

Museum visitors - characteristics and behaviour

Patterns in Visitor Research

To summarize this page, I've drawn out some interesting points which could be lost in the research on this page. These points have been seen multiple times.

Approachability of Museum Staff:

Visitors feel that museum staff does not care much about them, and are not approachable for help and advice. [3] This is especially true for people with disabilities. [6]

Interactive Exhibits:

Museum visitors love to be engaged and love interactive exhibits. It is important to engage all the members of the family, even at children's museum where engaging parents is overlooked. Engaging visitors is not so straight forward though; If it requires reading direction, they are notorious for failing to do so, choosing instead to copy the person in front of them. [2]

Desired Experience:

Visitors work all day and don't wish to take on a greater cognitive load. [5] They desire "a multifaceted experience involving both physical relaxation and intellectual exploration." [1] Stimulating emotions, and thought, are also important. [3][5] What emerges is a need for personal identification with the stories and with the methods adopted in terms of narrative and interaction. [5]

Museum Prestige:

Visitors see museums as very prestigious and believe the content of the museum is very trustworthy. This is great, but it also means that visitors will find it difficult to question and challenge the museum, and soliciting this kind of feedback and interacting is generally challenging. This is especially true for students and younger museum visitors. [3][4]

- [1] **The Information-Seeking Behavior of Museum Visitors**
- [2] **Examples of Common Mistakes in Museum Design**
- [3] **Educator and Student Museum Visitors**
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- [5] **Non-Visitors: Teenagers**
- [6] **Accessibility to visitors**

The Information-Seeking Behavior of Museum Visitors

Original document available at: home.earthlink.net/~toriorr/ROL_MuseumVisitors.doc

Key contents (directly extracted from the document):

- From around 1980 onward [...] museums themselves are in transition. They are no longer simply repositories of objects and artifacts stored for presentation, posterity and edification. They are expected to engage with the public and compete with the rest of the entertainment industry for tourist dollars and leisure time while maintaining their learning functions.
- The material created by demographic observations on museum visitors at all times of the week and day by several different studies implies in general that visitors are noticeably older, predominantly female and predominantly white and well-dressed. There were three social arrangements in evidence: couples, groups of women and solitary men. There were also members of school classes usually during weekdays and very few couples with small children.
- Information can be a commodity but museum visitor consumer behavior is stimulated by information in context as presented in exhibitions in the same way advertising promotes a feeling where customers are said to enjoy learning about a product even without an immediate purchase in mind.
- Zahava Doering, Director of Institutional Studies at the Smithsonian, argued that rather than communicating information, the "most satisfying exhibitions for visitors are those that resonate with their experience and provide new information in ways that confirm and enrich their [own] view of the world."
- Visitor engagement demands entertainment because the public increasingly views museums as a kind of tourist destination with the accompanying expectations.
- The information encountered turns into a two-way conversation between the curator and the visitor, with the visitor looking to construct meaning from what they see in relation to their background, and the curator looking to influence this interpretation by constructing knowledge through objects, narratives and histories.
- Stephen Weil [...] writes] "Some museums are celebratory, others seek to console. Some try to stimulate a sense of community, others to capture memory. And some simply offer the important refreshment to be found in breaking the grip of everyday routine." [...] Weil emphasizes this by listing some figures concerning attendance at the Smithsonian and his reflections on these numbers is edifying: "Of sixteen thousand visitors interviewed between 1994 and 1996 visitors who had come on their own, not as a part of any organized school or other tour only 14 percent had come by themselves. For the other 86 percent, their museum visits were interwoven with a social experience" . As Deborah Perry, Lisa Roberts, Kris Morrissey, and Louis Silverman have pointed out (Journal of Museum Education, fall 1996), "People often come [to museums] with their families and other social groups, and they often come first and foremost for social reasons. Although visitors say they come to museums to learn things, more often than not the social agenda takes precedence. Quality family time, a date, something to do with out-of-town guests, a place to hang out with friends: these are some of the primary reasons people chose to go to museums.
- Prince conducts several studies on what visitor's want and suggests that museums are able to provide a multifaceted experience involving both physical relaxation and intellectual exploration.

