

## A View From "Outside" Research on Community Audiences

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As a researcher who has conducted a variety of studies of current and potential audiences for many types of museums, I want to champion the benefits of community studies, rather than doing just visitor research. The primary reward from conducting community studies is that museums learn facts about their audiences that they cannot discover by carrying out only in-house research. One cannot extrapolate data from visitor studies to the community at large.

A community study—usually conducted by telephone—of a systematic sample of the area population, not only provides information on both visitors and nonvisitors, but explains why such a large proportion of the population falls into the latter category. Once we know why people are staying away, we can plan how to do something about it—to their benefit and ours.

The explanation for the public's avoidance of museums can be found by comparing respondents' perspectives on leisure values, interests, and participation, and their expectations of a museum visit vis-à-vis other leisure activities. Having this broader picture of both visitor and nonvisitor populations helps the museum to evaluate its effectiveness in reaching diverse audiences and in improving its communication with wider publics. By learning how to connect with groups it has not even envisioned as being within its potential audience, the museum is prepared to improve its programming, services, and public relations.

My studies have focused on the psychographic characteristics of visitors and nonvisitors as the key to defining their leisure interests and their expectations of, and satisfactions with, a museum visit. These data have helped client museums develop a proactive view of their future audiences, rather than just measuring reactively their present visitors.

Table 1 displays the usual psychographic characteristics that we measure in community studies, though not all are included in every project.

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\*Note: This paper was presented at the 1993 Visitor Studies Conference, but did not included in the previous volume of collected papers

**Table 1**  
**Psychographic Characteristics (or Lifestyle Dimensions)**

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Attitudes	Personality traits
Opinions	Activities
Interests	Group memberships
Values	Social position
Concept of self	Consumption behavior
Goals	

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These factors explain motivation for, expectations of, and willingness to be involved with a leisure activity. They tell about people's reasons for visiting museums, awareness of publicity about a museum prior to a visit, satisfaction or dissatisfaction with a visit, and personal interest/involvement in the museum's subject matter (perhaps as a collector or as a participant in a related activity).

In each study that I conduct, I develop psychographic measures based on six concepts that describe people's expectations of, and satisfactions with, all types of leisure experiences (see Table 2).

The following six concepts, or leisure attributes, which were identified after extensive reading of relevant literature of the past 70 years, have been tested in many museum settings, by both myself and other qualified researchers. The replicated findings from these numerous studies confirm that the concepts produce both statistically and socially significant descriptions of current and potential museum audiences.

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**Table 2**  
**Leisure Concepts or Attributes**

- Doing something worthwhile, for oneself or others.
  - Feeling comfortable and at ease in one's surroundings.
  - Having a challenge of new experiences; exploring untried places or activities.
  - Having opportunities to learn.
  - Participating actively, rather than having a more quiet, passive experience.
  - Sharing the experience with other people.
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## Two Community Studies

The two community studies from which I have drawn the data described below were conducted in collaboration with an art museum and with an outdoor living history museum, both located in major metropolitan areas.

While these findings concentrate on the respondents' psychographic characteristics and how these affect leisure participation, including museum-going, demographic characteristics form the framework in which other data are embedded. We have long known that education, occupation, and age are the demographic variables that most correlate with participation in cultural, arts, and outdoor recreation activities, though income and residence are of some importance. The demographics that we usually measure are displayed in Table 3.

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**Table 3**  
**Demographic Characteristics (or Factual Descriptors)**

Sex	Marital status
Race	Number of persons in the household
Age	Number of children (if any)
Level of education	Ages of children
Occupation	Place of residence
Household income	Number of years of residence in the community

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Education, occupation, and income combine to create a "social class" factor that is important in determining leisure participation, because it influences cultural tastes, preferences, and standards. Persons in the upper education/occupation/income group generally have greater access to the training that is necessary to decipher "the museum code" of objects, language, and symbols, which thereby prepares them for knowledgeable and pleasurable participation in museum-going.

Residentially stable persons, who are involved with long-established social relationships in the community, and people who are in the lesser education/occupation/income cohort, are among those who are less apt to pursue leisure activities outside their home or neighborhood. Newcomers and shorter-term residents are more likely to engage in "going-out" leisure activities because they have fewer social ties with relatives and friends locally.

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## Art Museum-Related Project

In a research project with an art museum, I developed or adapted several techniques to evaluate respondents' levels of participation in four clusters of leisure activities: cultural, entertainment, active participation, and social interaction units. These clusters are shown in Table 4.

