

Chapter 9: Arboretum Visitor Profiles as Defined by the Four Seasons

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Introduction

The Holden Arboretum, the largest arboretum in the United States, is located in a rural area outside Mentor, Ohio, which is 26 miles northeast of downtown Cleveland. This museum of woody plants includes 3100 acres of woodlands, horticultural collections, display gardens, ponds, fields, and ravines.

Because of its large acreage, Holden is able to preserve several natural habitats as well as develop scientifically documented collections and gardens. Its collections include plants from around the world, selected because they are appropriate to the climate of northeast Ohio. There are display, rhododendron, and wildflower gardens; collections of crabapples and lilacs, and a visitor center with library and classrooms. Other attractions include marked trails for hiking and birdwatching, cross-country skiing in winter, and special events throughout the year, such as maple sugaring in March, Mother's Day brunch during the peak crabapple bloom, and a Harvest Moon festival in September.

In its 35 years of being open to the public, Holden Arboretum had never conducted any professional visitor or audience studies. In 1986, when it was about to launch a long-range planning process with a view to expansion—of trails, buildings, classes, and programs—the time was deemed appropriate to begin audience research.

Arboretum staff and trustees wanted to learn how the institution might more effectively serve its publics, both current and potential; how it might reach more types of audiences than the frequent visitors who constitute a major portion of the 80,000 visitation annually, and how it might broaden its programming, educational, and public relations efforts. Since staff and trustees suspected that arboretum visitors differ from season to season, they authorized a year-long visitor study as the first step in the master plan. This researcher, who was brought in at this point to

direct the study, commended them for properly conducting the research at the beginning rather than at the end of the long-range planning process—where it is often tacked on to justify decisions already made.

Method

Previous research had shown the necessity of emphasizing audience psychographics, along with the usual demographics and participation data, in the questionnaire that would be used to gather information from a random sample of visitors in each of the four seasons. Psychographic dimensions such as attitudes, values, opinions, expectations, and satisfactions would be probed by leisure preference statements based on Hood's (1983) previous research, which showed that six attributes of leisure participation are basic to adults' decisions to participate or not participate in a variety of leisure activities and places, such as going to arboreta and botanical gardens, to zoos and aquariums, to museums and historical sites. The six leisure attributes are, in alphabetical order: being with people (social interaction), doing something worthwhile for oneself or others, feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings, having a challenge of new experiences, having an opportunity to learn, and participating actively.

In an interactive process extending over more than two months, the staff and research director examined optimum topics for inclusion in the eight-page questionnaire—seven pages to be answered by all visitors in the sample, plus an additional page just for arboretum members. As one Holden department head phrased it, this “marvelous meshing of the researcher's expertise and the staff's input” produced a comprehensive instrument that examined a diversity of subjects which could provide answers essential to the master planning process.

In addition to 16 psychographic questions, the schedule included queries on 18 reasons for visiting Holden, the respondents' companion(s) on the survey date, perceptions of the arboretum both before and after visiting, preferences for various aspects of the arboretum, source of information about arboretum events, frequency of visitation, level of participation in 12 related leisure activities—both as children and as adults, participation in eight Cleveland metropolitan area leisure places, and 12 demographic variables.

The research director trained two staff members and 20 volunteers on sampling, scheduling, dealing with the respondents, record keeping, and coding the data. Data were gathered as guests were exiting the visitor center on specified weekdays and weekends in the four seasons of 1987:

January 28-March 22, May 1-17, July 16-26, and September 19-October 18. Usable responses were received from 569 persons. Most of the visitors selected for the sample willingly complied. Refusals were usually for lack of time, the guest was about to go on a group tour or had someone waiting, the person was a first-time visitor who had not yet explored the arboretum, or the individual had already filled in a questionnaire on a previous visit.

SPSS-X was used for data analysis (frequency distributions, chi-square test of significance with Cramer's V, and factor analysis). The findings were presented in five preliminary reports of eight pages each—one on each season plus one on the merged data, and a final report of 78 pages. The project began in September 1986 and concluded in March 1988.

