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Audience Research and Development for Museums Attracting Visitors to Sustain a Dedicated Audience Base

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Audience Research and Development for Museums

Attracting Visitors to Sustain a Dedicated Audience Base

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the importance of visitors for museums and focuses on how audience research contributes current and future programs and exhibitions. How research is conducted during key planning stages for exhibitions and programs may determine the choice of appropriate research methods and the drawing of definite conclusions. Audience research allows museums to expand services, programs, and exhibitions to encourage involvement and enjoyment by visitors. Through explanation of qualitative and quantitative methods of research, the author exemplifies research and outcomes through various case studies. Museums may face obstacles while considering or conducting audience research, such as cost, hiring outside consultants, and the need for developing visitor study departments.

The ultimate goal for museums is audience development. By increasing visitor numbers and diversity, museums can create a broader audience base to support museum programs and operations. Case studies are provided for examples of successful audience development initiatives.

Audience research and development coincides for the benefit of museums and audiences. By learning the interests and dedication of visitors, museums can alter or modify various aspects of operations to encourage visitors to attend and increase the exposure and educational benefit of museums and the various opportunities that are provided.

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I. Introduction

Art Now: Georgina Starr: Hypnodreamdruff. When you read the title of this 1996 Tate Britain exhibition, what do you imagine to view in the galleries (assuming you have no past exposure to the work of Georgina Starr?) Most people with basic or minimal art historical knowledge may not know what to expect! Could you see some visions of the artist's dreams or life experiences? Actually, it is a whole different experience altogether, *Art Now: Georgina Starr: Hypnodreamdruff* consists of a series of video works by Starr following an invented cast of characters in a dream sequence.

The artist created *Hypnodreamdruff* as an episodic rendition of a dream. Starr keeps the audience engaged with unique personalities that form captivating conversation, all while feeding selfish tendencies and habits. Starr, a British artist, created visions to draw in audiences. By adapting her experience, visitors could have been drawn in by an aspect in the story they could relate to. The title of the exhibition, *Art Now: Georgina Starr: Hypnodreamdruff*, also establishes curiosity that may attract a museum visitor into the video gallery.

How do museums know what will attract audiences to each gallery? How many visitors look for information about a museum or exhibition on a website? Why do visitors attend certain exhibitions and programs? How can the museum attract a more diverse audience? Many museums use audience research to answer these questions and to address strengths in current operations as well as problems and concerns.

In 1993, the Tate Britain, "commissioned a qualitative visitor audit."¹ The visitor audit examined what visitors look at, observe, read, what encourages conversation, and what they may

¹ Soren, Barbara. "Audience Research Informs Strategic Planning in Two Art Museums." *Curator*, v. 43, no. 4. 324-42. 2000.

share with friends after a visit. The research also identified ways in which the visitor experience may be improved based on current strengths. The audit used the following vehicles for analyzing visitor experience: focused surveys, naturalistic observation, conversational gallery interviews, tracking, and focus groups.

The Tate Britain discovered many patterns and realities about the audience. One issue examined in the audience study was how exhibitions and individual galleries are perceived by visitors based on the title of the gallery. “New Displays,” is the term the Tate Britain used to describe galleries containing a new rotation of works from the permanent collection. Only one participant in the audit knew the correct meaning of the term, “New Displays.” Most respondents could not give a response or made an incorrect statement. The results of this one question led research staff to conduct a room title formative evaluation exercise. Staff raised several concerns during planning regarding, “effectiveness of descriptive versus thematic titles.”² The research staff then went one step further in comparing descriptive and thematic titles by interviewing visitors. It was concluded that, all visitors interviewed preferred either the current thematic title or a combination of thematic and descriptive titles. This led to a reevaluation of current gallery titles and a change of them accordingly to describe more accurately what visitors could expect in the galleries.

This is just one of the many ways museums use audience research to identify visitors’ relationships with the institution. Museums may use audience research to focus on one specific issue, to analyze overall visitor experience, or to rate satisfaction during a program or exhibition.

Museums everywhere face the arduous task of discovering cultural desires of the community and region. How an exhibition and the corresponding programs will be received and

² Soren, Barbara. “Audience Research Informs Strategic Planning in Two Art Museums.” *Curator*, v. 43, no. 4. 324-42. 2000.

supported determines the success, expansion, and longevity of a museum. In order for museums to achieve educational missions, the public requires access to the collection. Curators, education staff, and the institution as a whole should support interpretive exhibitions and stimulating programs to attract new visitors, while meeting the needs and desires of loyal, dedicated patrons.

Audience development allows the museum to increase visitor numbers, improve quality of programs, and overall support. Without audiences, museums would have limited outlets in which to exchange knowledge from experts to the public for the ultimate educational experience. Audiences also sustain operations in museums through admission fees, gift shop revenue, donations, fundraising, as well as volunteer and docent support.

Audience research is usually prompted by an audience development initiative, such as declining general admission numbers or while trying to gather visitor diversity statistics. It is important for the museum to project an open-door environment and welcome everyone. More often than not audience research spawns development initiatives to attract more families, certain ethnic groups, or members.

While the doors to the museum may be open, if visitors are not attending, the museum will eventually cease to exist. Development of a museum audience requires creative marketing methods to assure entertainment and enjoyment for visitors. In order to maintain a supportive audience base, museums should constantly evaluate programs and exhibitions to determine what was successful and what needs improvement. Audience research and evaluation can be conducted in a variety of different ways including surveys, focus groups, and general observation.

In order for a museum to sustain a dedicated audience base, the museum staff should research the existing audience and use marketing methods to encourage new visitors. A museum

uses audience research and development for several reasons, including community involvement, current audience demographics, and how it may attract underserved populations. Audience research and development statistics may also determine changes within a program and to gather information for reports to foundations and government entities. Research of the current or potential audience can make or break a museum's audience development initiative.

