

Misconceptions Held by Museum Professionals

Marilyn G. Hood
Hood Associates
Columbus, Ohio

1. People who come once to the museum will be seduced into returning.

Hundreds of people have come once and have no intention of returning if they have had a disappointing experience...unable to find relevance to their life in the museum experience because of esoteric or nonexistent labels, puzzling exhibits, crowds, museum fatigue, and incomprehensibility of the entire experience.

2. If we get schoolchildren into the museum early in life, they will be devoted visitors for the rest of their lives.

My research indicates that as many school children are turned off to museums for life as are intrigued by them because of unsatisfactory experiences they have had on school tours – and they remember these patronizing, stultifying school trips vividly 20 or 30 years later.

3. People come primarily to the museum to learn.

Most people come to the museum to have a good time, in whatever way they define that. For some, it is learning, for others it is the social interaction or active participation aspects that draw them in. The latter care more about sharing a leisure experience with people they care about than having an educational experience.

4. In a museum that doesn't charge admission, devoted visitors will be so loyal they will want to become members.

If they're getting all they want from their present participation, and they don't value what is in the membership package, they have no reason to join. Since most membership packages are assembled on the basis of what the museum wants to offer, rather than from what the member wants to purchase, there often is little incentive to join.

5. This museum is unique.

Therefore, national or international research findings of museums or museum audiences don't apply here. All museums are more alike than they are dissimilar, and there are commonalities between museum, zoo, botanical garden, nature center, historical site, and aquarium that make application of findings from one setting to another appropriate and sensible.

6. Families are the backbone of museum audiences.

It may appear that families dominate most museum audiences, but actual counts often show that older adults, childless persons, or those with grown children are the ones who care most about the museum and are the most devoted

visitors. Especially among those who are frequent visitors and those who rank museums highest as leisure places they value, families are not the dominant cohort.

7. The same approach serves everyone.

If the handout or docent's talk is greatly appreciated by the Sunday afternoon crowd, it will suffice for the Tuesday morning group. We know from research that weekday audiences differ from those on weekends, that visitors differ by seasons, that locals differ from travelers. That demands a variety of approaches to reach a variety of individuals and their learning styles.

8. Folk who come for one type of program will automatically spill over into other programs or into becoming regular viewers of the exhibits.

Usually, the people who come for the festival, workshop, film, demonstration, performance, come precisely for that event and the qualities it offers. They are not necessarily enticed in equal measure by the exhibits, which offer other qualities that interest them less.

9. People come primarily for the *what* – what's offered, what the museum is featuring.

The frequent visitors do, and though they are a small minority of any community, they attend so often they may make up 40-50% of the museum's visitation. But the bulk of the visitors come for the *how* of the event – how the presentation is offered and experienced, how they share the event with other people, how the event relates to their daily life. The more connections that exist between the viewer/participant and the museum/event, the more ways the person can experience the totality.

10. Visitors equal visitation.

The number of visitors any museum served in a year is more likely to be about half of the total visitation, because of repeat visits. Some devoted visitors may attend 40 or more times a year and be counted each time.

11. Survey research is simple/easy to do – just hand out a few questionnaires, tally the responses, and you have direction for the next project.

When conducted in a methodologically-sound, systematic manner, survey research is a sophisticated, even complex, process in which there are no shortcuts – or the data will be compromised, even erroneous, and useless to guide decision making.

12. All research methods are equal and therefore, interchangeable.

Many believe that comment cards received at an exhibition, visitors register comments or brief evaluations received at a lecture or workshop are just as worthwhile and reliable and accurately represent visitors' views as the data from a carefully conducted survey. Instead, these voluntary comments or the evaluations that have been handed out with no plan and no follow-up to insure a representative sampling of opinion can mislead. Research shows that people who voluntarily answer either are very positive and very negative. The in-betweens have to be sought out.

13. Museums should be delighted with a 20-30% return rate on a survey.

Instead, they should be chagrined. Only the devoted or the complainers answer to the first mailing or first round of a survey. Assiduous follow-up is necessary to learn the responses from the bulk of the population being surveyed. Never accept less than a two-thirds response rate if you are using the results to guide decision making. If you expect to make a life-and-death decision, it may be necessary to get at least 80-85% response rate, to be sure you are proceeding correctly.

14. Focus groups are as good as a detailed survey and cheaper.

Focus groups and surveys serve different purposes and are not interchangeable. Focus groups can explore general responses, attitudes, interests in a loosely structured manner; surveys are more effective for acquiring specific data which can be quantified and analyzed by a variety of statistical programs.

15. Qualitative research gets at the affective domain and quantitative at the cognitive, and never the twain shall meet.

By carefully structuring leisure statements based on important concepts of leisure attributes, the research can comprehensively probe attitudes, values, opinions, and interests in a quantitative questionnaire that is self administered or proffered by a personal interviewer.

16. Demographics will tell you all you need to know about your audience.

Demographics should provide the framework within which the other data are analyzed, but they will not tell you *why* people are or are not visiting the museum. Only psychographics will tell the why and the how, explore the socialization patterns and life styles and peer group influences of visitors and nonvisitors. A museum that focuses its survey research on demographics is selling itself short.

17. If the museum says it's giving visitors twice as much to see/do as in the past, it can charge twice as much as in the past.

Admission fees must be related to what the public perceives to be "value." The museum may think it's providing twice as much value, which justifies doubling the price. If the public doesn't believe it's getting twice the value for twice the price, it will be disappointed, disenchanted, and spread the word that the museum is a ripoff. □

There is Not Always Agreement Between What People Say and What They Do!

Bill Ford
Jacksonville State University

M. Borun & M. Miller (1980). *What's In a Name? A Study of the Effectiveness of Explanatory Labels in a Science Museum*. Philadelphia: Franklin Institute of Science.

One of the studies in Borun & Miller's report compared people's preferences for label length with what they actually read. Respondents were divided into five groups, each received a different number of lines of text (14, 21, 29, 38, 45). Respondents tended to prefer slightly more lines than they were actually given, except in the case of the longest label of 45 lines. Thus, when there were 14 lines available, visitors averaged preferred number of lines was 18; when 21 lines were available, average lines preferred was 25; etc. In contrast to preferences, the number of lines actually read was always less than the number of lines available. When there were 14 lines available, an average of 13 were read; when there were 21 lines available, an average of 17 lines were read; etc.

The study demonstrates a clear difference between the stated preferences of visitors and their actual behavior. Respondents tended to prefer more lines than actually available, but consistently read fewer lines than actually available.

S. Bitgood & K. Richardson (1986). *Validation of Self-Reports in a Zoo*. Technical Report No. 86-30. Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design.

This study assessed the validity of self-reports on two activities: self-tracking and time estimation. Visitors who were unobtrusively observed were asked to retrace their path through the Birmingham Zoo. While visitors were 83.5% accurate in reports of whether or not they entered a specific exhibit area, they were only 61.2% accurate in tracing the pathways they took through the zoo.

In addition to being tracked by the observer, visitors' total time in the zoo was calculated by means of a stop watch. As they exited, visitors were asked how long they had been in the zoo. Only about 15% of visitors could accurately estimate within 15 minutes total time in the zoo. Close to 40% of respondents overestimated their time by more than 15 minutes and over 20% underestimated their time. About 25% refused to make any estimation at all.

The results of these studies suggest that self-reports are often inaccurate if they are not validated. □