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**Table 4**  
**Clusters of Leisure Activities**

Cultural

Going to libraries  
Going to art museums  
Going to concerts  
Going to plays  
Going to historical sites or nature centers  
Going to zoos

Entertainment

Going to amusement parks  
Going to movies  
Sightseeing  
Window shopping or browsing in stores  
Attending sports events  
Watching public television

Active Participation

Camping or hiking  
Boating or fishing  
Swimming  
Skiing or ice skating  
Being a participant in musical activities  
Engaging in arts and crafts

Social Interaction

Going to city or metro parks  
Picnicking  
Visiting with friends or relatives  
Participating in church or club activities

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The basic evaluation technique was a multi-attribute model (Table 5).

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**Table 5**  
**Multi-Attribute Model**

The model is based on the assumption that a consumer's attitude toward an object (or organization, group, product, or action) is the total of two factors:

- The perceived importance of several identified attributes (*Presence of the attributes*); and
  - The degree to which the specific object appears to possess each attribute (*Quantity of the attributes*).
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This means that the object (the museum) must possess the desired important attributes, and the quantity of each attribute must be enough to inspire choice/involvement/purchase. The more favorable the attitude one has toward an object, place, or activity, the more likely one is to prefer/select/use that object, place, or activity.

Using these and other measures, I was able to define the community residents by three levels of museum participation: frequent, occasional, and hardly ever or nonparticipants (see Table 6).

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**Table 6**  
**Levels of Participation in Museums**

Frequently =	at least three visits a year
Occasionally =	one or two visits a year
Hardly ever =	less than one visit a year, or never

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The research showed that participation in art museums was much more highly related to psychographic than to demographic variables. It was also obvious that occasional and frequent art museum visitors were definitely different in their valuing of the six leisure concepts and the psychographic measures based on these concepts, and in their participation in the four leisure activity clusters.

The differentiation by the respondents in their valuing of the leisure concepts was crucial to their decisions about participating in art museums. Though frequent visitors believed art museums possessed all six of these leisure attributes, and they valued all six highly, they most preferred opportunities to learn, to have a challenge of new experiences, and to do something worthwhile in leisure.

At some previous time, frequent visitors had informally evaluated art museums by the leisure criteria they valued. In terms of the multi-attribute model, not only were the leisure attributes that they valued present most of the time in art museums, but the quantity was consistently sufficient to provide satisfying visits on a regular basis. Consequently, their attendance became habitual when they decided that art museums qualified on both counts. In the language of the model, not only did these adults have favorable attitudes toward the "product," but they "made the purchase."

On the other hand, occasional and hardly ever participants most highly valued the other three concepts—being with people, feeling comfortable and at ease, and participating actively in leisure. They either did not find in art museums the three attributes they valued, or, if they recognized that the attributes were present, the quantity was not great enough most of the time to warrant their attendance. As a result, these folk did not perceive that art museums offered them as many leisure benefits on a consistent basis as were proffered by competing options.

Occasional guests appeared to evaluate each museum visit individually, to decide whether to invest themselves in the venture or whether they might garner more of what they valued in another setting. Once or twice a year they concluded that a visit to an art museum was worthwhile, based on the expectation of the museum's fulfilling their leisure needs. The hardly ever or nonparticipants either did not consider the leisure attributes offered by an art museum to be important or they found the museum to be lacking in the three attributes that were of greatest value to them.

In multi-attribute model terms, just because an activity or place is perceived to possess an attribute does not necessarily mean that respondents find that attribute to be enhancing, nor does such acknowledgment always lead to positive attitudes or involvement. For instance, the very fact that occasional and hardly ever visitors believed that art museums offered learning opportunities was not viewed as a benefit. Especially for persons who had had negative experiences with formal education, learning opportunities appeared to be a hurdle rather than an asset. In that sense, a museum visit connoted a ponderous and demanding intellectual experience, rather than a possibility for casual, relaxed exploring and diversion with people they cared about.

When participation in the four activity clusters was evaluated, data showed that persons who frequented art museums were the most intensely involved in all four leisure clusters, and those who hardly ever visited art museums participated least frequently overall in the activity clusters—reinforcing the premise that people in the "going-out" mode are more likely to be museum patrons.

However, the majority of adults who did not go often to art museums was generally more active in cultural activities as adults than they had been as children, meaning that they did engage in other cultural cluster offerings

such as going to libraries, concerts, plays, and zoos, but they were not going to art museums.

Conversely, the frequent participants in art museums were involved in fewer cultural activities as adults than they had been as children. After having had wide exposure to cultural offerings in childhood, they evidently decided to concentrate on museum-going as one of their primary adult activities.

These findings demonstrated that, just because respondents engaged in numerous cultural activities as children, there was no guarantee that they would continue to pursue these specific activities as adults, though they tended to remain active within the cultural cluster. As children, they may have been involved in certain events because of parental or school direction and decision. As adults, they were able to make their selections on the basis of their own criteria, which may not have been the values inherent in art museums.

