

Chapter 12

INFORMATION FROM MUSEUM SECURITY PERSONNEL

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Visitor information from uniformed security personnel, i.e., museum "guards," is one of the least utilized resources in museums today. A visitor at the Milwaukee Public Museum revealed that guards are more aware of the specifics of visitor behavior and reactions than are other museum professionals. Although representatives from various museum departments including public affairs, education and administration could predict some audience responses with a fair amount of accuracy, they failed to perceive visitor preferences that are essential to the understanding of heterogeneous museum audiences. Museum guards, however, in direct touch with the public were aware of the events that draw target audiences, of demographic preferences, and why some exhibit halls are empty while others are well-attended.

Guards' contact with the public is distinctly different than that of curatorial and managerial personnel. Although guards are responsible for enforcing institutional regulations, their relationship with the public is to provide answers and information on an individual basis. One of the duties of the guards is, in fact, to observe museum visitors. Visitors, in turn, approach guards with a variety of inquiries, requests and complaints. Although the kind of observation inherent in this reciprocal relationship could be put to good use in program and exhibit planning, reports by guards continue to be a neglected resource in most museums.

Interviews with curators at the Milwaukee Public Museum indicated that they were highly knowledgeable and critical of the exhibit content under their supervision. They had little understanding however, of the dynamics of visitor behavior that produced audience reactions to their exhibits (e.g., age and family preferences); why halls might be underpopulated; and what exhibits appeal to specific populations. Many museum staff members who have considerable influence in the exhibit and program policy do not extend their responsibility to regular visitor contact or are too busy to observe visitors in a systematic manner.

When guards were interviewed as part of the Milwaukee study, they eagerly described patterns of visitor behavior. It was apparent that the

guards were seldom asked their opinion, and that they felt their information potential was undervalued.

Observations of Ethnic Group Attendance

The guards expressed interest in the visitor study being conducted at the Milwaukee Public Museum. After finishing an afternoon of interviews, I discussed the ethnic populations of Milwaukee with one of the guards. "Why can't we draw more blacks to museum exhibits?" I asked. We have some excellent funded programs on black African heritage. In spite of media attention, however, only the highly educated community leaders, plus a few teachers' groups attended. He answered that our programs might be black African heritage, but Milwaukee blacks felt relatively little affiliation with the strange sounds of African instruments, and had less interest in the intricacies of strip-woven textiles. "Ask a prominent black sports figure—a baseball player—to appear and blacks will attend. Or exhibit Harley-Davidson motorcycles. That's really Milwaukee culture!" He went on to describe an exhibit opening at which a black athlete was scheduled to appear, and the surprising deluge of admirers that came to see him.

Perhaps these are not the kinds of answers the museum professional would like to hear, nor does the discovery of this information mean that the museum is ethically bound to plunge exhibit halls into the current fads of popular culture. It does mean that an untapped source of information is readily available for those seeking new options in programming.

Led by the conversation about black Milwaukee culture, I requested guards to write impressions of other ethnic patterns they might have observed. They enriched my data with several interesting additions:

- One of the guards observed the periodic influx of diverse ethnic groups at the museum, e.g., groups of Puerto Ricans and orientals at a certain time of the year, and other foreign travelers during the summer. Although they were unsure why some of the variations in attendance flow occurred, observations of demographic changes can be used as a basis for anticipating museum attendance patterns.
- Another pointed out that Mexican people tend to come in large family units. I later mentioned this to a Spanish-speaking educator. She explained some of the cultural differences among the Hispanic populations: i.e., that while Puerto Rican family units were similar to those of the U.S., Mexican people had retained a strongly traditional family structure. She advised that programming for Mexican populations should be family-oriented.
- On a more local and immediate level, an unusual influx of large "extended" families from surrounding counties crowded the museum

one Sunday morning. Guards told me they had anticipated this type of attendance because the TV children's show "Sesame Street" was performing at an auditorium two blocks away. If the Public Affairs office had this information in advance of the performance, no evidence of it was apparent in sale items nor in publicity for scheduled family and children's programs.

Exhibit Hall Traffic Patterns

An example of astute observation concerns the traffic patterns in the African Hall at the Milwaukee Public Museum. Deemed by most staff members as one of the most popular halls in the building, a museum guard said, "Yes, a lot of people come to look at this hall, but they don't stay. They just pass right through." The guard then offered his opinion on why people passed quickly through a major hall that spreads over an area of 16,500 square feet. Although the dioramas show magnificent animal groupings against sweeping environmental murals, there were few descriptive labels in the broad, winding hall to slow people down, and no visitor options (see note 1). Although the guard had never heard the term "holding power" (see note 2), he observed and understood what effect the concept had on visitor behavior.