In the following pages I will discuss the evolution of the relationship between the museum and its audience, survey various methods of audience research, how they can be used effectively, and explore how audience development emphasizes the mission and outreach of an institution. I will also give these issues life by including case studies about museums that initiated and conducted audience research and how these institutions achieved audience development goals. I will conclude my paper with a discussion of some common problems and concerns museums should be aware of when planning for and performing audience research and development initiatives.

II. History Between Museums and Audiences

While audience research is beneficial for many reasons, it is also central to understand how and why the practice developed. Considering the institutional history of museums, the concept of audience research is relatively new. In the past, museums were seen as an activity strictly enjoyed by wealthy and educated citizens. As the climate of and attitudes about museums changed; staff, donors, docents, and curators realized the potential impact of programs and exhibitions to benefit all. By attracting visitors from various communities through innovative outreach programs and events; museums have developed broader audiences overall, not limited to the upper class, as in the past. While audiences continue to change, museums are constantly searching for vehicles to attract particular groups or residents of specific communities by providing tours and special activities to bring those who may not otherwise have the opportunity to explore museum offerings.

It is not known when audience research participation and conclusions were first used for strategic planning; yet, the following statement provides some basic historical guidelines. Audience research was first used in the early 20th century. “Museums in Great Britain began to survey their visitors during the 1960s, rather later than museums in North America.”³ Various methods of audience research gained prominence in the 1970s and 1980s, which led to survey and focus group formats that provide accurate and efficient results.

Audience research gained relevance with the growing competition between museums and other leisure activities such as movies, music, sports, amusement parks, and traveling. With more widely advertised activities gaining popularity, museums had to compete with mainstream

³ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Their Visitors*. New York: Routledge. 1994. 59

media and advertising. This has become more common in contemporary society with activities like concerts, eating out, sporting events, and vacations becoming more convenient, popular, and affordable.

Another hurdle for museums stems from the fact that many people who have visited museums strictly during childhood or never before may, “think of them as forbidding, difficult, unchanging and of no immediate relevance.”⁴ In order for museums to shift this opinion, staff needs to offer a wide array of activities and exhibitions that will appeal to people from a variety of backgrounds, education levels, and ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. For example, “Large, urban museums are striving to expand their collections, exhibitions, and programs to represent more ethnicities and organized exhibitions focusing on non-Western culture to attract more immigrants and visitors from abroad.”⁵ Therefore, museums must know the composition of their audiences and understand their current audience better so as to discover ways to attract a broad variety of visitors from the surrounding community or region. Audience research has been used to realize the potential outreach of a museum to the surrounding community and region so that everyone may have the unique opportunity to learn from experts with actual historical objects.

⁴ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Their Visitors*. New York: Routledge. 1994. 19

⁵ Kotler, Neil and Philip Kotler. *Museum Strategy and Marketing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1998. 116

III. Audience research

i. Why is audience research important?

Audience research is imperative for museums to promote and plan exhibitions and to support activities to attract visitors from the immediate community, tourists, and scholars alike. Museums engage people who find a connection to or are eager to learn about the exhibits, objects, and mission of the institution. Staff, members, and trustees of the museum are proud of the arts in their community. Members and trustees are willing to sustain and fund a museum because of its educational potential and influence. Creation of exhibitions and programs to please those who contribute to operations will ensure the building of a strong, supportive local and regional audience.

Knowledge of the audience is important for a check and balance of services, programs, and administration and, “continued justification of a public service, the demonstration of a professional approach to management, the development of knowledge and expertise and the improvement of performance.”⁶ Knowledge of visitors is instrumental when acknowledging progress and growth and setting practical goals for the institution. The following will discuss the importance of conducting audience research, highlight various qualitative and quantitative methods, and show how results can be effectively interpreted to gain the greatest benefit for the museum.

If a museum wants to develop a nurturing visitor base, the institution should open conversation to the needs and desires of the audience. Research of a community or region surrounding the museum encourages growth of the potential audience; citizens of the community who have not visited the museum. Community organizations such as churches, community centers, and libraries are excellent sources to collect data from the potential audience.

⁶ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Their Visitors*. New York: Routledge. 1994. 54

According to the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation of the American Association of Museums, “While they (museums) collect, research, and preserve a wide variety of materials and objects, it is their presentations to the general public about these objects through the media of exhibitions and public programs that give museums their distinct and unique character.”⁷ Identification of intriguing qualities of the collection and the educational potential of programs is a great tool when trying to attract eager and supportive visitors.

Most museums demonstrate the need to cater to audience members with various offerings, based on education level, race, and physical and mental disabilities, among other characteristics. The museum may learn about various groups of people that make up the community by surveying current and potential visitors. By adapting programs and exhibitions to attract a more diverse constituency, the museum may better position itself in the community and public sector in order to sustain current success and future growth.

While museums are valuable educational and cultural treasures for all ages, many families and other patrons choose more convenient, widely advertised activities. Audience research can assist museums in identifying why visitors may choose other popular activities more often or rather than those offered by museums. Advertising is simple and affordable for industries that thrive from high profit margins such as movies, music, sporting events, amusement parks, restaurants, malls, and vacation destinations. Yet, museums are continuously finding creative ways to lure visitors. In recent decades as these activities have gained popularity and affordability, museums have felt the increased competition and have adapted accordingly, by expanding offerings and adopting some corporate advertising strategies. By learning about visitors and why they participate in other activities, museum staff can identify ways to alter

⁷ “Professional Standards for the Practice of Audience Research and Evaluation in Museums.” *American Association of Museums*: 19 May 2003.

current programming to associate qualities from some of these other activities. For example, if a survey concludes that visitors enjoy attending movies, the museum may want to organize a film festival or program series focusing on art house or independent films that relate to a component in the museum's collection or current exhibition. Most foreign, independent, and art house films are usually in limited release at local theaters, so museums can provide a venue for screenings that will attract a whole new audience.

