

Calling All Spiritual Pilgrims



Identity in the Museum Experience

by John H. Falk

Museums, meet Frank. Frank is African American and in his early 40s and works as a traffic department scheduler for a large entertainment company in Los Angeles. On a Saturday afternoon in 2001, he, his wife and his then 7-year-old daughter visited “World of Life”—a permanent, interactive exhibition examining how people, plants, animals and even the tiniest living cells all perform the same processes to survive—at the nearby California Science Center. The family was there to “have a good time and for my daughter to learn something new, whether it was one thing or ten,” Frank said. “I wanted her to carry something away from the visit that she’ll remember.”

When asked if he learned anything from the show, Frank responded, “I’m not sure. I was really focused on watching my daughter.” But the more Frank talked, the more apparent it became that the visit had additional and important meaning for him personally. He spoke of growing up in a family that valued learning in general and science in particular. “My dad was a chemistry professor, and he helped us develop a liking for science as we were growing up,” he recalled, adding that his father’s busy schedule meant his mother took him and his

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siblings to museums. He intimated that he's working to be more involved with his daughter's upbringing than his father was with his. Going to museums, particularly science museums, thus emerges as something deeply rooted in Frank's sense of self. Despite his insistence that the visit was his daughter's idea, one suspects that Frank's family history may have played an important role in the decision to visit the science center.

My colleague Martin Storksdieck and I spoke with Frank at his office in 2003, nearly two years after the visit in question—one of nearly 200 individuals we randomly selected, interviewed, tracked and observed in 2001 as part of a large National Science Foundation-funded study on museum learning. Frank's description of his visit, like each of the 52 other interviews we conducted with individuals 18 to 24 months after their science center visits, provides a fascinating lens through which to better understand the museum experience. These recollections were often deeply personal, intimately tied to each subject's sense of identity. Also striking was how consistently individuals' post-visit narratives correlated with their entering narratives. Both the ways in which subjects talked about

ning to move from the theoretical into the practical realm, this new model centers on the idea that each museum visitor is motivated to come based on one of a relatively limited set of identity-related needs. No matter what experience visitors are seeking—from a fun family afternoon to a moving spiritual journey—understanding and responding to these reasons could enhance the quality of the museum visit, leading to happier and, in turn, more devoted patrons.

Although for many years museum-learning research has shown that visitors don't passively receive museum experiences but rather actively construct their own personal meanings, these ideas appear to have gained only minimal traction among practitioners. Perhaps because these ideas run counter to long-held views about the nature of learning and museum "best practice," many, if not most, museum professionals continue to operate as if visitor behavior and meaning-making are almost exclusively dictated by the content and organization of exhibitions and programs. The latter ideas are a throwback to the now-repudiated behaviorist models of learning, which viewed learning as a linear, stimulus-response process: Build an exhibition that communicates X, and if you were skillful enough to design it so that it sufficiently attracts and holds the public's attention, they will learn X. If the public doesn't learn X, well, you obviously aren't a very skillful exhibition curator/designer. A wealth of research, both in and outside of museums, now confirms that this traditional model is just not accurate.

We now know that what people learn from a museum experience is influenced by what they knew before they walked in the front door, by the nature of the conversations they

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why they came to the museum and what they remembered from the experience invariably seemed tied to what they were seeking to accomplish through the visit, the relation of these goals to how they define themselves and how the museum fulfilled their personal needs.

Insights gained from this and subsequent research are leading to a new model of the museum experience. While it is just begin-

ing while in the museum, by what they do and see in the museum and by what they think about, see and do after they leave. All of these things contribute to museum learning; none is more important than any other. The latest research reveals that we need to add visitor identity-related motivations to this list. It appears that what an individual learns from a museum experience is strongly influenced by his or her identity-related needs, needs that are often reflected in the reasons a person has for visiting the museum.

