they have

little reason to return. If the museum turns out to be a disappointing place that they don't want to talk about afterward because it won't enhance their standing with their peer groups, they are unlikely to revisit it. Discounting this critical ingredient is saying to the public, "What you care about doesn't count with us." Remember that when the public leaves the museum it can speak negatively as well as positively about the experience it has had.

And this factor is linked to another measure of the kinds of places the public chooses to go: Over half of the community respondents agreed/strongly agreed that they wanted to be in an old familiar leisure place that offered them no surprises. When we bill our museums as unusual places with exotic contents seen nowhere else, or as settings that are great for learning but not particularly high in entertainment value, we are characterizing the museum by *our* value system. This may present the institution in a way that is anathema to potential visitors, who indeed might have a wonderful time if they could get past those descriptors that they regard as negative. The demographic characteristics of community survey respondents appear in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
**Community Assessment Study**  
**(Conducted 1990)**

Comparative Data of Staff and Volunteer Samples with  
Community Merged Data

Code: M= merged community data (all data for the five  
socioeconomic/geographic areas)  
S= staff data  
V= volunteer data

Sex	<u>Male</u>		<u>Female</u>				
	M	46.8%		53.2%			
S	27.7		72.3				
V	25.0		75.0				
Marital Status	<u>Married</u>		<u>Single</u>	<u>Widowed</u>	<u>Divorced/Separated</u>		
	M	56.7%	27.6%	6.2%	9.6%		
S	55.3	23.4	2.1	14.9			
V	67.5	15.0	5.0	12.5			
Age	<u>18-24</u>	<u>25-34</u>	<u>35-44</u>	<u>45-54</u>	<u>55-64</u>	<u>65-74</u>	<u>75+</u>
	M	13.0%	28.2%	22.3%	13.2%	10.5%	8.6%
S	6.4%	21.3	38.3	21.3	10.6	2.1	0.0
V	0.0	5.0	15.0	10.0	25.0	25.0	20.0

**Number of persons in household**

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5 or more</u>
M	16.6%	30.6%	19.6%	18.7%	14.2%
S	21.3	44.7	8.5	10.6	10.7
V	32.5	47.5	10.0	7.5	2.5

**Number of children in household**

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3 or more</u>	<u>0</u>
M	16.9	14.2	9.9	42.8
S	14.9	12.8	4.3	63.8
V	2.5	5.0	2.5	87.5

**Have children in household**

	<u>Under age 6</u>	<u>Age 6-10</u>	<u>Age 11-17</u>
M	20.9%	16.6%	19.5%
S	14.9	12.7	19.1
V	5.0	7.5	2.5

**Ethnic group**

	<u>Caucasian</u>	<u>African-American</u>	<u>All others</u>
M	81.5%	16.5%	2.0%
S	91.5%	6.4	2.1
V	95.0	2.5	2.5

**Education**

	<u>Less than High School Graduate</u>	<u>High School Graduate</u>	<u>Post High, Some College</u>	<u>College Graduate</u>	<u>Postgrad, Professional Degree</u>
M	15.6%	25.0%	27.4%	21.8%	10.1%
S	2.1	14.9	34.0	17.0	31.9
V	5.0	10.0	37.5	20.0	27.5

**Education Summary**

	<u>No post high school education</u>	<u>College Graduate</u>
M	40.6%	31.9%
S	17.0	48.9
V	15.0	47.5

**Length of residence in metro area**

	<u>20 years or less</u>	<u>21-40 years</u>	<u>41+ years</u>
M	32.3%	41.1%	26.7%
S	32.0	42.6	25.5
V	12.5	30.0	57.5

**Household Income**

	<u>\$30,000 or less per year</u>	<u>\$30,001-\$50,000 per year</u>	<u>\$50,001 or more per year</u>
M	36.0%	28.8%	22.5%
S	49.0	29.8	17.0
V	15.0	32.5	35.0

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<b>Primary occupations for merged data (question not asked of staff or volunteers)</b>	15.1%	clerical, salespersons, technicians
	14.3	administrative personnel, minor professionals
	12.8	homemakers
	12.6	business managers, lesser professionals
	11.4	retired
		(all others were 9.8% or less)

NOTE: In addition to these figures, there were usually "no opinion" and/or missing answers, so these figures may not total 100%.

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## The On-Site Visitor Study

The second research project I want to discuss was an on-site visitor study. In this venture, we gathered data from visitors in five program seasons over one entire year. Using four sections of that 20-minute questionnaire, we solicited responses from random samples of both staff and volunteers at the museum. Again, I found interesting contrasts between these three audiences in their psychographics and demographics.

In this study, visitors were most likely to seek a quiet leisure place of solitude where they could get away from daily life. They preferred an activity that was as much entertainment as it was a learning experience, and they sought a place where people of all ages could participate actively. In other words, they were not looking for a preeminently studious educational experience presented in a didactic manner.

The volunteers were again the folk who most sought challenging experiences and constructive activity in their leisure life. It was they who wanted to share their skill and knowledge with others and to be useful to others in leisure. They were also the most likely to want to tell friends about interesting leisure experiences but the least likely to want a quiet place of leisure offering solitude. Again, the volunteers were usually older persons, who may have become involved in the museum precisely to avoid solitude.

Volunteers wanted both to sample casual learning activities and to find prepared programs for learning in leisure—in stark contrast to staff members' preferences. Only 2% of the staff strongly agreed that they preferred prepared programs for learning in leisure—though that is what many of them were proffering to the visitors. I was so startled by the very low percentage of staff who strongly agreed that they would choose prepared programs for learning for their own leisure life, that I rechecked every questionnaire to verify that the data had been entered correctly. Here, as in the community study, 45% of the staff disagreed/strongly disagreed with this leisure option.