The traditional museum visit, which stereotypically has been a social gathering for high-class, educated citizens, has changed. Socialization factors may determine a visitors' dedication to arts and culture. For example, if a child participated in the arts or was taken to a museum, they are more likely to visit as an adult. Those who have culturally active friends are more likely to be involved as well. "Word-of-mouth recommendation is the museum's most valuable asset."⁸ This would be evident in creative exhibitions and programs that are well attended by the community, especially if there are many first time visitors. One of the most important question on surveys is "How did you hear about the museum and its activities?" to be answered by choosing one from a list of options such as friends, magazine, newspaper, radio, or flyers.

More and more museums are expanding offerings related to exhibitions and evening programs to attract patrons with different lifestyles. Museums usually have a target group in mind when conducting audience research for development purposes to attract more families, students, or young professionals. Evening programming and gallery hours are key to expanding audience diversity. With day-to-day activities and full-time jobs occupying museum operating hours, potential visitors may enjoy having the option of evening hours. Students may be encouraged to visit a lecture at the art museum about Jackson Pollock, especially if the student

⁸ French, Ylva and Sue Runyard. *Marketing and Public Relations Handbook for Museums, Galleries, and Heritage Attractions*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press. 1999. 4.

studied his work in an art history class. A student discount or a program by the museum held on campus may also persuade interested students to be involved with the museum.

More often than not research is used to increase visitor numbers, by learning about the motivations for attending and what makes up their basic demographics. Studying visitor experience also recognizes strengths and weaknesses in overall museum operations. Most museum visitors are seeking a range of experiences. Creative offerings lure visitors with programs that correspond with exclusive exhibitions and admission discounts for families, students, and seniors. Corporate sponsored admission nights such as the Target Corporation's sponsorship of free Fridays at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Saturday programming at the Brooklyn Museum of Art may also help bring more publicity and status to the museum. A variety of local and major corporations will often sponsor free admission for a day or for select hours or a series of programs.

Patrons greatly appreciate hospitality, clear directions on the museum website, captivating brochures, an easy to navigate facility, and helpful and courteous staff members. Research is an assistive tool when considering changes in visitor services and operations. Visitors are concerned with their overall experience. Even if an exhibition is intriguing and captivating, if the receptionist is rude, gallery guides are no longer available, and signage directing visitors to galleries is sparse, visitors may not return. Basic surveys asking visitors to rate visitor services and operations may initiate simple improvements that would enhance the overall experience and result in more repeat visitors.

When conducting research, survey questions may be geared towards a museum target group. For example, if one of the fastest growing audiences in museums are families, museums may use research strategies to identify existing programs and how new activities may increase

participation from families. When a museum is considering restructuring programs or developing new activities, a survey covering current programs may ensure structured and smooth planning, implementation, and transitions to new programs. Therefore, strong partnerships with schools and a positive influence in the community will encourage more families to attend exhibitions and related programming. Dialogue between the museum and families about parents' and childrens' needs and desires will help shape contents or topics of programs and when determining schedules for programs based on demand. In this case, audience research in the form of a program evaluation would be a prime vehicle to gather the appropriate information.

Conclusions drawn from audience research are integral components in grant applications, during preparation of annual reports, or during donor cultivation. Development staff and grant writers should be able to explain the attraction of the museum's exhibitions, facilities, and programs. Research involving attendance numbers and demographics are important because of the detailed and expressive components required by many corporate and government supporters. Proof of appropriate use of funds in proposed operations is desired by the company, group, family, or individual so they will be committed to continuing philanthropic ventures. As Eilean Hooper-Greenhill explains, "detailed knowledge of the operation of the museum" should be gathered with ease, "when required."⁹ All staff must identify with the museum they work for because they represent the institution. Audience research and visitors' satisfaction is gauged using components and projects completed by each department at the museum. Staff must know visitors and how to serve them to cultivate members and regular visitors for a sustained, active flow of mission based activities.

⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Their Visitors*. New York: Routledge. 1994. 11.

Neil Kotler and Philip Kotler suggest, “museums that are seeking new audiences can follow three strategies, 1.) modifying existing programs and strategies; 2.) promoting existing programs more effectively; or 3.) total innovation with new programs.”¹⁰ Audience research can be used during utilization of the above strategies, which are good options for museums that may have a declining visitor base and may not have budgetary goals that allow for extensive audience research. All existing programs and strategies deserve full review including identifying strengths and weaknesses.

ii. Introduction of research methods and evaluation

Various research methods are used to gather data. Museum staff or other personnel conducting research must be aware of the goals of the museum, only then can the appropriate vehicle for research be determined. Any select method of research provides either quantitative or qualitative results. To determine accurate conclusions about the sample group, quantitative methods depend on the amount of surveys completed; the larger the sample group, the more accurate the picture of the overall audience. Prime examples of quantitative methods include entrance or exit surveys compiled with multiple choice questions. Visitors may also be asked to express their satisfaction with various components of their experience using a rating scale. Entrance surveys are often used to gather quantitative information about a visitor such as gender, age, race, education level, area of residence, economic status, etc. Exit surveys are mainly used at the conclusion of a program or upon the conclusion of an exhibition to gather information such as motivations for visiting the museum, other interests, museum member status, or frequency of visits to the museum.

