

Research & Evaluation

The Anatomy of a Museum Visit: What Visitors Really Want

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What do visitors really want when they come to museums? To be entertained? To be educated? To have an enjoyable time with their family? To show off the local sights to their out of town guests? We know that all these answers are correct. But how does that help us when we think about providing quality experiences for our audiences? What is it that they really want, and how can we provide that?

Almost thirty years ago Jerome Bruner wrote of the natural “will to learn.” He states that virtually all people are born with intrinsic motives for learning whose reward is in the completion of the task, or perhaps in the process of engaging in the activity itself. He identifies four natural energies that must be enlisted in order to sustain this spontaneous learning: curiosity, a desire for competence, the aspiration to emulate a model, and the need for social reciprocity (Bruner, 1966). His theory is important to keep in mind as we strive to design successful museum experiences, but it does not offer very many practical strategies for implementation.

Based on a series of research studies by Thomas Malone and Mark Lepper (Malone, 1980, 1981; Lepper & Malone, 1987; Malone & Lepper, 1987) a subsequent research investigation examined the museum visit in terms of current motivational theory (Perry, 1989, 1992). The results of the study identified six affective variables describing what visitors to museums really want: curiosity, confidence, challenge, control, play, and communication. The remainder of this paper will present and discuss a brief overview of these variables.

Curiosity

Visitors to museums are curious. They expect to see things that surprise and intrigue them. They often don’t know what they will see, but they are curious to see what is there. There are three ways their curiosity is piqued.

Attention – Visitors are naturally attracted by the bright colors, interesting sounds, and unusual objects they perceive. They want to be shown things they have never seen presented in attractive displays.

Intellect – Visitors want their intellectual curiosity to be stimulated. They enjoy discovering information that contradicts something they thought they knew. “I always thought that when you mix all colors you get black. Here when you mix all colors of light you get white!” They enjoy encountering information that shows them their knowledge is not complete. “I never know that Symphony No. Four was Tchaikovsky’s favorite.” And they enjoy discovering rules for potential simplifications. “Oh I get it, all these animals are spiders.”

Interest – Visitors also get curious when an exhibit is interesting to them. They enjoy exhibits that deal with topics they are familiar with, or that relate to existing knowledge they already have. They also enjoy exhibits that include activities for all ages.

Confidence

Visitors to museums want to feel good about their experiences. They want to feel that they are competent and that they can understand what the exhibit is about. They want to be able to successfully complete an activity. There are two ways to appeal to visitors' perceptions of personal competence.

Success – Visitors need to be able to experience success. They feel successful when exhibits a) are easy to understand, b) provide answers to questions they have, c) guide the visitor through the activities, d) tell the visitor where to go to get answers to any additional questions they might have, and e) present the information in a variety of ways.

Expediency – Visitors need to feel successful quickly. If they perceive that they will be unable to succeed, or that success will come at too high a price (e.g. they will have to spend too much time) they will leave rather than have their personal competence questioned.

Challenge

While visitors want to feel good about their ability to succeed, they also want to be challenged. If they perceive that the exhibit is too easy or that they knew it all already, they will be bored and choose not to invest any time. Balancing confidence and challenge is an important issue facing museum professionals. Challenge is comprised of two components.

Expectations – Visitors like to know what to expect. They appreciate clearly stated goals, having a number of short easy-to-do activities related to the goal, and having their attention directed to the important parts of the exhibit, artifact, or painting.

Uncertainty – Visitors do not want to perceive that success is automatic. They want to know that they will be able to succeed, but they want to invest some time and effort in order to get something out of the experience. They enjoy having questions posed to them, and having hidden information that is revealed only after further investment of energy.

Control

Museums are free-choice environments. Visitors want and expect to be able to control what they do and when they do it. These feelings of self-determination and control are stimulated by choice and power.

Choice – Visitors appreciate the opportunity to choose between a number of alternatives. These can be menu options from a computer program, or short activities presented as labels. At the same time, visitors also appreciate a choice between different types of activities. Some of these activities might be more playful in nature while others might be more instructional, or informational.

Power – A feeling of power is an important component of successful museum visits. Visitors enjoy the opportunity to expend relatively minor amounts of energy in order to produce significant effects. This is often achieved when visitors manipulate the artifact, and when they interact with the exhibit at their own pace.

A visitor's desire for power can easily inhibit or be detrimental to the goals of the exhibit. We all encounter this phenomenon when we observe visitors running around pushing buttons to make something move and then running on to the next unit, or mindlessly monopolizing some interactive.

Carefully balancing power with the goals of the exhibit becomes an important consideration for exhibit designers.

Play

People seek out experiences that promote feelings of enjoyment and playfulness. While playful experiences are very idiosyncratic, they often incorporate both imagination and sensory enjoyment.

Imagination – Visitors enjoy activities that encourage them to use their imaginations. Any situation that evokes mental images of physical or social situations not actually present is one that stimulates the imagination. Engaging in play-acting and playing make-believe are common ways we think of activating the imagination. For some visitors imagination is evoked by relating the activities to other experiences with which they are familiar. “Imagine that you are at home. Where would you see this phenomenon demonstrated?”

Sensory enjoyment – Visitors want to experience sensory enjoyment. This can be as simple as seeing something beautiful, touching an object, or hearing a haunting melody. It can also be playful engagement with the exhibit such as making hand shadows in the light. Sensory enjoyment for many visitors is a feeling of peacefulness, awe, or reverence.

Communication

In order to make a museum visit complete, visitors want to feel that they have engaged in meaningful social interaction. Sometimes this is a dialogue between the exhibit and an individual, but more likely it is with members of a social group. This communication does not necessarily occur exclusively at the museum, but may also occur on the ride home, or days, weeks, years, later.

Cooperation – Visitors enjoy the opportunity to work together on an activity. Often this is working on an activity that requires input from several visitors simultaneously. Other times it is a meaningful exchange of information.

Guidance – Visitors come to a museum with a natural will to teach and to learn. They enjoy engaging in successful teaching/learning interactions. They enjoy being given the right amount of information in the right format so that they can engage in a meaningful and successful teaching/learning interaction.

Conclusion

This description of the six affective variables that comprise a successful museum visit, provides a foundation for a preliminary theory of informal museum learning. The challenge facing us as museum professionals – particularly as we become increasingly committed to serving more diverse audiences – is how we operationalize the various constructs. What may be challenging to one individual may be intimidating to another. What may stimulate meaningful communication in one cultural group may inhibit it in another. However, careful and thoughtful consideration of these issues can only help to improve the quality of museum experiences we provide for our visitors.

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