Several other observations had apparently escaped the attention of the museum administration. The Urban Habitat and the Pre-Columbian Mezzanine are located in obscure areas of the museum and are acknowledged as low attendance sections. Only the guards were aware that one of the large exhibits in the Urban Habitat entitled the Junkpile ("When It Comes to Waste, Americans are King of the Mountain!") was extremely popular. People often requested directions to reach the exhibit hall. The Junkpile contains a stratigraphic cross section of American life from the turn of the century into the 1970's. It is a concept central to the Urban Habitat theme. After sharing information about the exhibit with me, the guard discussed ideas for identifying the contents of the hall more clearly to raise public attention and attendance. He pointed out that small, efficient changes in the hall exterior and entrance might be far more productive than considering an expensive change in content. A study of visitor responses to the Urban Habitat hall brought similar conclusions by Dr. Chandler Screven of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, International Laboratory for Visitor Studies (see note 3).

The Pre-Columbian Mezzanine is reached by a narrow stairway in an interior section of the third floor. Its entrance is untitled and is so obscure that it has been mistaken for an office area. One of the guards said that if collections such as coins, stamps or armor (none of which were on exhibit at the time) were housed on the mezzanine, attendance would soar because collectors request the location of their interests (see note 4). The

area could be combined with glass-front office space to provide added security.

Learning and Observation

When the facts of museum attendance are reduced to statistical analysis without the kind of anecdotal information offered by the guards, it is easy to stereotype an "average" visitor. It is true that visitors spend an average of only seconds at exhibits, that much of their time is spent at sales counters, restrooms and cafeterias, that they read labels at a junior high level, and that they come for leisure/social entertainment. Without the familiarity of regular observation, the visitor can be caricatured as an anonymous fugitive from the rainy weather who looks for brief escape through passive entertainment. That, in fact, was the impression conveyed by several staff members. To those of the staff who spend much of their time researching and attempting to convey accurate and significant information to the public, statistics on visitor learning, indeed, present a dismal picture. Curators who were interviewed were particularly sensitive to the knowledge that people come to be entertained, not to read label information, and that much of the professional staff's effort went unnoticed. Responses from curators also revealed that their academic experience oriented them to the traditional, textual type of education rather than to visual learning.

Visual learning is not as easily identified as textual learning, and knowledge gained through visual impression is intrinsically more difficult to express than the recitation of scientific facts. The initial stimulus which encourages learning is precisely the phenomenon in which museums excel, and an aspect of learning that is hard to measure.

If bare audience statistics are fleshed out by first-hand observations, a new respect for the visitor emerges. Guards who actually observe visitor behavior have developed an informed opinion of visitor motivation and abilities. Rather than a disparaging reflection of visitor mentality, the need for brief, clear labels with frequent rest/refreshment breaks are seen as a result of the social demands of group experience and the competing distractions of new stimuli.

Granted, not all guards can produce accurate and unbiased information that will be valuable to the managerial staff of the museum, but the study suggests three steps that can enhance communication, increase attendance of target audiences, and aid in program/exhibit policy:

- Selectively derive information from guards, check with others who have observed similar situations, and investigate situations that can improve attendance and visitor satisfaction.
- If written reports are requested from guards, courtesy requires management to acknowledge receipt of those reports. Good management practice also requires that action or inaction on the

reports be mentioned at regular meetings. If guards are treated in a professional manner, an improvement in self-image and job perception can produce better results.

- Careful selection of guards and planned training sessions will upgrade the quality of the reports on visitor behavior.

Whichever of these suggestions is put into effect, the most important lesson learned from the Milwaukee Public Museum study is that guards' reports should not be disregarded because the observations are not what management expected or would like to hear. An unexpected reply is fertile ground for innovative programming.

Reports should be processed by public relations/marketing offices and brought to the attention of related museum departments. Those in charge may decide to not act upon guards' opinions/observations because they are not priority issues, or because they do not serve the best interests of the museum; final analyses and decisions are the province of the administration. With all the high level demands on the time of management and curators today, utilization of the up-front information from guards can provide valuable insights to supplement statistics.

Notes

1. Visitor options are defined as variations in arrangement of exhibits that provide a choice for visitors, e.g., alternate paths and levels.
2. Holding power is the viewing time of the visitor at any exhibit/hall.
3. The basic models and methods for this study were adapted from C. G. Screven (see Bibliography).
4. The questions most frequently asked by visitors are: Where are the restrooms?; Where are the escalators?; Where is the cafeteria?; Where are the stamps/coins/armor collections?

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