Identity is something all of us intuitively understand at



some level, but it has proven a notoriously challenging idea to scientifically operationalize. The way my colleagues and I have chosen to define and measure identity begins with the premise that museum visitors are actively seeking meaning and that most engage in a degree of self-interpretation about their museum experience—prior to, during and after the visit. Most of this interpretation revolves around an effort to give coherence and meaning to their experiences. Visitors tend to see their in-museum behavior and post-visit outcomes as consistent with certain personality traits or group affiliations and as satisfying personally relevant roles and values, such as being a good parent, a dedicated museum member or an intrepid cultural tourist.

For example, many art museum visitors think of themselves as curious people, generally interested in art. They see art museums as places for exercising that curiosity. One such interviewee, when asked why she was visiting the museum, responded, “I haven’t been [here] in a while and I was hoping to see some really new and interesting art.” This same visitor later reflected on her visit and recalled, “I had a superb time at the art museum. I just wandered around and saw all of the

fabulous art; there were some really striking works. I even discovered a few works that I had never seen or known anything about before.” Because this subject identifies herself as having an interest in art, she both set out to and determined she had succeeded in satisfying this passion at the museum.

How you see yourself as a museum visitor depends to a large degree upon how you conceptualize the museum. In other words, if you view yourself as a good father and believe that museums are the kind of places to which good fathers bring their children, then, like Frank, you might actively seek out such a place in order to enact such an identity. Or if you consider yourself an inquisitive person who goes out of the way to make unusual and interesting discoveries, you might actively seek out a local history or small community

museum when traveling through a new city. I believe that this is what a large percentage of visitors to museums actually do—not just with regards to parenting and tourism but throughout a wide range of identity-related functions.

As museums have become increasingly popular leisure venues, more and more people have developed working models of what museums are like and how and why they would use them—in other words, what the museum experience affords. These museum “affordances” are then matched up with the public’s identity-related needs and desires. Together, these create a very strong, positive feedback loop. The loop begins with the public seeking leisure experiences that meet specific identity-related needs, such as parenting or personal fulfillment. As museums are generally perceived as places capable of meeting some (though not all) identity-related needs,

the public prospectively justifies reasons for visiting a museum. Over time, visitors reflect upon their museum visit and determine whether the experience was a good way to fulfill their needs, and, if it was, they tell others about the visit. Finally, they and others will then seek out this or other museums in the future for the same reasons.

Over the course of several studies, my colleagues and I have found evidence to support the existence of these identity-related feedback loops. The ways in which individuals described their museum experiences both before and after a visit appear to mirror their museum-specific, identity-related self-reflections. Although in theory museum visitors could possess an infinite number of these self-reflections, most tend to fall within five basic categories, which, as predicted, echo their reasons for visiting. Consider the following quotes from each of the five identity types we identified in our interviews:

Explorers are curiosity-driven, with a generic interest in the content of the museum. They expect to find something that will grab their attention and fuel their learning. "I remember thinking I wanted to learn my science basics again, like biology and that stuff. . . . I thought [before coming], 'You're not going to pick up everything, you know, but you are going to learn some things.'"

Facilitators are socially motivated. Their visit is focused on primarily enabling the experience and learning of others in their accompanying social group. "[I came] to give [my] kids a chance to see what early life was like . . . it's a good way to spend time with the family in a non-commercial way. They always learn so much."

Professional/Hobbyists feel a close tie between the museum content and their professions or hobbies. Their visits are typically motivated by a desire to satisfy a specific content-related objective. "I'm starting to put together a saltwater reef tank, so I have a lot of interest in marine life. I'm hoping to pick up some ideas."

Experience Seekers are motivated to visit because they perceive the museum as an im-

portant destination. Their satisfaction primarily derives from the mere fact of having "been there and done that." "We were visiting from out-of-town, looking for something fun to do that wouldn't take all day. This seemed like a good idea; after all, we're in Los Angeles and someone told us this place just opened up and it's really neat."

Spiritual Pilgrims are primarily seeking to have a contemplative, spiritual and/or restorative experience. They see the museum as a refuge from the work-a-day world. "I like jellyfish. They are so very soothing to watch, so very relaxing, so different than the craziness of the rest of the world."

