

Strategies for Visitor Management on Tours
2019 Garden Docent Training
Hillwood Estate, Museum & Gardens

After being asked by docents-in-training to provide resources on managing visitors on tour, we polled our mentor docents to get their advice on strategies for engaging visitors, especially those who can be challenging, on tours. Here is some of their sage advice, much in their own words.

Main Take-away:

- Always highlight the positive and gently move the visitor's attention to another focal point, if a re-focus is needed.

The Questioners, Those Visitors Who Ask Unrelated or Seemingly Never-ending Questions:

- "Happy to discuss later" variations:
 - "Because of the time limit/Because we have a lot to cover, I am happy to discuss more after the tour"
 - "I'd like to talk to you more about your questions/comments and can spend a few minutes with you after our tour is over"
 - "Great questions! Let's talk after my tour!" and move on.
 - "Let's discuss that later, if we have time." And move on.
- "I don't actually know that answer, but I promise to have the answer next time you visit."
- "While I am passionate about this stuff, I don't know all the objects/features or answers. I'm still learning new things every time I tour. So I'm not sure of the answer."
- "If someone disagrees with your information, say 'I cite information I learned in my docent training and own research, but I'm sure there are other points of view out there.'"
- Thank them for their interest: "That is a really good/interesting point/observation/fact."
- After the tour, docents can look up the answers to those questions that seem like they could add to their tour.

The Dawdlers, Those Who Seem Disengaged

- People will linger, take pictures, talk to their friends. Some folks are tired.
- "Wait for the bulk of the group to arrive at the next room, and then start the room discussion. Most who lag behind may be more interested in their side conversations than the tour and that is not a problem, they are still enjoying themselves."
- "I tell folks at the beginning of my tour we are in such amazing spaces that they are welcome to peel off if they need to, or take photos, or go slowly and catch up with us."
- "If the entire group is slow, graciously ask that folks are welcome to circle back to what interests them after the tour, but that we have to move a little faster so we don't run into another tour."

What is the Frequency of Having Challenging Visitors on Tours?

- "You don't come across difficult visitors often. Most are interested, eager to learn, polite, and appreciative."

Last Words of Advice:

- "You can impress (or rather overwhelm) them with lots of facts, but most likely they'll only remember the story behind those facts."
- "If you have fun doing the tour, your visitors will too."
- "Sometimes groups of foreign visitors take tours with translators. Shorten what you say in each garden so the tour fits into the 1 hour. These groups need this special accommodation."
- "Finish your tour in an hour, especially during busy season. You can tell visitors are tired, although they may think they want to go on because they don't want to miss anything!"
- "Sometimes there is criticism about Marjorie Post's conspicuous wealth. Realizing you don't need to change their minds, but only offer your perspective, come up with your own response, to have at the ready. Something along the lines of, 'Yes, she was very wealthy, and lived a luxurious lifestyle. I appreciate how she used her money to benefit others, and seems to have been well-esteemed by those who worked for her.'"