Results

As surmised, Holden Arboretum's visitors did differ from season to season, in psychographics, demographics, expectations of the arboretum, satisfactions received from a visit, reasons for visiting, and participation in other leisure time pursuits (both outdoor activities and at other preservation-exhibition institutions). Only a small portion of the extensive findings can be summarized in this paper. Tables 1 through 11 provide the data for the following discussion.

In addition to the seasonal information gained from these tables, when the psychographic, demographic, and participation data are related, individual audience segments can be discerned. The practical value of such identification of visitor clusters is of immense importance in audience development and marketing to target publics.

Winter Season

In the winter season data, several audience segments can be identified even though the visitors were highly similar in many respects.

Though most types of preservation-exhibition institutions aim their major outreach at family groups, which they assume constitute the backbone of their attendance, the reverse was true for Holden's winter visitors. Those who came alone were at least twice as likely to be frequent visitors as any other "companion" group. Also, members of one-person households and singles visited the arboretum frequently, and probably were some of the persons who came alone.

An organized group outing was very important to individuals who lived in one-person households, who were more interested in socializing at leisure events than were other visitors. Evidently, some of these one-person household members could not get to the arboretum except by group outings, which they valued as much for the social aspects as for the intrinsic offerings of the arboretum. Also, a prepared program for learning, which was defined as lectures, films, tours, and demonstrations, was important to organized group visitors; merely walking around on their own was not sufficient for their satisfaction. Singles and those formerly married were the most enthusiastic about leisure experiences that are challenging, in which there is a chance to be creative and try new things.

For most arboretum guests, finding people of similar interests in leisure activities was not important, except for those who wanted to share the arboretum experience with other persons, show the arboretum to out-of-town guests, or attend a special event at the arboretum. In all three circumstances, the interaction with others of similar interests was an important component of their visit.

Somewhat surprising was finding that picnicking, a social interaction activity, was very important to persons of higher education and occupations, as well as to members of larger households and homemakers. On the other hand, those of upper education disliked an old familiar activity or place that holds no surprises or risks, while those of lesser occupational/educational status were more likely to prefer such an activity or place and an activity that is primarily entertainment rather than a learning experience. This suggests a different emphasis is needed if the arboretum is to be successful in wooing an audience that is not upper education/occupation/income.

Holden members, who came oftener to the arboretum than nonmembers, were seeking a quiet, low key place that provides rest and relaxation. Those most wanting a place of solitude, to get away from other people and daily life and work, were the postgraduates and the 25-44 year olds who might have been people in high-stress jobs and with many family responsibilities.

Visitors most interested in learning about plants and nature wanted to do it in a casual way rather than through prepared programs for learning; this was especially true for the 25-34 year olds, who were probably parents of young children, since this age group most favored stroller accessibility to trails and gardens. All types of visitors wanted a variety of offerings all year around, and all wanted a place where people of all ages can participate in an active way. Being able to drop in on the spur

of the moment, to return many times and always find new interests to explore, and to walk the trails were important to all types of visitors.

Contrary to previous research findings about typical museum visitors were the evidences of low level of interest in doing some service for others and in sharing one's skill and knowledge with others through leisure activities. Only persons who wanted to share the Holden experience with others and to show the arboretum to out-of-town guests were also willing to share their skills and knowledge.

Spring Season

The composition of the spring visitor cohort was quite different from the winter: 54% were members and 21% were making their first visit on the day of the survey, whereas 80% of winter visitors were members and 5% were making their first visit.

Scheduled programs at the arboretum—that is, lectures, classes, and field trips—were most important to visitors who came alone and to high school graduates, and special arboretum events such as the Pancake Breakfast and Plant Sale appealed most to those employed in clerical or sales work and semiskilled jobs. Special events were least important to the postgrads. Another differentiation on the basis of education was that high school graduates preferred an old familiar leisure activity or place that holds no surprises or risks, but the postgrads did not. Also, those in lesser-status occupations were more interested in socializing with family and friends in a leisure place and most preferred a place where people of all ages can participate in an active way; the latter attribute was not appealing to executives or retired persons.