¹⁰ Kotler, Neil and Philip Kotler. *Museum Strategy and Marketing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1998. 11.

iii. Methods of audience research

Qualitative methods include front-end studies, focus groups, visitor panels, and phone surveys, which may have smaller sample groups because of time constraints and cost; but tend to heed more specific insight into reasons for satisfaction and concerns with visitor services, exhibitions, and programs. Qualitative research results depend on the skills of the researcher. A qualified researcher should possess some of the following characteristics, “strong conceptual interests, a multidisciplinary approach, and good investigative skills, including doggedness, the ability to draw people out, and the ability to ward off premature closure.”¹¹ During discussions in phone surveys and focus groups these qualities will make or break initiatives and corresponding goals.

Visitors are more willing to expand on why an experience was positive or negative when given the opportunity to discuss within a group; also concrete answers provide museum staff with suggestions that can be expanded upon and fully explained. Research may be conducted at the museum or in the community. Interviews and discussions can enhance any research study because participants can better express emotion through conversation than written statements.

Phone surveys are usually directed at non-visitors (in the community) or former members who may have lapsed in renewal or participation. Many museums conduct a phone survey on an annual basis. They can be very time consuming and require the cooperation and dedication of many staff members or volunteers. In order to gain worthy results, hundreds or thousands of phone calls must be completed.

Selecting a method of research depends on what the museum wants to know about the audience. Museums usually have a goal or process in mind when deciding to conduct audience

¹¹ Dierking, Lynn D. and Wendy Pollock. *Questioning Assumptions: An Introduction to Front-End Studies in Museums*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Science-Technology Centers. 1998. 23.

research; such as increasing visitor numbers or altering the format or content of a variety of programs or services. Stages of exhibition planning can be analyzed during audience research and in the following ways: “front-end analysis is carried out at the beginning of the development of the ideas for the exhibition; formative evaluation tests ideas and exhibits while in production; and summative evaluation examines what has been achieved at the end of the process.”¹²

Front-end analysis may be conducted before the presentation of a new exhibition, especially if a museum has experienced declining visitor numbers for an extended amount of time or the museum is looking to expand its audience base. For example, the goal of the study would then be to discover the desires and interests of current visitors or community citizens, to develop a new and exciting exhibition to attract a growing audience.

iv. Stages of audience research and evaluation during exhibitions

Formative evaluation may be conducted during the exhibition to gauge the success and satisfaction of the material and mission of the exhibition. “Formative studies help in evaluation of prototypes and mock-ups and redesign for clarity, comprehension, accessibility, and ease of use.”¹³ While an exhibition is open, it is a prime opportunity to assess strengths and weaknesses of approach and clarity to the audience. If a glaring error or concern is addressed while the exhibition is in progress it may be corrected or adapted so as to make the exhibition more beneficial to future visitors. Also, if important components or facts are lacking in an exhibition, curatorial or education staff may use the opportunity to create supportive materials (brochures or handouts) to enhance existing information in the exhibition.

¹² Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and Their Visitors*. New York: Routledge. 1994. 74.

¹³ Dierking, Lynn D. and Wendy Pollock. *Questioning Assumptions: An Introduction to Front-End Studies in Museums*. Washington, D.C.: Association of Science-Technology Centers. 1998. 5.

Museums would conduct summative evaluation at the conclusion of an exhibition or after a program to investigate the overall satisfaction or impact. This is the perfect opportunity to establish goals and strategies for planning future exhibitions.

Since a visitor study is such a major component of sustainability and growth for any museum; it is important to know if extended research projects impact the performance of the museum. Many surveys and other methods of audience research can provide accurate results if conducted properly. Questions should be based on what the museum staff wants to know about their visitors and what aspects of operations are being examined. An entire department or the entire museum must be dedicated to the plan to enact change or maintain current programs and services. If problems are addressed and positive change is enacted based on conclusive research statistics then a museum should know the success of the audience research initiative.

The Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation at the American Association of Museums suggests, "All professionals involved in the practice of visitor research and evaluation should be familiar with the history, methodologies, past and current developments, and major findings in the field."¹⁴ Therefore in order to effectively achieve an audience research report one must know how museums operate, what they expect, the history and evolution of the practice, and the constant changes and evolution of the process. While it is not necessary for all involved to be experts, staff involved in the initiation of research projects may benefit from consulting a professional research organization or another colleague who has completed a similar project.

The preceding information displays just how involved and complicated audience research can be. The most important element to gain is that audience research can create vast changes to improve working relations and efficiency in operations. Most important of all is to know what

¹⁴ "Professional Standards for the Practice of Audience Research and Evaluation in Museums." *American Association of Museums*: 19 May 2003.

the visitors want and keeping these thoughts in mind while planning exhibitions and conducting programs. When conducted on a regular basis the museum may notice patterns or discrepancies from year to year which may initiate changes or realize success.

IV. Case Studies

While it is important to know the history, methods, and interpretation of audience research, how these aspects are used in real museums can create fluency in understanding the why audience research fosters knowledge of visitors to adapt museum services to all. In the following pages I will provide case studies from the Minnesota Historical Society, which focuses on the impact of a new facility, the Art Institute of Chicago, where audience diversity was surveyed, and the Montclair Art Museum, where visitors were surveyed during two featured exhibitions.

i. The Minnesota Historical Society

Established in 1849 the Minnesota Historical Society is composed of over 25 historical sites, libraries, and collections to exemplify and share the rich history of Minnesota with state residents, tourists, historians, and students. The Minnesota Historical Society implemented audience research in response to declining visitor numbers. In order for the institution to expand its draw to the community, staff began asking key questions before designing and planning exhibitions. Investigative questions to examine visitor's preferences included the following, "What do visitors want to learn about history? How do they like to learn it? What makes exhibits lively experiences? What do families want out of their museum experience? How do schoolchildren connect their museum experience with their classroom experience?"¹⁵

Researchers conducted front-end studies shortly after the historical society moved into a new facility in 1992. In order to improve visitor services and preserve the collection, the History Center in St. Paul underwent \$76.4 million capital project in 1992. The project was the

¹⁵ Kotler, Neil and Philip Kotler. *Museum Strategy and Marketing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1998. 120.

culmination of 12 years of planning and construction. “The History Center’s design fulfills the Society’s dual purpose: to collect and preserve Minnesota’s past and make that heritage available to the public.”¹⁶ The survey included questions that explored visitors’ backgrounds, preferences, interests, and satisfaction with current museum services and exhibitions.