- No museum visitor studies are better able to get to the dirt on visitor information seeking behavior than those done on science and technology museums [...] The demographics at these museum types shift dramatically as well with "75% of visitors either school children or family and friends accompanied by children...with a maximum of 10% of 'specialists and enthusiasts'

- Booth validated and identified three different groups of visitors and information needs [on science and technology museums]: The general visitor who requires information on opening hours, prices, the Museum's facilities, what's on, notable exhibits and navigation aids in the Museum; the educational visitor who requires (in addition to the above information for general visitors) more detailed information to help plan visits...and project based information; and finally the specialist visitor who requires (in addition to the information for general visitors) detailed information concerning the Museum's collections and access to its expertise, together with links to other sources of information.

- the quantity of information provided is important. Packages of information which can be read quickly, exhibitions with less than 30 displays and short audio monologues require considerably less investment of time and effort prevent visitor fatigue.

- visitors do not all respond to different interpretive media in the same way. Some visitor groups are more likely to seek out information, particularly the more detailed presentations.... For such visitors learning, understanding and appreciation would seem to be especially important requirements. ...There was also some tendency for older visitors, those with a longer period of education, and those visiting in a group of two adults to make greater use of interpretation. Overall, then, the "effectiveness" of interpretation seems to be the result of an interaction between visitor and interpretive medium, rather than being due solely to the properties of the medium. -

- Having a website violates some of the motivations for visiting museums. For instance, it is difficult to create true numerous experience or social analog because of the barrier of screen and machine. However, many museums see it as the only way to reach communities of visitors limited by geography, time or ability and answer their specific information needs for a non-immersive but still playful, enlightening and entertaining experience.

- [conclusion] No matter how you slice and dice the visitor statistics, the idea that permeates the literature and makes the most basic sense is that every visitor's motivations and seeking patterns are still rooted in the experience of being human. In that context museum visitors (those who seek out the collections and experiences presented by objects and environments created by other humans) are as diverse and unique as humanity itself, making their information related behavior reflective and iterative.

(all sources of information are referenced at the end of the original document).

Examples of Common Mistakes in Museum Design

http://www.ukupa.org.uk/events/presentations/science_museum.pdf

This presentation includes many examples and illustration of common pitfalls of museum exhibits. The presentation champions several core ideas of user centered design: prototyping, in house testing, etc.

A few main points:

- **Visitors will not read instructions on how to operate the exhibit.** Nearly always, they will copy the actions of the visitors before them.
- **Visitors like orientation** (not necessarily organization!). Chaos and randomness often do not work. For example, one museum filled its lobby with a sampling of artifacts from each of its exhibits, but unfortunately these were ignored)
- **Delivering the context and theme of the museum exhibit can be difficult.** Visitors can often jump to conclusions. For example, one exhibit on the timeline of landmark inventions included a giant aircraft in the center. Upon entering the hall, visitors assumed they were visiting an exhibit on transportation.

Educator and Student Museum Visitors

This document details the results of several focus groups conducted by the V&A museum (<http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/architecture/index.html>) in London, England. The chosen users are the teachers and students of key stage 2 & 3 (ages 9-14), and the professors and students of further education and higher education (ages 15+). The exhibit which they are researching is on architecture, but many generalizations to other contexts are safe to make from the results.

