

Significant Issues in Museum Audience Research

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In the 1960's and '70's, when I was employed as a researcher, writer, and editor at a major historical society museum, I was constantly asking my colleagues, "Whom am I preparing this publication for, this label for, this brochure for? Who is my audience?" The usual response was "Everybody!", which, was, of course, absurd. Having been in the communications field all of my professional life, I was very aware that the first commandment of communications is "Know your audience." Without the recipient of the message being the focus of the message, the communication is likely to go astray.

This inability to secure a definition of the intended audience finally became so frustrating that I decided I'd have to learn on my own how to communicate better with my publics. Thereupon, I entered graduate school, while continuing to work at the museum. In my graduate studies, the more I delved into the seven decades of museology literature, the more apparent it became that though there were some landmark studies and publications about connecting effectively with museum audiences, most museum staff members were not familiar with them. As a consequence, the bulk of museum audience studies was mediocre, if not abysmal.

A strong sense of *deja vu* pervaded as I slogged through dozens, even hundreds, of poorly designed, implemented, analyzed, and interpreted studies that produced trivial results. Some were so inadequate that they produced erroneous results. Then came DiMaggio and Useem's survey in 1978, which indicated that perhaps 60% of museum and performing arts audience studies were discarded, their results never used. Even the ones that were satisfactory were ignored, having no impact on the operation of the institutions for which they were designed. So, I asked, what was the point in doing them?

Furthermore, why weren't museum staff members acquainted with their own literature base? Why weren't they applying the tested results from the excellent studies? Most of all, why did they continually repeat the same superficial study, instead of developing a further refinement that would contribute to progress in the field? Answers to these questions did not appear to lie within museology.

Since I began my communications career as a journalist, I have always wanted to know the story behind the story. Consequently, I began searching

outside of museology for the answers – in sociology, leisure science, psychology, communications, marketing, and education literature.

This search, as I progressed through a Ph.D. in educational communications, led me to two major conclusions, which have become the primary perspectives of my research:

- First, though demographics and participation patterns have been the backbone of most museum audience studies, they do not explain ~~why people do or do not attend museums~~. They describe the factual characteristics of people, but they do not examine personality and motivation factors.

Therefore, the answers lie in the psychographics – people's values, opinions, attitudes, interests, concept of self, social interaction behavior, expectations, satisfactions, goals, activities, group memberships, social position, and consumption behavior. In order to know why people are in the museum, what they expect from their visit, and how they will measure their satisfaction, we must explore their psychographic dimensions. Demographics and participation patterns provide the framework, but they should not be the focus of any serious study. In fact, when one knows the implications of the psychographics, one can predict the demographics that are likely to accompany those traits – though only the reverse is usually assumed to be true.

- The second primary perspective of my research relates to the ~~nonvisitors~~ and how to attract them to the museum. Whenever I work with a museum on a consultation or research project, the first questions inevitably are: "How can we bring in the people who aren't here? Who is *not* in our audience and why? Why aren't more people here, and why aren't people of more diverse backgrounds here?" Increasingly, these queries relate to minority audiences.

Hence, the focus of my studies has been on these two aspects: probing the psychographic dimensions of current and potential audiences, and determining why people are not at the museum. These were the theme of my first museum research article, "Staying Away: Why People Choose Not to Visit Museums" (*Museum News*, April 1983). Museum staff members and docents have told me that these findings, derived from a community study and replicated in numerous studies since, opened an entirely new understanding of who is in the audience and who isn't, and why.

The research shows the reasons why ~~people are not present~~ often have little to do with the exhibits or the intended offerings of the museum, and a great deal to do ~~with the ambiance, the atmosphere of physical and~~

psychological comfort, the assurance of being able to cope with the place and its "museum code," and the feeling that the museum sincerely wants a wide variety of people to attend.

Implicit in the design of all audience research should be the expectation that the resulting findings will be applied to solve practical problems that the museum faces. When I am guiding a museum committee through questionnaire design, I require them to develop questions that will lead to "actionable data." That is, every answer must supply some piece of information they absolutely need to help them make better informed decisions and actions. When I ask, "If you knew that, what would you do with it?" and the staff member replies, "I don't know," my response is, "Then, we don't ask it." Unfortunately, many audience study questionnaires contain irrelevant questions that don't provide direction for the future, that don't supply actionable data that can be applied toward solving real problems.

In my research, I have found that the fundamental questions that potential audiences everywhere are asking are: "What does going to the museum mean to *me*? Is this place worth investing my time and effort, and perhaps money? Does the museum show it cares about me by making itself accessible to me on my terms? Will it help me understand its message, by making the effort to bridge the gap, rather than expecting me to deal with it on its terms? If not, why would I want to be part of its audience?"

These are not unusual concerns. We all choose to go to places that we perceive will bring us whatever we define as rewards. And, if the benefits we receive are minimal, according to our criteria, we see no reason to return.

When I've conducted anonymous telephone surveys with community respondents – people who are not in the museum and who do not know the study has any connection with a museum – I've heard startling comments, such as:

"Why should I go to a place where they don't care whether I come?"

"Museums are only for rich people and college graduates."

"When I was there they had these little labels that didn't tell you anything about the objects. Why *were* these things in a museum?"

"It was very confusing. You didn't know where you were going and there was this jumble of things that didn't seem to have any relationship to each other."

"I was there once, on a sixth grade trip 30 years ago, and it was so bad, I never went back."