Since the new building provided better facilities for gallery space and visitor services, the staff at the historical society felt a survey was necessary to gauge satisfaction in the overall visitor experience. The front-end study concluded that visitors desired to learn about daily lives of people and cultures in the past. For future exhibitions, “emphasis was given to making exhibit experiences personal and emotionally satisfying.”¹⁷ By using various points of view and interactive components, the historical society gave visitors options as to how they wanted to interpret the material. Exhibitions evolved to feature large-scale objects, actual objects from the life of Minnesotans, multimedia presentations, and hands-on activities. Audience research proved positive for The Minnesota Historical Society; visitors attended more often and stayed longer for education and enjoyment.

ii. Art Institute of Chicago

In the midst of Chicago there is a museum that has inspired generations and continues to grow by attracting a diverse audience. With one of the most recognized collections and some of the most renowned works of art, the Art Institute of Chicago has expanded offerings by providing programs and classes for teens, families, students, and seniors. While the Art Institute’s audience represented the city’s ethnic composition in many respects, the Institute

¹⁶ The Minnesota Historical Society website. <http://www.mnhs.org/about/mnhistory.html>

¹⁷ Kotler, Neil and Philip Kotler. *Museum Strategy and Marketing*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1998. 121.

desired stronger outreach and involvement from African Americans. The Art Institute also strived to encourage more African American visitors to become members over a 5 ½ year period.

The Art Institute utilized many research techniques at the museum and in the community to discover why African Americans did or did not visit the museum and why.

One of the key issues was to what extent African-Americans feel comfortable visiting the Art Institute compared to other groups, and whether they have adequate preparation and information about art for their experience in the galleries.¹⁸

By expanding offerings and emphasizing the culture and history of all ethnicities, visitors felt that they could visit anytime without feeling intimidated or overwhelmed.

During the study, the Institute used qualitative and quantitative methods of research using volunteers. They conducted a timing-and-tracking survey, which observes visitors in the gallery and takes note of comments made in reference to art, which objects they chose to view, and for how long. Researchers also conducted a mini survey to determine demographic profiles of visitors sampled. During the research period, the institute presented several exhibitions and programs featuring African American artists and themes.

The Art Institute of Chicago hired three African American researchers to conduct the study. The results unveiled some pertinent information about the museum's African American audience and their relationship with the Art Institute. Demographics of the African American visitors were different from the average audience, composed of people ages 35-44, younger than the average museum visitor, and highly educated professionals. Many of the African Americans who participated in the study were visiting for the first time in two years or more.

¹⁸ Soren, Barbara. "Audience Research Informs Strategic Planning in Two Art Museums." *Curator*, v. 43, no. 4. 324-42. 2000.

While some of the museum's goals were fruitful, some were not. Some surveyed commented that they were pleased with the expansion in exhibited African art and more diverse exhibitions especially those with an African American undertone or theme. Yet, most surveyed were not convinced that memberships would be worthwhile. African American visitors also thought it was important for programs and activities to reach-out to the black community of Chicago.

These combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods were successful for the Art Institute of Chicago. Many concerns were identified by African American visitors and the Institute adapted in the following ways to continue to grow in audience diversity. Some visitors interviewed stated their family and friends were dedicated to and would only visit museums or galleries with African or African American art. So, the museum expanded permanent offerings of various African and African American inspired and created works from tribal art to Harlem Renaissance works. An additional connection to the museum's collection could be found in the gift shop, by featuring more products representing and emphasizing works from the African American collection. The Art Institute also involved more African American docents and volunteers, to represent the African American part of the community in Chicago. The Institute therefore determined that African American visitors would see more of themselves in the Art Institute of Chicago.

Audience research has proved to be a priority for the Art Institute of Chicago. Sally Clark, the first director of evaluation and research at the Art Institute, managed the audience research project outlined in this case study. In a presentation at the American Association of Museum's annual meeting in 1997 she, "described how museum staff were using newly

developed and existing research methods to enhance their understanding of visitors' wants, needs, and expectations."¹⁹

Researching African American visitors assisted in strategic planning for the museum as a whole. The Art Institute used research results to set standards and baselines in every aspect of operations, to maintain information, to track progress, and to disseminate findings across the museum. In adapting programs, services, and exhibitions for the entire Chicago community, the Art Institute involved all museum functions in changes, programs, and services.

iii. Montclair Art Museum

With a permanent collection rich in American and Native American works, visitors to the Montclair Art Museum (MAM) can visualize the history and evolution of American art and its various movements, artists, and media. Located in Montclair, New Jersey, the museum is sustained through dedicated community and member support. The museum coordinates several major exhibitions each year and hosts complimentary programs and lectures for students, scholars, teachers, and families.

In October 2005 the marketing and communications department at MAM hired the research firm, Audience Research and Analysis, to conduct quantitative entrance and exit surveys to gallery visitors. Generally, visitors who came to the museum strictly for lectures and programs were not polled. Statistics were tabulated to determine effectiveness of advertising, audience demographics, and satisfaction with the current exhibition and visitor services. Over 200 surveys were collected over the course of one month. Results were compiled in the Visitor Profile and Satisfaction Study report compiled by Audience Research and Analysis. The first

¹⁹ Soren, Barbara. "Audience Research Informs Strategic Planning in Two Art Museums." *Curator*, v. 43, no. 4. 324-42. 2000.

phase of surveys was conducted during the major fall exhibition, *Roy Lichtenstein: American Indian Encounters*. Attendance numbers were high for the duration of this exhibition (compared with attendance in October 2004.) The reason for this attendance increase was due to the popularity of Lichtenstein and his work, advertising, and favorable reviews in the *Star-Ledger* and the *New York Times*. Visitors were encouraged to participate in the survey in the following ways: members were offered a free gift for their time and non-members were given the option of half price admission for one member of their party.