People who had come to the arboretum in organized groups preferred to come in such a manner, which may be the only way they could come. Those who desired group outings also wanted a leisure place where socializing with others was a major component of the event. Interestingly, those who came alone were the “companion” group that least wanted a leisure place of solitude or a quiet, low key place of rest and relaxation; apparently, they came alone not to escape people but because they had no one to come with.

Sharing the arboretum experience with other persons was most important for single and formerly married visitors—who may have been the ones who came alone. These two groups were also most interested in returning many times to a leisure place and finding new interests to explore. Sharing the arboretum experience with other persons was

important to individuals who preferred a place where all ages could actively participate and where socializing was a primary factor. Singles and women were the most interested in leisure places where they could get to know people who had interests similar to theirs.

Walking the trails was most important to those who came alone and to the postgraduates. The most frequent hikers were 25-54 year olds, especially men and especially members. Nonmembers were the ones most wanting stroller accessibility to the trails and gardens, which indicates that lack of access currently may be an impediment to their becoming members.

Those who were not interested in learning about plants or nature at the arboretum preferred a leisure activity that is primarily entertainment. On the other hand, the more one wanted to return to a leisure place and find new interests to explore, the more he/she was eager for learning.

Those who delighted in picnicking, showing the arboretum to out-of-town guests, and sharing the arboretum experience with others, also wanted leisure experiences that they could tell their friends about afterwards. However, trail walkers did not want to tell their friends about their experiences or to participate in prepared programs for learning. Those who did want prepared programs for learning were persons who came to the arboretum specifically for scheduled programs or for picnicking, or were avid gardeners, but overall, most people preferred to learn in a casual way.

People who came to view wildflowers, watch birds, or hike sought a leisure place of solitude, and those who came to picnic, walk the trails, visit a specific arboretum garden, or learn about plants and nature preferred a quiet, low key place that provides rest and relaxation.

Summer Season

The lowest percentage of members and the highest percentage of first-time visitors marked the summer cohort of the visitor study.

The summer visitors who very much liked prepared programs for learning and opportunities for casual learning wanted to come to the arboretum for scheduled lectures, classes, and field trips, but overall, casual learning was not a prime reason for arboretum visitation except for a small group.

The less the visitor was college educated, the more important it was to him/her to attend scheduled programs, but high school graduates were not interested. Women were much more interested than men, and nonmembers than members, in scheduled programs.

Learning about plants and nature at the arboretum was not important to family groups but was important to those who came to Holden with friends or came alone. Particularly parents of younger children were not interested in prepared programs for learning.

Those who came to the arboretum in an organized group, those who came alone, and the formerly married all wanted to come to the arboretum in an organized group; that option did not appeal at all to family groups or hikers. The formerly married most wanted to visit a place where they could get to know people of similar interests, share their skill and knowledge with others, and learn in a casual way. This small group, apparently mostly middle-aged women, seemed to be searching for new activities and new people to bolster their leisure life.

Picnicking was most popular with the top three occupational groups (business managers, executives, administrative personnel) and with the retired and persons who had at least "some" college education. Hiking was most popular with singles, especially young men. Those who came to walk the trails and to watch birds sought a place of solitude where they could get away from people and daily life and work.

People who came to picnic or to show the arboretum to out-of-town guests did not seek a challenging experience in which there is a chance to be creative and try new things. Overall, the summer visitors seemed to want a laid-back leisure experience, since even the desire to learn was highly correlated with a wish for a quiet, low key place that provides rest and relaxation.

By occupation, arboretum and botanical gardens were most popular with executives, administrative personnel, and business managers, who are typical "museum" visitors. Those without children most wanted to return many times and always find new interests to explore and be able to drop in on the spur of the moment at leisure places.

