The Visitors' Perspective on Visitor Engagement

Understanding visitors' needs will greatly inform our work in engagement.

By Max A. van Balgooy

While engagement might seem to be the latest fad in museums today, it is not a new idea. Museums have increasingly sought ways to attract and retain public support as individual philanthropy declined after World War II. Twenty years ago, Stephen Weil laid out that history in his article "The Museum and the Public," predicting that "the relative positions of the museum and the public will have revolved by a full 180 degrees" in the first half of the 21st century and "it will be the public, not the museum, that occupies the superior position."

That revolution is still underway and many museums are strengthening their service to the public to achieve educational, social, and financial goals—in other words, engagement. Museums have drawn inspiration from a wide range of external sources to be more engaging, including consumer marketing, tourism, geography, cultural anthropology, and psychology, as well as the growing internal field of visitor studies. There is such an abundance of information, it can feel like we're bobbing in the ocean with advice floating around us like driftwood. Although the pieces haven't come together sufficiently to build a ship, we've lashed together enough wood to build several rafts.

What we have learned is that engagement isn't about finding a hot topic, a new technology, or a clever membership appeal. Such approaches may initially grab an audience, but the results are short-lived. We must step back and consider why people engage (or avoid) museums if we are to develop strategies that consistently deliver success.

Defining Terms

As museums seek to engage the public, we should start by recognizing that "museum," "engage," and "public" are vague, monolithic terms that inadequately describe their breadth and range. AAM has brought together art museums, science centers, children's museums, history museums, botanic gardens, zoos, natural history museums, planetaria, halls of fame, historic sites, and other institutions to improve practices, share resources, and advocate with one voice. But these terms have also caused a dull conformity in our thinking, which is often revealed in missions that simply "collect, preserve, and interpret" and "engage the public." As a result, I've expanded my planning projects to include vision (a description of a desired future) and values (a set of principles that shapes its decisions and behavior) along with mission. These help move organizations from thinking inwardly and simplistically toward acting outwardly and intentionally. For engagement to occur, it must be an overt part of a museum's mission, vision, or values.

Likewise, the "public" in the United States represents more than 300 million people who not only are individually unique but also identify and organize themselves in countless ways. It's not useful to treat them as one mass, nor do we have the resources to adequately serve them as individuals, so most organizations construct target audiences. There is growing consensus that demographics (e.g., age, race, ethnicity, class) are less useful for identifying target audiences than interests, motivations, aspirations, and values. These latter factors affect people in two ways: by compelling a person to leave his or her home (push) and by attracting a person to a specific destination (pull).

In 1979, John Crompton, a young professor at Texas A&M University, sought to better understand these push-pull factors by conducting in-depth interviews with people who traveled for pleasure. His first discovery was that immediate top-of-mind explanations, such as "doing something new or different," are misleading. By interviewing each person for about two hours, he allowed for a greater exploration of the reasons for traveling, which were vastly different from what interviewees first stated. That led to Crompton's second major discovery: people are motivated to travel for complex social or psychological reasons, such as strengthening family relationships, meeting new people, self-evaluation, escape, or prestige. Museums, therefore, need to shift from merely providing something new and different in their exhibitions, tours, and programs to also fulfilling the deeper personal and social needs of their audiences.

Finally, "engagement" can mean many things in museums, from increased attendance and membership to stronger advocacy and social action. Engagement should imply an ongoing relationship, thus it has to involve more than a single visit. We're often faced with people who are try-ers: they try out an exhibit, tour, or program and fail to return. How do we make museum participation a habit or custom? Can the terms "customer" and "buyer" rather than "visitor" and "member" help us rethink our engagement efforts?

Convenience, Novelty, and Values

Engagement needs to be a two-way relationship. Stephen Bitgood, founder of the Visitor Studies Association, has shown that people routinely conduct a cost-benefit analysis before and during their visit. For example, visitors are more likely to pay attention to exhibitions and programs if they perceive high value in the encounter. In exchange for their time and money, visitors expect to receive

something in return of equal or better value. These costs and benefits can be measured in many ways.

Convenience

Convenience increases the likelihood of a museum visit. Whenever miles or hours of travel increase, a person is less likely to make the trip. Marketing researchers have called this phenomenon "distance decay" and have shown that participation drops precipitously at a certain threshold distance. This threshold will vary depending on a variety of circumstances. Two museums could both be ten miles away, but one might feel much farther because it's in a busy urban area with lots of traffic. I recently completed a study that showed this drop occurred at seven miles for Cliveden in urban Philadelphia, whereas it was it was 15 miles to the north and 30 miles to the south for the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts in rural Katonah, New York.

Because access and proximity influences visitation and support, museums should actively consider their surrounding community. Neighbors are usually ideal candidates for habitual visitors and supporters, yet they can be easily overlooked as a target audience for public programs or fundraising. The 2007 Kykuit Forum on Historic Site Stewardship in the 21st century noted this opportunity among its findings: "Servicing the needs of the local community (not the tourist audience) is the most valuable and most sustainable goal for most historic sites." That advice probably applies to other types of museums as well.