Opening questions of the entrance survey asked how often audience members visited the Montclair Art Museum, what encouraged them to visit (newspaper ad, radio commercial, website, mailing, or word of mouth), reasons for visiting, etc. To fully gauge visitors' other cultural interests, participants were also asked what other museums they have visited recently, what newspapers they read, and what radio stations they listen to. 48% of those surveyed were repeat visitors to the museum, the majority within the past year.²⁰

Considering the various ways the Montclair Art Museum advertises to the public: website, newspaper review, newspaper ad, e-newsletter, and radio commercials, two of the most effective methods, according to the survey, were pretty simple. Among 61% of members surveyed, featured mailings were the lead source of motivation and information for attending MAM. About half (48.4%) of non-members surveyed said a personal recommendation was their encouragement for attending the MAM galleries.²¹

²⁰ *Visitor Profile and Satisfaction Study – Fall 2005 Montclair Art Museum*. Audience Research and Analysis. December 2005.

²¹ *Visitor Profile and Satisfaction Study – Fall 2005 Montclair Art Museum*. Audience Research and Analysis. December 2005.

MAM visitors were proven to be regular museum goers and art lovers. Most visited museums in New York City. The most popular museums included the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the American Museum of Natural History. Other popular choices included New Jersey institutions such as the Morris Museum, The Newark Museum, and the Jersey City Museum.

Demographic statistics revealed that visitors of the Montclair Art Museum do not suggest a diverse audience, especially when compared to the ethnographic statistics for northern New Jersey. An overwhelming majority of visitors surveyed (90.1%) were white. Two other ethnic backgrounds represented were black (3.2%) and Hispanic (5%). Among those surveyed, women were the majority (67%) of visitors. Age was also another revealing statistic of the museum audience. “The mean age of gallery visitors was nearly 50 years. Members were eleven years older on average. Twenty-one percent were under 35 years of age while 18 percent were seniors, leaving 61 percent between 35 and 64 years of age.” This proved that the museum is attracting various generations. The mean household income for those surveyed was \$129,078.²²

Quantitative surveys proved successful for the Montclair Art Museum. In order to have points of comparison, the museum also conducted another similar combination of entrance and exit surveys for the major spring exhibition, *Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands*. Statistics gathered from the series of surveys are being used to expand marketing, program offerings, and visitor services. To address concerns and evaluate services provided by the museum, a Visitor Experience Committee was assembled, composed of staff members from various departments, who meet monthly.

²² *Visitor Profile and Satisfaction Study – Fall 2005 Montclair Art Museum. Audience Research and Analysis.* December 2005.

Based on conclusions, the Montclair Art Museum desires to attract a more diverse audience. During the spring and the summer of 2006, the museum exhibited a retrospective of the art of Willie Cole, an African American contemporary artist from New Jersey. The subject matter and approach of *Anxious Objects: Willie Cole's Favorite Brands*, attracted a more diverse audience. By exploring more innovative programming and new and universal art, the Montclair Art Museum strives to evolve audiences to represent the diversity of the region.

The exit survey concluded reception was excellent, but security staff followed too closely, which made visitors feel uncomfortable. Overall, visitors had an excellent experience at the Montclair Art Museum and would “definitely” recommend the museum to friends and family.²³

²³ *Visitor Profile and Satisfaction Study – Fall 2005 Montclair Art Museum. Audience Research and Analysis.* December 2005.

V. Obstacles museums may encounter when planning for or during audience research

While audience research can allow museums to take an intimate look into who they are serving, extensive studies are very expensive to conduct from start to finish. Museums may not have the appropriate staff abilities and funding to successfully complete an audience research study; therefore a museum may choose to hire consultants and statistical analysts who exclusively provide services to non-profits and museums. Consultants may assemble focus groups or craft surveys based on the needs of the museum. The consultants then tabulate and prepare a report and conclusion based on the statistics. Many museums realize the need for experience staff and are establishing visitor studies departments and hiring personnel to specifically conduct and analyze audience research and to manage visitor services such as the admission desk, the store, and facilities. In this chapter, I will discuss how museums may perform research on their own, when and why museums hire consultants, and the development of visitor services departments.

i. How museums can conduct audience research on their own

For small to mid-size institutions with limited budgets, audience research may seem like an overwhelming task. With grants and government money becoming more competitive, some museums may not have funds to conduct a visitor experience study and tabulate the statistics accordingly. Many times there are not enough staff members to dedicate their time to creating a survey. Also, if staff can devote time to a survey, in order to correctly draw conclusions, statistic data analysis knowledge may be necessary. If a museum does not have staff or skill to conduct a survey, they should analyze the institution and existing programs and services and decide what they are capable of. While money and staff restraints may not allow a museum to conduct surveys to the extent they would like, even some knowledge of visitors can be very valuable.