"When I was there on a school trip 20 years ago they made us march around to different exhibits and stand there while some woman lectured at us, then we got on the bus and went back to school. Why would I want to go there on my Sunday afternoon?"

You don't hear these comments if you survey only people in the museum, which is like preaching to the converted. We cannot find out

what's wrong with our places if we don't talk to the people who avoid us. We can't understand what we should change in order to make better connections with a broader audience unless we ask the psychographic questions.

Why does the educator from Ann Arbor like to watch demonstrations in the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, MI? Why does the designer from Vermont go into raptures over the decorative arts there, while the engineer from Chicago goes into similar raptures over the locomotives in this museum? Is it because of their occupational or educational characteristics? No, these people are evaluating their experiences from their feelings dimension, not their factual characteristics. What drew them into education, design, engineering in the first place? What values guide their lives? To understand their motivations, we need to know the basic qualities of their personalities that determine the fabric of their lifestyle, leisure choices, and museum visitation.

Merely analyzing demographics and participation patterns will not reveal what people care about in their leisure experiences. Instead, we should concentrate on learning how individuals make decisions about the use of their leisure time, energy, and money; examine how nonparticipants differ in these respects from frequent visitors, and, even more importantly, how frequent attenders differ from occasional participants. Only then can we truly know whether or not we are offering, or are able to offer, the kinds of experiences that nonparticipants value and expect. When we know that, we can develop ways, within our mission and capabilities, to reach these elusive audiences.

In carrying out such a plan, the basic step is recognizing that people do ~~make choices about how they will use their leisure time, energy, and money.~~ We often assume that because we regard museums as valuable, the public will similarly cherish them and want to share in them. However, individuals do not just automatically gravitate toward museums or any other leisure places, no matter how worthwhile they may be. Instead, before making their choices, they consider which of several competing alternatives appears to offer them the most rewards, the greatest satisfactions, based on their criteria of a desirable leisure experience.

Sometimes museum staff get so caught up in the idea that people should come to the museum to learn that they forget that ~~most people go to the museum to have a good time, in whatever way they define that phrase.~~ It may include ~~learning, having a challenge of new experiences, sharing the event with people they care about, participating actively, doing something worthwhile for themselves and others, and enjoying comfortable, enhancing surroundings.~~ If they are conscious and capable of learning, they will learn while they're there – more by osmosis and by sampling activities that fit their interests than from a didactic message. Sometimes what they're learning is “this isn't a place I want to be in or return to.”

If that is what they're learning, then it's our responsibility to find out what's turning them off and to do whatever we can, within our mission and ability, to help make the museum a place that more audiences will enjoy. That doesn't mean demeaning the mission, downgrading the offerings, or pandering to the public. It does mean researching how we can most effectively convey our message to as broad an audience as possible, for their benefit and ours.

Harris Shettel characterizes himself as "the visitors' advocate," and I certainly agree that is my responsibility also. But, I would go even farther and say that we researchers have to be change agents. To effect change in the attitude and behavior of prospective audiences, we first have to effect change within the museum. This means incorporating the research findings into the management philosophy and budget of the museum, and throughout all the enterprises that the museum offers. When I have asked museum directors what has been the most valuable outcome of the research I have conducted for them, they have said it was raising the consciousness of the staff and trustees regarding their visitors and potential visitors. From that time forward, they considered the point of view of the audience, as well as that of the museum insiders, in all that they did.

This brings us back to the question I asked earlier: If the research results are not mainstreamed into all the undertakings of the museum, what is the point of conducting the research? Sadly, it is not unusual to hear, after an estimable project has been completed, that the museum staff is resistant to adopting the changes that are required to do a better job for themselves and their audiences.

The very people who were eager to know "what our visitors think" or "who is not in our audience" lose interest when the magnitude of the findings strikes them. Doing a better job for the audience and for the museum will require change; that is implicit in doing a study. You do not expect to remain the same after the study has been completed; otherwise, there is no reason to do the research. You are not seeking confirmation of what you already know, but direction into territories yet unexplored – and, granted, such exploration is often scary.

If we're going to be effective visitors' advocates, we researchers can't stop with turning in the final report. I have come to believe that I should go back to the museum three to six months after the report has been received, to help staff overcome reluctance, even fear, about implementing the findings. Sometimes the data tell you what you don't want to hear, but need to; sometimes they tell you not to proceed with a favorite project. As a change agent as well as visitors' advocate, it may be necessary for the researcher to follow up with additional, patient consultation on how specifically to put the results into practice, to help move the museum from what is to what could be. Her guidance may be needed to propel the staff from engaging in mere discussion, into making informed decisions and taking action.

I will close with a reiteration about the necessity for showing we care about our audiences before we can expect them to care about us. This example is from a letter to the editor of a major newspaper by a man who had been recently unemployed. He wrote eloquently that during "that sometimes dark period, I rediscovered the public library, specifically the [major city] Metropolitan Library (a gold mine of employment and research information and the answer to nearly any question one could ask) and the [small suburb] suburban library (which provided the comforts of life – books, records, tapes, compact discs, videos, and reference materials)."

Here's the important part of the message for us: "All services were rendered with competence and friendliness one would be hard-pressed to find elsewhere. In other words, no matter who one is, everybody is a somebody at the public library."

I propose we take this as our motto: No matter who one is, everybody is a somebody at the museum. There is no better way to build and serve our audiences, to their benefit and ours, than to ensure that everyone counts and that we care.

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