

The Variety of Art Museum Survey Techniques

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One of the major goals of many art museum administrators is to increase the attendance of the infrequent visitor while maintaining the satisfaction and interest of the frequent visitor. A museum survey can be an extremely useful tool for assessing the necessary modifications of any art museum to fulfill the desires and expectations of a diversified audience. There is a variety of different survey techniques available that can be utilized to achieve this goal, and a review of three noteworthy museum studies will hopefully highlight some of these.

One commonly used survey technique is an interview of the art museum visitors. Valuable information can be gained by the museum from an interview, such as the demographical characteristics of its audience and their impressions and perceptions of the museum. A fine example of this type of survey is a study performed by O'Hare (1974) at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. This survey analyzed four main factors of the museum's visitors: their demographical characteristics; their motivation for going to the museum; their behavior or actions during their visit; and their reactions and impressions of the museum.

Another good representation of this particular survey technique is Nash's (1975) study of art museum visitors at the Whitney Museum of American Art. As the O'Hare study had done, Nash interviewed people who had just completed their trip of the museum exhibits. The interview gathered visitor responses of questions pertaining to the visitor's museum experience ("Was your trip positive or negative?"), impressions of the museum ("What adjectives would you use to describe the museum?"), and behavior while on the museum floor ("Did you talk to any staff members?" or "Did you visit the restaurant?"). Studies such as this and O'Hare's can be extremely valuable for the analysis of needed museum improvements, because they directly ascertain the audience the museum is attracting, the specific demands and desires of this audience, the most popular and least popular exhibits, and the impression or image the museum is conveying to its visitors.

Museum visitor surveys can provide an enormous amount of information about the particular characteristics and desires of the museum's audience, however, they provide very little information about the infrequent museum user. Nash (1975) performed another survey on the streets of Manhattan and Rochester, New York, to discover "what people thought of art museums and their reasons for not attending them" (p. 56). This survey approach can elucidate the needs of the infrequent visitor, and necessary changes can be made on these findings to make the museum more attractive and enticing to a larger audience.

Finally, Hood (1983) took a different angle to assessing the public's demand of art museums. She performed a telephone interview in the Toledo, Ohio, area which analyzed frequent, occasional, and infrequent art museum visitor's leisure time values and desires. These results were then compared with the leisure benefits of a visit to the art museum. Consequently, the administration at the Toledo Museum of Art has gained valuable knowledge about the needs and inclinations for leisure time of a larger variety of the city's citizens, and thus, has been able to modify the museum's image, style, and format to become a more appealing and attractive form of recreation for a greater amount of people.

Any one or a combination of these survey approaches can be used, depending on the specific goals of the research group. Performing a museum survey is an important step to understanding the needs of many and to ensure the satisfaction of a diversified population.

References

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