We have discovered that the majority of museum visitors can be defined within these five categories—but why would you want to do this kind of segmenting? Because these groupings appear to be directly related to key outcomes, such as how visitors interact with the setting and, importantly, how they make meaning of the experience once they leave. The experiences museums provide for visitors (e.g., exhibitions, programs, tours) do not work equally well for all groups; on the contrary, our research found that the content of the various institutions we investigated was just right for some and totally missed the mark for others. Learning more about the specific needs of each group at your institution would enable you to better serve the needs of each segment. Remember, the closer the relationship between a visitor's perception of his/her actual museum experience and his/her perceived identity-related needs, the more likely that visitor will return to the museum again and encourage others to do so as well.

For example, if you knew that many of your adult visitors were Facilitators, primarily visiting in order to be good parents (which is almost certainly true for a large percentage of adult visitors of zoos, aquariums, science centers, natural history museums and children's museums), it would make great sense to acknowledge and reinforce that motivation. One way to do so might be to explicitly "thank" these visitors for bringing their children to the museum, such as by saying, "You were a really good parent today. It looks as if your children had a really great time, and I know they learned a lot, too." Or if you were able to communicate with visitors before the visit, you could help Spiritual Pilgrims know when the least crowded, most peaceful time would be to visit. Even in a typically kid-centered place like a zoo or science center, you could create the equivalent of "adult swim" and invite Spiritual Pilgrims to visit at those times when they could find the rejuvenation they seek.

Explorers are a particularly common group of museum visitors—individuals with a natural affinity for the subject matter but generally not experts. These visitors enjoy "behind the scenes" tours and other chances to feel that they are seeing things that others are not. Provide Explorers

with a unique museum experience, and you will fulfill their need to feel special and encourage them to come back for more. Professional/Hobbyists, on the other hand, tend to be quite knowledgeable and expect the museum to resolve questions others cannot answer. Not surprisingly, these are the folks who will sign up for special lectures or courses. Figure out how to reach them—perhaps by advertising in hobby magazines or on hobby/professional websites—and get information about upcoming learning opportunities into their hands. Finally, Experience Seekers simply want to have a good time and see the best of what the museum has to offer. These are the visitors who will gravitate to a tour of collection highlights; they'll also be the first to be turned off by poor guest services, such as unfriendly staff or unclean bathrooms. Attending to these services will pay dividends in positive word-of-mouth from one Experience Seeker to another.

In short, I believe that customizing museums' offerings to suit the distinct needs of different identity groups will better satisfy regular visitors' needs and entice occasional visitors to come more frequently. I also believe that this approach opens the door to new and creative ways to attract audiences

who do not visit museums at all. This is because I do not see the five basic categories of identity-related needs as unique to museum-goers. What separates those who go to museums from those who do not is whether they perceive museums as places that satisfy these basic needs. In other words, if we could figure out how to help more people see museums as places that fulfill their needs—and then deliver on this promise—more people would go to museums.

A large number of visitors arrive at our institutions with preconceived expectations. They use the museum to satisfy those expectations and then remember the visit for that reason. Therefore, the identity-related motivations yield some measure of predictability about what those visitors' experience will be like. Each visitor's experience is of course unique, but each was framed within the socially/culturally defined boundaries of how a museum visit affords exploration, facilitation, experience seeking, professional and hobby support and spirituality. Other types of experiences no doubt occur, but most visitors appear to seek them out or enact them with relative infrequency.

The lens of identity-related museum motivations thus provides a unique window through which we can view the nature of the museum experience and potentially can improve it. Although all of this remains still a theory, there now appears to be sufficient evidence to justify efforts to use this model for improved practice. The hope is that this approach will lead to dramatically better ways to enhance the experience of current visitors, improve the likelihood that occasional visitors will become regular visitors and provide new and improved ways to attract groups of individuals who historically have not thought of museums as places that meet their needs. ●