Fall Season

The largest group in the year-long sample was the fall cohort; nearly half of them were members, and one-fifth were making their first visit on the survey date.

Walking the trails at the arboretum was most important to postgraduates, administrative personnel, and executives, those who came with family and friends, and persons in the 25-54 year age bracket. Persons who came alone or in an organized group were least interested in hiking and backpacking.

Learning about plants and nature at the arboretum was not very important to any age group, although nonhikers showed some interest in prepared programs for learning. Such programs were moderately important to those who came for a scheduled arboretum program or to learn about plants, to birders, or to visitors at a specific garden, but there was not much interest in prepared programs, even by those who intentionally came to learn. Casual learning opportunities at arboretums/botanical gardens were not popular either, though women and older guests were more interested than men and younger visitors.

Those who came alone had made the most visits to the arboretum in the previous year, and they most preferred an activity that is primarily entertainment rather than a learning experience. Also somewhat interested in an activity that is primarily entertainment were the skilled manual employees, homemakers, retired persons, and those over 45 years old. Persons who came alone or in an organized group most wanted to be able to return to a leisure place many times and always find new interests to explore. Of the occupation groups, retired persons came the most often.

Parents of young children and members of larger households most wanted to show the arboretum to children, though members of larger households generally went to arboretums and botanical gardens less often than did adults from smaller households.

An activity that is primarily socializing with family and friends was most appealing to those in the lower-status occupations and with lesser education, but not to those in the higher occupation or education groups. Socializing was most important to those who came to show the arboretum to children and to share the experience with other persons. Also, an old familiar activity that holds no surprises or risks was sought more by skilled employees and retired persons and those over 65 years old than by executives, business managers, and homemakers. Gaining approval or recognition from other people in a leisure setting was more important to the less educated. Doing service for others during leisure appealed most to skilled manual employees, retired persons, and high school graduates, but not to executives.

Solitude was most important to those who came to picnic, to bird, or to hike, and to members rather than nonmembers. Getting to know people with similar interests appealed moderately to those who came to Holden to share the experience, to attend a scheduled program, or to picnic, and to women.

Significance of Study

The significance of this Holden Arboretum audience assessment is primarily twofold: the study covered all four seasons in a calendar year, which produced data detailing the distinctiveness of the visitors in each season; and measures of psychographics were a major emphasis in the questionnaire and the data analysis, because these factors, rather than demographics, are the motivations for participation in leisure activities.

Since visitors differ by season in their expectations of arboretum content, satisfactions with their on-site experiences, and their attitudes toward the institution and its place in their leisure life, a one-time or one-season assessment of an arboretum's audience is insufficient to gauge the diversity of visitor responses. Also, the matrix of responses over the four seasons reiterated and strengthened evidences of new audiences to cultivate. What appeared to be only a hint of an audience segment in one season was often repeated in other seasons, to indicate a stable, though small, segment worth developing.

The comprehensive nature of the Holden questionnaire produced substantial reliable information that can be incorporated into the arboretum's master plan. It is useful also for immediate practical application in developing audiences, programs, educational courses, and public relations thrusts for each season. The arboretum can also draw on the findings to design general development of funding, public relations, and membership programs.

Since Holden Arboretum now knows more about its visitors' perceptions than does any other cultural institution in the Cleveland metropolitan area, it is well prepared to undertake the next steps of its master plan and to envision its future.

