

Chapter 19

A PRELIMINARY LOOK AT ATTENDANCE AND ADMISSION FEES

Douglas Hoy
National Museum of Natural Sciences
Ottawa, Ontario

Background

The National Museum of Natural Sciences is a museum of natural history operated by the federal government in Ottawa, the capital city of Canada. Our exhibit building, opened in 1911, contains displays on geology, dinosaurs, mammals, birds, plants, and ecology. The exhibits primarily present Canadian examples. We completed the most recent major exhibit renovation in 1980. Until September 1988, we shared the building with a human history museum, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, and visitors moved freely between the two museums. Admission and parking were free, and no special membership program existed.

About 60% of general attendance came from tourists not from the adjacent National Capital Region. (Attendance is counted manually by security guards at building entrances. Mean error in counting has been estimated to be 7.5% [Dickey & Johri, 1977]). Despite this, 63% of visitors had been to the Museum before, 1.4 times per year on average. Most came in family groups. Organized group attendance was almost completely (97%) school children (Beacock & Hogg, 1984; National Museums of Canada, 1979). See Table 1 for the annual attendance before fees.

A national technology museum also located in Ottawa had similar visitation patterns and a similar audience. Other national museums in the city (art, war, aviation) had somewhat different audiences (Ottawa Centre for Applied Management, 1986).

Table 1**Annual Attendance Before Fees**

General	356,000
Groups, unassisted	82,200
Groups, assisted	23,800
Hall rentals	36,000

Planning for Admission Fees

The federal government and the Board of Trustees for national museums required the Museum to put admission fees into place, primarily to help defray ever-increasing costs of operation. Considerable advance speculation took place about the impact of fees. How much would attendance drop because of fees? Who would be most affected? Who least affected? What would be the effect on repeat visits? Visit length? What shifts would occur in visit time and duration? Although many museums have probably been in this dilemma, not much has been published on the topic (see Loomis, 1987, pages 52-57, for a review). The figures and observations in this paper, preliminary though they are, may be of help to museums faced with introducing user fees.

A comprehensive study commissioned by the government (Ottawa Center for Applied Management, 1986) identified several guidelines.

- Fees should generate net revenue to the museums.
- Fees should not interfere with the museums' mandate to disseminate cultural information, indeed, fees should support this goal.
- Fee schedules should reflect fair, realistic market value of the products and services offered.
- Revenue should go toward projects clearly identifiable by the public, and should not decrease government funding.
- Measures must be taken to avoid discouraging regular museum visitors.
- Low-income groups should be identified, and measures put in place to accommodate them so no one is turned away because of their inability to pay.

Side benefits envisioned for this new policy included:

- the perceived value of a museum visit would increase
- the actual value of a visit would increase, as new exhibits and programs were made possible with fee revenues
- the museum would become more sensitive to visitors' needs, leading to an improvement in exhibit and program quality.

A market study determined that \$2.00 was a fair charge for an old or small museum, \$4.00 for a newer one, and \$6.00 for a large special exhibit and general admission.

Fees Program

Admission fees began in June, 1988, in all national museums except the technology museum, which did, however, charge for entry to a special exhibit on holography. All museums had free admission, and stayed open until 8 p.m., on Thursdays. At Natural Sciences, parking charges were put in place, and the Museum was kept open on Mondays in winter. [See Table 2].

Table 2

Fee Schedule

Adults	\$2
Students	\$1.50
Children	\$1
Seniors	\$1.50
Family	\$5
Annual Pass for one	\$15
Family Pass	\$40
Children 0-6 years	free
School Groups	free
Tour Groups discount (free until Sept. '88)	20%

Effect on Attendance

A year has passed since the introduction of fees. The full effect of fees has yet to be determined, but a comparison of data from National Museums of Canada, 1979, with an average of June and August, 1988, figures from Rubenstein, 1988 and 1989, show that:

- The average drop in general attendance was 35% for the first twelve months of fees.
- Summer attendance (tourists) dropped by 30%, and winter attendance (locals) dropped by up to 60%.
- Although summer groups were up by 80%, and winter groups down by about 30%, total group attendance for the year decreased by only 4%.
- Visitor place of residence did not change significantly.

- No major change in rate of repeat visitation has occurred.
- Thursday has become the most busy weekday because admission is free, but weekends are still the most popular time to visit.
- The number of assisted school groups went up by 17%. This is not surprising, since preregistering a group with the Education Department gives free admission.
- After an initial serious drop, attendance has begun to return to former levels.
- Special events or new exhibits did bring the attendance briefly back up to, or above, old levels.
- Oddly enough, the technology museum that did not charge admission also experienced a decrease in general attendance of up to 45%.
- Evaluation studies (Rubenstein, 1989) and comment cards have shown that local visitors resent having to pay for parking even more than for entry to the Museum.

Table 3

Annual Attendance After Fees

General	230,788
Groups, unassisted	78,825
Groups, assisted	27,300
Hall Rentals	35,896

Conclusions

- The greatest drop in attendance occurred during months with predominantly local visitation.
- Attendance loss can be mitigated by new programs and exhibits.
- As Loomis (1987) points out, initiation of fees is often accompanied by other changes in circumstance that make it difficult to assess the effect of fees alone. Parking charges may be at least as significant to local visitors. As well, half of the building's exhibits were closed when the Museum of Civilization moved out. Many visitors were not aware that two different museums inhabited the same building.
- Other confounding factors may have been the opening of a new National Gallery, and a national capital tourism promotion program that reputedly increased tourism by 8%.

- Upon reflection, the change in visitor attendance has not been as significant to the Museum as have been the internal changes in the organization as a result of the user-pay doctrine. A new marketing division, increased attention to visitor satisfaction, and a major exhibit renovation program are some harbingers of a more exciting and dynamic institution in the future.

References

- Beacock, J., & Hogg, J. (1984). A demographic survey of visitors to the Victoria Memorial Museum building. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa, Canada.
- Dickey, R., & Johri, H., Bureau of Management Consulting (1977). An evaluation of the visitor attendance information system in the NMC, and considerations for improvement. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa, Canada.
- Loomis, R. (1987). Museum visitor evaluation: New tool for management. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History.
- Ottawa Centre for Applied Management (1986). Attendance model and fee structure for National Museums of Canada. Part II: Strategies and structures. NMC, Ottawa, Canada.
- National Museums of Canada, Planning Secretariat (1979). Visitor research project. NMC, Ottawa, Canada.
- Rubenstein, R. (1988). We kids need a place to find out about things! Children's museum audience research project. Canadian Museum of Civilization, Ottawa, Canada.
- Rubenstein, R. (1989). A natural for any age! Preliminary study of visitor needs and perceptions for the National Museum of Natural Sciences. NMNS, Ottawa, Canada.