I hasten to add that this finding does not indicate that the staff of either institution is not interested in intellectual endeavors. Rather, it indicates that the staff's zeal for such activity is satiated by their own professional

work and that they seek compensatory-type activities in their own leisure life (much as the mail carrier doesn't go for long walks on Sunday).

The staff was also highest in disagreeing/strongly disagreeing with pursuit of constructive activity in leisure time, in making themselves useful to others, and in sharing skill and knowledge with others in leisure. Staff did like entertainment as much as learning in their leisure places and they were the most likely to prefer leisure activities that primarily involved socializing with other people. Staff and volunteers were about equal in their desire to meet people with similar interests in leisure places.

Since the visitors in this study were people who were actually in the museum, these folk generally differed less from the staff and volunteers in their preferences and intentions than did the community respondents—yet there were significant variances in values and perspectives among these three groups. This staff appeared to be more people oriented in its leisure values than was the staff in the community study. Therefore, this staff was stronger in its social interaction preferences and less likely to seek a leisure place of solitude and rest. The demographic characteristics of museum visitor survey respondents appear in Table 2.

**Table 2**  
**Museum Visitor Assessment**  
**(Conducted 1990)**

Comparative Data of Staff and Volunteer Samples with  
Visitor Merged Data

Code: M= merged visitor data (all data for the five  
program seasons in 1990)  
S= staff data  
V= volunteer data

Sex		<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>					
M		53.0%	46.4%					
S		48.3	51.7					
V		45.5	54.5					
Marital Status		<u>Married</u>	<u>Single</u>	<u>Widowed</u>	<u>Divorced/Separated</u>			
M		72.9%	15.5%	4.0%	7.0%			
S		62.1	25.9	1.7	8.6			
V		68.2	15.9	15.9	0.0			
Age		<u>18-24</u>	<u>25-34</u>	<u>35-44</u>	<u>45-54</u>	<u>55-64</u>	<u>65-74</u>	<u>75+</u>
M		5.9%	18.1%	27.0%	16.9%	17.9%	11.7%	1.8%
S		6.9%	25.9	34.5	13.8	15.5	3.4	0.0
V		2.3	9.1	2.3	9.1	27.3	40.9	9.1

**Number of persons in household**

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>5 or more</u>
M	13.0%	39.5%	17.9%	18.6%	9.8%
S	13.8	39.7	17.2	20.7	6.9
V	20.5	56.8	18.2	2.3	2.3

**Number of children in household**

	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3 or more</u>	<u>0</u>
M	15.3	13.5	5.3	63.5
S	12.1	13.8	3.4	65.5
V	6.8	0.0	0.0	93.2

**Have children in household**

	<u>Under age 6</u>	<u>Age 6-11</u>	<u>Age 12-17</u>
M	10.3%	16.7%	17.5%
S	12.0	15.5	13.8
V	4.5	0.0	2.3

**Ethnic group**

	<u>Caucasian</u>	<u>African-American</u>	<u>All others</u>
M	93.4%	1.9%	3.4%
S	96.6%	1.7	0.0
V	100.0	0.0	0.0

**Education**

	<u>Less than High School Graduate</u>	<u>High School Graduate</u>	<u>Post High, Some College</u>	<u>College Graduate</u>	<u>Postgrad, Professional Degree</u>
M	5.0%	23.1%	31.6%	17.0%	20.4%
S	1.7	6.9	36.2	15.5	39.7
V	6.8	22.7	34.1	15.9	20.5

**Education Summary**

	<u>No post high school education</u>	<u>College Graduate</u>
M	28.1%	37.4%
S	8.6	55.2
V	29.5	36.4



**Primary occupations for volunteer and merged data**  
(question not asked of staff)

Volunteers	Merged
56.8% retired	16.3% retired
9.1 homemakers	15.6 administrative personnel, minor professionals
9.1 skilled manual workers	14.3 business managers, lesser professionals
	14.0 clerical, salespersons, technicians
	(all others were 8.7% or less)

NOTE: In addition to these figures, there were usually "no opinion" and/or missing answers, so these may not total 100%.  
In this study, income, and length of residence in metro area were not asked.

### Conclusions

The findings from these two studies tell us we'd better pay attention to our inside publics as well as to our visitors and potential visitors because they won't necessarily think the same way or view our institution, exhibits and programs similarly. We should capitalize on the reasons that volunteers involve themselves with us, by playing up these identified benefits when we invite their participation. These data also point up some ways in which the publics we deal with differ in their expectations of an enjoyable, positive leisure experience, and in how audiences may interact with the museum. Unless the staff evaluates museum experiences from the publics' viewpoints, it is likely to miss opportunities to engage their interest, attendance, and support.

These findings also alert us to the importance of assessing our internal publics' responses to what museum decision-makers think is important. Is there internal consensus on how we should present ourselves, or are we pulling in different directions? Do we have a similar value system among staff members and volunteers so that we're conveying cohesive communications, or are we offering mixed messages that confuse the publics? Are our volunteers or visitors with us for reasons that are different from those we supposed were true?

When you conduct visitor or community studies, don't just stop with your major audience, but survey your internal publics as well. You are likely to learn some very enlightening facts about their similarities and contrasts. Depending on how you perceive the import of the survey findings, either consternation or ideas for improvement might result. Establishing links between the expectations, preferences, and values held by the internal publics and the museum's visitors and the larger community is essential to successful public relations and marketing efforts. When you

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know where the points of disagreement or misperception lie between your various publics, you are prepared to address ameliorative efforts that will produce a more effective meshing of expectations and satisfactions.

### Reference

Hood, M. (1983). Staying away: Why people choose not to visit museums. *Museum News*, 61(4), 50-57.