References

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

Table 1a
Residence of Respondents
Merged Data for Four Seasons 1987

Eastern Cleveland suburbs	70%
Immediate suburban-exurban area around Holden Arboretum:	42%
Other eastern suburbs (between east boundary of Cleveland and the Mentor area):	28%
Cleveland proper	3%
Western and southern suburbs	9%
Elsewhere in Ohio (including 9% from other locales in northeastern Ohio)	11%
Out of state	3%
No response	4%

Table 1b
By the Four Seasons, 1987

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Eastern Cleveland suburbs	81%	71%	55%	68%
Cleveland proper	2	3	4	3
Western and southern suburbs	4	8	16	10
Elsewhere in Ohio	10	12	14	11
Out of state	2	2	6	3

Table 2
Length of Residence

	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall
Had lived in Cleveland metropolitan area:				
less than 5 years	5%	8%	12%	10%
20 years or less	14	26	27	27
at least 21 years	55	40	41	44
at least 41 years	20	19	12	17
No response	31	34	31	29

Table 3
Members and Visitation

	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall
Percentage of visitors who were members:	80%	54%	43%	48%
First time visitors:	5	21	31	21
Been to Holden prior to survey date:	94	79	69	78
Been to Holden in previous 12 months:				
no times, though had been some time prior to that:	2	10	12	14
1-2 times	11	20	10	19
3-10 times	52	29	32	31
11 or more times	32	18	10	12
20 or more times	17	8	10	4
40 or more times	5	3	4	2

Table 4
Sex

	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall
Males	53%	35%	43%	45%
Females	44	54	37	48
No response	3	11	20	7

Table 5
Age

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
18-34 years old	23%	19%	24%	18%
35-54 years old	44	41	51	54
55 years or older	32	38	24	25

Table 6
Marital Status

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Married	74%	75%	63%	76%
Single	15	11	20	10
Formerly married (widowed, divorced, separated)	10	12	16	12

Table 7
Household Size

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Living in one- or two-person households	50%	54%	44%	51%
three- or four-person households	36	36	39	38
five or more person households (includes four individuals who lived in group households of 19-42 persons)	12	8	14	9

Table 8
Children in Household
(Persons under 18 Years Old)

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Households with children	38%	31%	40%	39%
Households without children	60	67	59	58

Table 9
Children by Age Category

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Children under 6 years old	14%	11%	12%	12%
6-11 years old	20	8	26	18
12-17 years old	16	18	16	20

(In all seasons but fall, some respondents had children in more than one age category)

Table 10
Educational Level

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	<u>Fall</u>
Less than high school graduation	2%	1%	4%	3%
High school graduate, trade school graduate	15	13	18	10
Some college, junior college, technical school	28	26	26	26
College graduate (four years)	25	21	18	27
Postgrad or professional degree work	29	36	33	33
Percentage having <u>at least</u> some college	82	83	76	85

Table 11
Occupations *

	Winter	Spring	Summer	Fall
Higher executives, proprietors of large concerns, major professionals (physician, attorney, professor, corporate executive, university administrator)	6%	8%	10%	9%
Business managers, proprietors of medium-sized businesses, lesser professionals (teacher, botanist, engineer, registered nurse, computer programmer, social worker, banker, journalist, accountant, architect)	25	23	28	28
Administrative personnel, owners of small businesses, minor professionals, manufacturers reps, higher level salespersons (production manager, realtor, insurance agent, sales manager, public relations director, juvenile parole officer, commercial artist, budget analyst)	17	9	16	15
Clerical, sales clerks, technicians, owners of little businesses (physician's assistant, electronics technician, bookkeeper, court deputy clerk, cashier, secretary, data entry clerk)	16	12	8	10
Skilled manual employees (auto body repairman, pipefitter, electrician, toolmaker, typographer, welder, clockmaker, mechanic, policeman)	5	6	6	4
Semiskilled employees, machine operators (longshoreman, plant millwright, saw operator, highway worker, warehouseman, machinist, factory worker)	2	1	6	2

Table 11 (continued)
Fall

	<u>Winter</u>	<u>Spring</u>	<u>Summer</u>	
Unskilled employees (parking lot attendant, laborer)	1	0	0	1
Homemakers	11	17	6	14
Retired	17	19	12	13
Students	1	1	4	2
Not gainfully employed (unemployed, disabled)	0	1	0	0

*Categories based on Hollingshead's Two-Factor Index of Social Position