There are many books and resources available for museum professionals covering audience research with examples of standard questionnaires and various methods of research. Volunteers can also be utilized to monitor survey participants. Even asking a few simple questions to visitors over the course of a month may provide answers and provoke change in marketing or visitor services.

ii. Hiring outside consultants

If a museum has research funding and lacks time or confidence to conduct accurate research on its own, the museum may choose to hire a marketing or statistician consultant. There are several companies available to complete specific, in-depth qualitative and quantitative audience analysis. Some cater especially to arts, culture, and non-profit organizations. For example *Audience Research and Analysis* based in New York City offers the following services for arts and culture organizations; economic impact studies, mail, telephone, and Internet research, focus groups, data processing, multilingual capabilities, mapping, and pedestrian counts. The client base for Audience Research and Analysis includes the Newark Museum, El Museo del Barrio, the Museum of Modern Art, the Montclair Art Museum, and the High Museum in Atlanta.²⁴ While companies such as Audience Research and Analysis provide excellent and thorough research, such services can start around \$20,000 for a simple quantitative survey analysis to hundreds of thousands of dollars, for an extensive combination of a series of qualitative and quantitative analysis over a period of months or years. Therefore, any museum that is considering hiring a consultant should always thoroughly investigate the company or individual and contact past clients (of similar size and scope) to rate satisfaction.

Not only are exhibitions, programs, and activities important in attracting and retaining museum visitors, so is the overall visitor experience. Museums realize the importance of details

²⁴ Audience Research and Analysis website. www.audienceresearch.com

such as directional signage inside and outside the museum, skills and knowledge of receptionists, training of security guards, and selection of gifts in the store. Museums recognize these are all important aspects of a visitor's experience and they are creating specific positions to strictly deal with reception, the gift shop, food service, signage, access to the disabled, and the overall quality of the museum and its offerings.

VI. Audience Development

i. Introduction

While a museum may have a current, strong audience base, museums should always consider the future of the community and how it may change over time. Families may move away, members may not renew memberships, and students may become future museum members and donors; considering these issues, museums strive to be a positive asset to education and the community? This is why it is important to develop a supportive audience base to sustain the museum for the future.

Museums reach out to the entire community and usually have target groups in mind when planning programs, exhibitions, and other activities. Most museums have specifically designed programs to attract families, children, teens, certain ethnic groups, young professionals, seniors, etc. By reaching out to these groups, museums prove the desire to provide education and experiences for everyone. Many museums also provide free admission for special programs or for gallery visitors during select hours or days of the week.

Throughout this chapter I will discuss the significance of audience development and how outreach and community programs have created new environments and renewed interest for new audiences. To prove the success of development initiatives, I will discuss various methods and programs used to develop audiences during the Arts Festival of Atlanta in 1996, at the Cleveland Museum of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, and at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

ii. Arts Festival of Atlanta, *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*

The Arts Festival of Atlanta in 1996 was a unique opportunity for audience development as the city prepared to host the summer Olympics games. As an annual summer event, the Arts Festival of Atlanta embarked on how to create events and exhibitions to captivate an international audience. The festival organizers' goal was to expose broader audiences to contemporary art. This example of audience development for a specific instance focuses on one exhibition that was part of the festival, *Conversations at the Castle*. Since the festival offered an occasion for institutions to reconnect with visitors and expand the contemporary art audience, organizers wanted to design this exhibition specifically for the development of the contemporary art audience. The exhibition was displayed at a central location that would provide appropriate gallery space while embracing the history and culture of Atlanta. *Conversations at the Castle* was titled so, because the exhibition was held in a preserved, majestic historic home in midtown Atlanta built between 1909 and 1913. While the Festival was a popular annual event, it was time for an evolution of sorts considering the exposure of Atlanta in 1996,

By the 1990s, the Festival was beginning to understand that it was outgrowing, both physically and philosophically, its traditional home. It began to seek a national, even international presence. And like the cultural community around the Olympics, it questioned how it could develop in a larger arena and still serve its loyal hometown public.²⁵

Several public and gallery installations were commissioned by leading contemporary artists for the exhibition. The public art projects were seen as beautification mechanisms for urban renewal

²⁵ Brenson, Michael and Mary Jane Jacob. (ed.) *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1998.

in preparation for the Olympics. The Festival also instituted change by moving various activities and exhibitions from one central location to various venues downtown and around the city of Atlanta which allowed Festival executives to gain confidence by, “grafting international aspects onto its programming without jettisoning cherished elements.”²⁶ By researching existing and potential audiences in Atlanta, a front-end study was used when orchestrating the exhibition.

The curators strived to create an exhibition to break the assumptions that contemporary art evokes, “an air of sophistication, intellectualization, and class that, it is said, can only be appreciated by a refined and restricted group.”²⁷ The curators of the exhibition, Mary Jane Jacob and Michael Brenson, wanted the art and the artist to come directly in touch with the audience. The curators located points of meaning in contemporary art for those unfamiliar with the art world and what it encompasses. Jacobs focused the overall visitor experience, “on common needs and concerns as addressed by artists who continued an age-old tradition of grappling with questions of human existence through art.”²⁸ Curators commissioned works that would envelop the culture and diversity of the Olympics and the city of Atlanta. The exhibition was formulated to encourage visitors to connect with the art through their own knowledge and personal life experiences. Not only did the curators and exhibition administrators consult with the potential audience and artists, but they also met with civic, corporate, and cultural leaders of Atlanta discuss their opinions on several topics related to art, the world, and the exhibition.

²⁶ Brenson, Michael and Mary Jane Jacob. (ed.) *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1998.

²⁷ Brenson, Michael and Mary Jane Jacob. (ed.) *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1998.

²⁸ Brenson, Michael and Mary Jane Jacob. (ed.) *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1998.

Curator Michael Brenson suggests that when children and students have positive museum experiences, “The artistic imagination has to be exposed to young people in a way that inspires them to engage their environments and expand their knowledge of themselves.”²⁹ Art that exposes qualities the audiences can identify and interact with will encourage potential audience members to attend museums and foster learning. In order for the exhibition to better connect with the community, some artists took up residencies in Atlanta during the exhibition, to explore the essence and culture of the city. They formulated supporting “conversations” and projects used to engage and involve audience members. Many of the gallery and public works were interactive and encouraged audiences to ponder many different topics.