Some useful points:

- **Professors** want information and access to content in advance to organise topics and exhibitions into the syllabus.
 - Museum must support deliberate long term planning and faster paced short term planning.
 - Professors and teachers want information on times and locations of teaching workshops, presentations, lectures and exhibits. Constraints are important (is there enough place for 30 students? enough time? Do you allow photography? Child friendly lunch?)
 - Teachers and professors hold museum in high esteem and approach the information as believers, and the resources with respect.
- **Older Students**
 - First type: Browsing / socializing for collecting ideas, interaction with other students and staff. Social space and coffee shop atmosphere.
 - Second type: Focused, goal oriented research. Library environment, thinking, concentrating. Students need to know that they will be able to find the information they want at the museum, how that information is organized, where it is located.
 - "The further into higher education you go, the more formal and goal directed, study seems to become"
 - Many want to access from home on their own time. Would be useful if they could view the bibliography of the exhibit by email. Could the exhibit be seen as an interesting way to connect students to the relevant sources?
- **Younger students** need to be wowed, inspired and need practical hands-on activities. To enhance the visit of young students, museum must have strong pre and post visit experience.
 - "Readiness to learn is enhanced by perceived relevance of the subject. Long term learning is confirmed by subsequent experience."

Science Museum Visitors

The website has several posts which hash the information gathered from a massive survey with 14,000 respondents, from fifty museums and science centers. If you check the website, be sure to click the science museum visitor tag in order to see only the posts they've made on the data from the result of the survey.

- 14,000 respondents from fifty museums and science centers in four countries (US, Canada, UK, and Australia - although the vast majority of respondents were from the US, the respondents from the other countries responded similarly to the American sample).
- Respondents had an established relationship of some kind with the museum, such as a membership, and had signed up to receive e-mails from the museum. 73% of respondents were female.
- 66% were parents of minor children. 16% were grandparents. 20% adults with no minor children in their lives.
- For 60% of respondents, visiting was to provide learning opportunities for my children. 45% said that their children liked to visit. 44% said they visited for family time.

Why do they join and/or give to the science museum? A number of reasons, indicating that individuals have different motivations for their support.

- Nearly half of respondents indicated budget-minded reasons for support. 48% saying they gave to pay for the services they receive, and 46% to save money. These respondents tended to be young moms in their 20s, 30s, and 40s.
- But nearly as many, 44%, said they joined to help children's organizations, and 43% to help the museum improve, indicating a strong philanthropic reason for support. These respondents, however, tended to be older than the young moms.
- Only 2% joined because they "were asked," a number that is consistent with what we have found in our other studies. We are glad to see this low number on this response, as it indicates that members do not feel that a membership request is simply a financial transaction. Instead, there is value inherent in that membership, regardless if the motivations are budgetary or philanthropic. We believe that museums could probably be asking for these gifts a whole lot more.

Good News: people believe science museum have good, trustworthy exhibits, with something for all ages

- 75% believe that the museums have "good exhibits," a strong response for this core offering of science museums.
- Additionally, 60% believe that the science museum has something offer children "of all ages." 50% are visiting four or more times a year, indicating that science museums are part of the routines for many Core Visitors, a very good thing. And finally, 84% of respondents felt the museum was "very trustworthy," a wonderfully high response (and one we will explore in more detail in an upcoming post).

Not-so-good News: Museum fail to meet the needs of the entire family and do not believe museum staff care about them

- Only 39% of respondents felt the museum met the needs of their family, a response that falls in-line with what we have seen in our children's museum study and our study of outdoor history museums.
- Only 8% of respondents feel the staff of the museum cares about them. This is the lowest we have yet seen in our field-wide studies; in comparison, 16% of outdoor history museum respondents felt the staff cared about them.
- < 20% felt the museum engaged adults.
- 14% felt the museum helped bring the community together, a figure that, once again, falls in-line with what we have seen in our other studies.

And 88% of respondents identified themselves as white or Caucasian. This is simply not the most promising visitation trend over the long-term as America becomes increasingly more diverse. And while this batch of research did not delve into issues of diversity in great detail, we do feel that science-based museums, and other museums that see similar visitation patterns, need to be having conversations on this issue sooner rather than later.

Bad News: The number of core museum goers that actually enjoy natural history and science centers are low. When we separated out the respondents based on what type of museum they responded to, we found something startling.