When respondents were asked to rank the local art museum against four other area leisure places, those who ranked it first were the most likely to view art museums as places for participating actively, feeling comfortable and at ease, learning, having a challenge of new experiences, exploring, and interacting socially. In other words, persons who cared the most about the local museum also felt that art museums generally met their criteria as desirable places in which to spend leisure time.

Additionally, people who had ever been to the local art museum had more positive attitudes toward the psychographically based descriptors of an art museum experience than did those who had never been. But, people who had attended only once in the previous year were consistently less positive in their feelings about comfort, challenge of new experiences, and social interaction in art museums than those who had been ten or more times in the prior year.

Also, persons who went alone to the museum had the most positive feelings about active participation, comfortable surroundings, learning, and challenge of new experiences in art museums. More than half of those who visited the art museum alone were frequent participants; more than half of those who went with family or friends were occasional participants, and more than half who last attended in an organized group did not generally visit art museums. These data substantiated other findings that the frequent and occasional visitors were quite different from each other, as well as that the frequent patrons were considerably different from the hardly ever guests.

Interestingly, the two dozen individuals who said they never visited art museums, even though they had been to the local museum in the previous year, apparently had gone not by their own choice. They were in organized tour groups or they were room mothers, or Scout or 4-H group drivers. In summary, loyal visitors attended because museum visitation was on their agenda, since it met all of their leisure criteria. Occasionals patronized special events, but didn't view the museum as a place to visit regularly. The

hardly ever group didn't go unless some outside propulsion moved them there.

The data from this extensive research illustrated that art museums have their best opportunity to develop additional audiences by luring the occasional visitors into more frequent attendance. By emphasizing the three leisure attributes that occasional visitors prize most, museums can entice these people to attend more often because they will be providing satisfying experiences for them on a regular basis. Building on the occasionals' moderate visitation pattern and their latent interests is likely to produce positive outcomes and be long lasting because their relationship with the museum has already been established.

Since the occasional visitor cohort usually comprises 40-50% of a community's population, reaching it with messages, programs, services, amenities, and leisure attributes that it values will greatly enhance the audience development prospects for any museum.

Attacking the nonparticipant problem requires investigation of the needs of particular constituencies before specific programs to reach them can be developed. However, since the occasional and hardly ever groups of museum visitors are similar in their valuing of the six leisure concepts, the more that a museum makes itself appealing to the occasionals, the more worthwhile it will appear to the hardly ever guests. This means there is a two-for-one payoff in efforts to provide the occasionals with the kind of leisure experience they value. Everyone wins.

The most important outcomes of this major project were the identification of the bases on which people make their leisure decisions, and defining ways in which museums can use those findings to understand their potential audiences better. Once an attitude toward cultivating occasional visitors has been incorporated into the museum philosophy, appropriate services and programs follow. If the museum makes the effort to reach the occasionals on their terms, they will come.

### **Outdoor Living History Museum-Related Project**

One of the advantages of conducting a community audience study is in learning how the respondents' characteristics, interests, and participation patterns compare with those of typical museum visitors. Prior to our conducting a community study for an outdoor living history museum village, an on-site survey had shown that persons with frequent museum visitor characteristics predominated in attendance. They were primarily in the upper education, occupation, and income groups, and they regularly patronized other cultural institutions, often on their travels.

The purpose of this community study was to ascertain interest in, and potential support for, adding a living history farm to an existing village complex, and to identify how closely community residents resembled typical frequent visitors. We used leisure concept and psychographic measures in



this study which were similar to those developed and applied in the previous community research.

In this telephone survey, persons who ranked the historic village first, against four other leisure places, were the most interested in the attractions offered by a potential farm, and those who ranked the village fifth were the least interested in a farm. Most of the people who ranked it highly had no young children, had lived in the area for several decades, were high school graduates or had some college, or were occasional visitors to historical sites or restorations. In other words, community respondents who gave highest status to the village did not possess the characteristics of the usual avid museum-goer.

Also, the higher the rank that respondents gave the local art museum, the lower their likelihood of being very interested in interaction with farm interpreters and in participating in farm activities, such as making apple butter or feeding animals—evidence of the distinction that respondents made between a conventional museum and an outdoor living history village or farm.

Whereas upper education/occupation/income groups are usually the people most interested in museums and historical sites, they were not the most enthusiastic about a potential farm. Individuals who were not in the top two education categories not only favored the farm, but were more willing than other segments to pay for a visit and to purchase food and handcrafts on site.

When respondents were asked about participating in farm life activities, they appeared to perceive a distinct difference between their interacting with interpreters and demonstrators and their actually "doing" farm or farmhouse tasks. For most people, the activities were not nearly as appealing as more passive involvement. Only the younger respondents were very interested in active participation in farm chores. The occupation cohorts most likely to participate in farm activities were machine operators/semiskilled workers, clerical/sales/technical personnel, and homemakers.