Museums can start an analysis by plotting the addresses of their members, donors, or visitors on a map. Then, compare the pattern to population density to understand where there are opportunities for growth. In recent years, this process has become much easier thanks to the increased availability of geographic information systems (GIS) to geocode databases and create maps. By using this process, the Haas-Lilienthal House, a Gilded Age mansion in San Francisco, discovered that very few households in their Pacific Heights neighborhood were visitors or members. They also conducted further research on residents within a mile of the house and found they primarily consisted of young singles and couples working in the tech industry or middle-age families who were adventurous trend-seekers, audiences that would not be attracted to the museum's popular holiday teas. Engagement changed when the house launched an event specifically for these audiences: "Mansion Mayhem," featuring Halloween decorations, a live band, and themed cocktails, now sells out each year.

While the theory of distance decay predicts a smooth transition from high engagement to low, a map of museum visitors will probably appear erratic, with islands of high concentrations and huge empty deserts. This is because museums are more varied than other consumer destinations such as gas stations or grocery stores. If all museums were identical, convenience would be the primary factor for engaging audiences. Instead, perceptions of novelty and values also play important roles.

Novelty

Museums usually tread a line between the familiar and the novel, although they may not realize it. An exhibition design or topic that's too strange or unfamiliar will confuse, repel, and perhaps even offend people. But if an exhibition features the same topic or collection over and over again, visitors will ignore it or be bored. How do museums strike the right balance to engage visitors rather than leaving them frustrated or snoozing?

A recent study on repeat visitation by Chinese tourists in Macau discovered that their experience was greatly affected by a person's tolerance for novelty. Some tourists were highly motivated by new experiences and preferred more personal and independent travel. They also were willing to travel farther, stay longer, and spend more money to find a thrill. On the other hand, some tourists preferred a familiar experience that had few risks or surprises, with well-planned itineraries or traditional activities that left little to chance. They tended to stay closer to home and made multiple, shorter visits to the same place.

Most museums have two kinds of audiences and both need to be engaged simultaneously. Some people prefer the familiar, always hoping to be greeted by the Tyrannosaurus Rex in the lobby, find their favorite painting in the same spot, or see the historic mansion at the end of the driveway. Others want a thrill and are looking forward to the next exhibit, a rare behind-the-scenes tour, or an encounter with the latest acquisition. Institutions that cater to novelty-seekers by hosting blockbuster exhibitions and grand festivals may find that attendance skyrockets but few people renew their memberships. Museums that reliably provide daily tours and permanent exhibitions may garner strong repeat visitation from their avid fans but struggle to attract new visitors.

Examine your public programs and events to assess the balance between familiar and novel topics, methods, and formats. Ask your visitors to review your upcoming calendar and tell you which listings interest them and why. How frequently are events repeated? Which activities can become new traditions and which traditions should rest for a few years? Your events may address lots of different topics, but are they always presented as lectures? You may use a variety of methods, but are your exhibitions, lectures, tours, and publications all on the same topic? Even if you offer a diversity of topics and methods, are they in the same format? Talk-back boards, dialogue, debate, and other two-way communication formats are becoming popular forms for engagement—are any of those appropriate for your museum?

Values

Close to my desk is one my favorite reminders about values, a notepad from Enron featuring a quotation by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter." It ironically reminds me that values aren't just about what we say, but also how we think and act. As museums, we collect, preserve, and interpret the things that matter. Twenty years ago, David Thelen and Roy Rosenzweig's study of American's attitudes toward history confirmed what we had always hoped: museums are the most trustworthy source to learn about the past. That's a great honor, but it comes with great responsibility.

Although museums are beginning to codify their values to more overtly guide decisions, much of it goes unspoken and is instead reflected in policies, procedures, priorities, and practices. Those values establish a culture that defines what's important and what's trivial. Unfortunately, it also establishes who's important and who's not.

At historic house museums, we have a legacy that often preserved the big house of the owner and his stories but marginalized the lives of women, servants, and enslaved people. Slave cabins were demolished, servants' bedrooms turned into storage, and women's lives confined to cooking, cleaning, or drinking tea. It's as if one man did it all by himself. We might claim that everyone's history is important and that we welcome a broad and diverse audience, but why would they trust us if we seemingly don't value their history and contributions to society? Museums that address other topics will have similar challenges, which can usually be revealed through an evaluation of exhibitions, school programs, or even the museum store to see who is represented and who has been left out. It's one of the major reasons that new museums are formed—to ensure an overlooked story is told, a forgotten collection is preserved, and a distant community is adequately served.

Museums Need to Look Internally

As we look to engage new audiences, we might first look within our museums to see what we offer that is meaningful and relevant to them. It will require humbleness to avoid assumptions about what's important, what's significant, what's best for them. We may need to spend more time listening than talking. We may need to re-evaluate our values to be sure we have the right priorities. We may need to make a long-term commitment to build trust. We may need to walk outside our doors to meet them halfway.

Max A. van Balgooy is president of Engaging Places, a design and strategy firm that connects people and historic places. He is also the director of the Seminar for Historical Administration, teaches in the museum studies program at George Washington University, and recently edited Interpreting African American History and Culture at History Museums and Historic Sites *(Rowman and Littlefield, 2015). These experiences provide a rich source of ideas for EngagingPlaces.net, where he blogs regularly about the opportunities and challenges facing historic sites and house museums.*