- only 69% of those respondents of a natural history museumsaid they actually "enjoy" visiting natural history museums.
- only 59% of respondents of science centers said they actually "enjoy" visiting science centers.
- but 86% of respondents from children's museums said they "enjoy" visiting children's museums, but we believe that adults visiting children's museums have different expectations for their own engagement than adults visiting natural history museums and science centers, resulting in a different, and more positive, result for the children's museums in the study.

We also found something else that startled us. When we asked the entire sample of respondents what types of museums they enjoyed visiting, and then ranked the museums by their results, this is what we found:

1. Zoos and Aquariums
2. Natural History
3. Historic Sites
4. Nature Centers
5. Art Museums
6. Botanical Gardens (tied)
7. Science/Technology Centers
8. Children's Museums (but #2 for parents)
9. History Museums

Non-Visitors: Teenagers

This article involves the results from a survey from the Fitzcarraldo Fondazione in Italy on teenage non-visitors. It involved focus groups of five higher-education institutes in Modena, with about 90 young people between the ages of 14 and 19. The article states that the results from the teenagers can be applied to adults non-visitors as well.

Teenagers generally have negative connotation of the word "museum," refers to ancientness, closure, regulations, and distance. What they like are museum with photography, recent history, explanations of present-day phenomena (technological and scientific), or that come into contact with the personal identity of the individual. Even more important is not the content, but the functional qualities, aspects of the experience as a whole, the way the visit takes place, rules of behaviour and the explicitly educational value.

Teenagers study all day, and view museums as additional workload. Museums must compete with things such as movies, which are much more accessible and therefore more instantly gratifying. Museum must deliver intense emotions during a visit (the emotional dimension appears to dominate the cognitive sphere in determining the value of the experience) so what emerges is **a need for personal identification** with the stories and with the methods adopted in terms of **narrative** and **interaction**.

Accessibility to visitors

1. [People with disabilities visit museums: an exploratory study of obstacles and difficulties](#)

There are laws in place and common architectural strategies to ensure spaces are accessible (e.g. washrooms, automatic doors, etc). But more work needs produced about the experience of visitors with disabilities beyond mobility issues - ie: facilitating engaging experiences (social, interpretive, information supply). The purpose of this study was to "explore the museum visit of people who use wheelchairs and crutches, as well as that of visually impaired people, highlighting hurdles to a full museum experience"; 45 people participated. Some findings:

To and from the museum:

The way to and from the museum was a major issue for those using a wheelchair, though not for people using crutches or visually impaired people who are accompanied. **Participants stressed the need for reliable, up-to-date information about the physical obstacles they might face** (e.g. public transit, entrances) - lack of information about this negatively affects the visit.

Inside the museum:

All participants considered the display to be the core of the museum experience, and the most common issue they addressed was the location of the exhibits. Height of displays, placement of interpretive text, placement of artifacts and crowding can all be barriers to people with physical disabilities. It can be a heavy physical effort to visit large museums, requiring return visits in some case.

Discouraging results from this study were findings about visually impaired visitors. According to the authors the visually impaired participants didn't have high expectations of museum staff and exhibits. These participants indicated that exhibits that could be touched provided a sense of inclusion.

Finally, "...there is an apparent need to make museum staff more aware of the facilities available for the disabled. This study revealed that while such facilities are available, often the staff is not aware of them or know where they are located within the museum. Another aspect of communication involves the interpretation of the museum exhibits. In the case of paintings and photographs, as well as sculptures, interpretive signage are often not easily accessible to the disabled... The innovation of new technologies could enable information to be transmitted directly to a person's mobile phone."

2. [Lessons from the Museum of Science's First Multimedia Handheld Tour](#)

To support their Star Wars exhibit, the Museum of Science developed an American Sign Language (ASL) tour on Toshiba E830 PDAs. Visitor response to the tour was overwhelmingly positive, with participants saying having ASL tours are a step in the right direction and wishing such tours were ubiquitous at the Museum of Science, and that it gave deaf visitors access to content that they would not have normally had access to. The article contains many suggestions for how ASL tours can be improved as the Star Wars ASL tour wasn't perfect (with respect to usability issues, and cultural issues related to timing, learning style and norms)