Other would-be visitors were considerably more enthusiastic about watching a demonstration or being entertained—in contrast to expectations of the staff, who thought guests would leap at the chance to churn butter or pitch hay on a recreated historic farm. Especially disenchanted with these suggestions were executives, professionals, and managers—the usual museum visitors.

The occasional visitor, who usually attends museums primarily for special events, festivals, and family days, was more interested in a farm because it appeared to meet his/her expectations of a good family outing and an enjoyable social experience.

Particularly important to the infrequent museum-goer is the opportunity for social interaction. For this audience segment, a requirement of a satisfactory leisure event includes participating with a group that both affirms one's leisure choices and shares in the experience. This

"togetherness" aspect is often hard for college-educated, more independent-minded museum staff and trustees to understand or accept, because it is not essential to their leisure lives. Yet it is absolutely vital to the leisure lives of the groups that expressed greatest interest in the farm.

The social unit need not be just family, but can be any group that the visitor feels comfortable with—fellow members of a club, hobby group, church circle, senior citizens center, union, or work team. The social group is especially important in participatory experiences like the farm and farmhouse activities. Furthermore, the very nature of an historic farm experience stimulates interaction, shared learning, reminiscing, and group musings.

An interesting note was that persons who had visited the living history village with family and friends had greater interest in visiting a potential farm than did those who had come with just family. The social opportunities offered by the mixed group no doubt helped make their visit a memorable and rewarding occasion.

Through factor analysis, we found clusters of related activities that respondents participated in as children and as adults. This analysis showed a strong relationship between five leisure activities that were "object-oriented": going to zoos, nature preserves, historical sites or restorations, and museums, and sightseeing. We analyzed respondents' levels of participation in these object-oriented places by their interest in participating in farm life activities. More than half the persons who were very interested in farm experiences were more involved in object-oriented activities as adults than they had been as children. That is, they were going to more places like zoos, historical sites, and museums, or they were going more often to such places, than they had previously.

This meant that the "going-out" group, which was seeking new and interesting leisure experiences, was by far the most likely to be receptive to the idea of visiting an historic farm. It also indicated that these people recognized that they had a number of options, and that they would select the ones which they perceived would bring them the greatest satisfaction in terms of their leisure values and expectations.

The largest group of persons who had "no opinion" on whether they wanted to visit a farm also participated in fewer object-oriented activities as adults than they had as children. The group that had the lowest percentage of being very interested in farm visitation was that which had maintained a stable level of interest in object-oriented activities/places from childhood to adulthood.

Therefore, cultural institutions were receiving much higher levels of visitation and support from persons who were more involved in object-oriented activities as adults than they had been as children; moderately higher support from those who were more involved as children than they were as adults; and lowest levels of visitation from those who maintained a stable participation rate.

Relating these data to sociological findings suggests that those who are moving in some direction are more adventuresome, more expectant, in attitude than the "maintenance level" people. This implies that institutional planners should be less concerned about maintaining levels of participation from childhood on, and be more focused on catching the budding interest of young adults—young families and young singles who are looking for places where they can enjoy themselves with family or friends while exploring new interests.

Interestingly, there was some indication that the occasional visitors perceived greater similarity between the living history village and a theme park than they did between the village and the local art museum, because they viewed both village and park as offering a variety of activities for all ages in places that were more accessible than a traditional museum.

Furthermore, these occasional visitors evinced a greater willingness to pay a sizable entrance fee than did the typical museum-goers (who may have expected to get in free at most museums, or they may have been members of the museums they regularly attended, which meant they didn't pay each time at the door).

In summarizing these study findings, the occasional museum visitor was far more interested than was the typical frequent museum-goer in visiting the village or the proposed farm. To the institution's advantage, it had an "in" with individuals who traditionally didn't go to conventional museums and with people who were searching for a novel leisure experience. Unfortunately, it had not yet effectively communicated the message of what it offered to this large population segment. The study findings pointed out that the village had a unique opportunity to develop an audience that other museums find difficult to attract.

The data from this community survey showed there was a considerable area population that would be likely to visit the village if the message about its attractions were presented in ways that emphasized the three leisure attributes these persons most highly valued—sharing the experience with people they cared about, participating actively, and feeling comfortable and at ease in their surroundings.

## Conclusion

Again, I recommend that museums conduct community studies because they will learn new, and usually, surprising, facts about their area population, as well as identify unsuspected audiences that are ripe for development. When community data are compared with those collected on site, the museum is infinitely better prepared to evaluate its opportunities for reaching and serving diverse publics.