The results of *Conversations at the Castle* provided a whole new audience for contemporary art. The creativity and interactive components of the artists’ works allowed “conversations” between the artists and audience, which allowed the artists’ to develop the projects from 1996 into new works and series based on the impact of this exhibition.

iii. Cleveland Museum of Art

Known for its exemplary collection and opulent history, the Cleveland Museum of Art is an institution that has always honored the mission in place since its founding in 1913 that the museum is, “‘for the benefit of all the people forever,’ to bring the pleasure and meaning of art to the broadest possible audience in accordance with the highest aesthetic, intellectual and

²⁹ Brenson, Michael and Mary Jane Jacob. (ed.) *Conversations at the Castle: Changing Audiences and Contemporary Art*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. 1998.

professional standards.”³⁰ In honor of founder, J.H. Wade II’s belief of providing the enjoyment of art to all general admission to the Cleveland Museum of Art is always free.

Cleveland is a city rich in cultural treasures and diversity. The Cleveland Museum of Art has embraced the city’s many communities through various outreach programs. The imagination and talent in children are encouraged through various classes and activities. Museum Art Classes and a Theater Arts Camp, regardless of ability to pay fees, the Museum provides scholarships and financial aid.³¹

An annual event with related activities throughout the year is the Parade the Circle Celebration. The Cleveland Museum of Art is located in the University Circle section of Cleveland, which is also home to The Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Severance Hall (home of the Cleveland Orchestra), the Cleveland Botanical Garden, and Case Western Reserve University. All of these institutions come together in June each year to involve the community and celebrate the arts with a parade and arts related activities for the whole family.

The extensive expansion of the Cleveland Museum of Art, which will be completed in 2006, has allowed the Museum to participate even greater within the community and the country. The Museum’s main facility, closed during the expansion, allowed the museum to host events and exhibitions throughout the Cleveland area. While the museum was closed, events and exhibitions were held in other locations throughout Cleveland, such as the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo, the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, Severance Hall, and Shaker Square. The Cleveland Museum of Art also curated several traveling exhibitions showing across the

³⁰ Cleveland Museum of Art mission statement. Cleveland Museum of Art website. http://www.clevelandart.org/whatsnew/pdf/CMA_Fact_Sheet_Nov_2005.pdf

³¹ The Cleveland Museum of Art brochure. *Welcome Families!* 2005.

country during the Museum's expansion period. While most expansion openings are a definite attraction for dedicated museum audiences, the additional exposure in the community may increase the initial draw to the new museum facility. The Cleveland Museum of Art is a premier institution with a fine collection that encourages and fosters the appreciation and creation of art and is therefore known around the world.

iv. The Walker Art Center

As the pinnacle contemporary arts venue in the upper Midwest, the Walker Art Center has a collection that tells the story of modern art and has engaged audiences for decades. In the mid-1990s, the Walker Art Center pondered how to involve young people in contemporary art as a part of its New Directions/New Audience initiative to make more potential visitors actual visitors. Many students would visit the Center during school field trips, then never again. The Walker Art Center sought to change this pattern by creating a program to involve and engage teens. The Center assembled a group of 12 teens from various Minneapolis high schools to participate in the Teen Arts Council.

The advantage and draw of the Teen Arts Council is that the members are involved in decision making and program planning to attract their peers. The Council was able to break away from the norm that museums are for field trips, but they can also foster talent development in art, writing, music, and film. With an annual budget of \$30,000 the Council's members coordinate and "promote programs that have made an impact on every area of the museum, from visual and performing arts to film and new media."³² Primary decisions and planning was the key components for success of the Teen Arts Council. Staff identified that teens were successful

³² *A Place of Their Own: Teens Make Programs Come Alive at the Walker Art Center*. The Wallace Foundation website.

when they were able to take pride in a program or project from start to finish, not just taking direction from adults.

Through everything from web projects, workshops, a quarterly magazine, and participation from artists and musicians such as the Guerilla Girls, Sue Coe, and Michael Franti, empowerment and pride enriched the program to continue and thrive. Various media used in contemporary art and the 21st century allowed Council members to create art with technology from everyday life that they are familiar with and accustomed to.

Perhaps the most engaging and impressive component of the program is the biennial exhibition, *Hot Art Injection*, where Council members select 75 works from thousands by area students. The exhibition is curated by the Council members with guidance from Walker Art Center staff. The target audience for the exhibition is their peers and school groups, therefore the exhibition may not contain any inappropriate content or profanity, otherwise the Council has complete creative control.

By 1999, teen visitors at the Center increased nearly 29% from involvement in Teen Arts Council and the various activities they hosted. With a teen audience of over 10,000, the Walker Art Center also developed created additional staff positions including a Teen Programs Coordinator. The Teen Arts Council was not the only success in the New Directions/New Audience initiative; other programs and outreach fostered audience diversity. “36 percent of all visitors have household incomes of less than \$25,000, and 15 percent of visitors are non-white, a number that eight years ago was too low to measure.”³³ As Walker Art Center director Kathy Halbreich states, “We’re bucking the notion that cultural institutions are elite, and we’ve seen how deeply our programs can touch the community. Opening doors and windows in one respect

³³ *A Place of Their Own: Teens Make Programs Come Alive at the Walker Art Center*. The Wallace Foundation website.

makes it easier to become diverse in others.”³⁴ The New Directions/New Audience initiative is seen as a national model for arts organizations looking to expand outreach programs and encourage audience diversity.

³⁴ *A Place of Their Own: Teens Make Programs Come Alive at the Walker Art Center*. The Wallace Foundation website.

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