
Redefining the Visitor Experience

Randi Korn

As an audience researcher, I have had the honor of conversing with hundreds of museum visitors. On a personal level, I always have a renewed faith in humanity after an afternoon out on the floor, and it is never because visitors learned what we wanted them to learn. Simply, I am continually amazed at how different we all are on some levels—how differently we think about the same idea and how differently we see the same objects. But I am also amazed at how alike we are on other levels—how we look for a validation of who we are in our museum visits. On a professional level, after hours of conversations with museum visitors, I started to realize that there is a gulf between the visitor experience from the visitor perspective and the visitor experience from the museum practitioner perspective, and that it is cavernous.

Many creators of exhibits hold the assumption that all our visitors are in the same mind frame—that is, they are there to receive our messages and to grasp or learn information. In fact, “learning” is the word that is often used, quite loosely I might add, by museum professionals to describe how we want visitors to experience exhibits. It is our obsession, and it seems to be the single framework we use to develop exhibits. Many exhibit development teams, with the prodding of museum educators, audience advocates, and evaluators, religiously ask, What will visitors do or understand after they visit the exhibit that they didn’t do or understand before? This question contains the assumption that with the exhibit we will change visitor behavior, and this change in behavior is, in the minds of many, connected to visitor learning. Although we have worked hard to get people to address that question, I think it is only *one* of the questions we should ask during the exhibit development process. We even use the word “learning” to describe the type of institutions we work in, except we prefer to tag onto “learning” the words “free-choice” or “informal,” as if the kind of learning that happens in a museum is somehow different from the learning that happens elsewhere. We are also obsessed with *how* visitors learn in museums, and we go to great

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lengths to continue to study that mysterious phenomenon. The *opportunities* for learning may be different, but I don’t think *how* we learn changes.

When exhibit planners talk about exhibits, visitors, and learning, they discuss content-driven exhibits and the imparting of concepts, facts, and information to visitors. Visitors, in turn, will walk away with at least some of the concepts, facts, and information, and learning is talked about as an outcome of the visitor experience. Learning, in a less traditional and broader context, may be briefly discussed, but the end product does not reflect these broader discussions.

If we have an understanding of potential visitor experiences other than learning, we are not acknowledging them or creatively integrating them into our exhibits. Please understand, I am not advocating we throw learning out the window or saying that visitors do not learn in an

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exhibit. Nor am I saying we should stop asking questions about visitor learning, because, truthfully, I think that asking ourselves these questions during the exhibit development process is absolutely necessary. They force us to communicate with our colleagues, to articulate our goals, and to work better toward a common end. I am saying, however, that there is a continuum of visitor experiences, of which learning is a part, and all the experiences are respectable and deserve attention as we develop exhibits. Learning is not the only justifiable outcome. I am also saying that we need to be more articulate. Are we using “visitor learning” as a catchall for the entire visitor experience? If we are, we shouldn’t be. At least from my perspective, learning is something quite specific. We should communicate more responsibly with each other, for I do not want to assume I know what my colleagues are talking about when they say “visitor learning.” I want to understand what they mean.

As I said earlier, I have talked with many visitors. As the number of my conversations grew and accumulated, I began to see and understand our visitors for who they are instead of who we want them to be. Eventually I began to see patterns to our conversations. The easiest way for me to discuss these patterns is to refer to the work of a few scholars, some of whom are not museum practitioners but who have written about and understand the visitor experience. I am referring to their ideas because their classifications of visitor experiences confirm my conversations with visitors and describe the visitor experience in simplified terms, even though the visitor experience is actually quite complex. As you read about them, I invite you to reflect on your own experiences as a museum visitor.

Many of you are already familiar with the anthropologist Nelson Graburn. His ideas were embraced by the

Commission on Museums for a New Century and have been referenced by many museum practitioners. He identifies three human needs that a museum can, and I think does, fill. The first is this: We all need to experience something intensive, of a higher, more sacred order, something out of the ordinary that is apart from our everyday life. This Graburn calls the *reverential experience*. The second need is associational. That is, the museum is a place where people can associate with each other, can have a *social experience*. The shared experience becomes the visitor experience. Third is the one we speak of so often, *education*. But Graburn defines education not as information gathering or mind or behavior changing, as we so often refer to it, but as a sense-making activity. Each visitor is on a personal quest. Meaning is made from a new experience as it hooks onto previous experiences. In his words, "The museum is a stage on which a production is presented which allows the visitor the freedom of move-

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ment, thought and timing to interpret the representations in their [*sic*] own familiar terms."¹

Sheldon Annis is a geographer, and his classifications are conceptually similar to Graburn's, but he describes them as *symbolic engagements*. He views the museum as a cultural warehouse. Objects are taken out of original context, stored, and eventually exhibited. When exhibited, Annis believes, the objects take on new meanings. The museum is the link between the object and what it means in its original context, and the object and its significance as created or symbolized in the exhibit.

For Annis, museum objects become symbols. Thus he describes the visitor experience in three levels of symbolic engagement. The first level is the *dream space*. He sees visitors moving through an exhibit uninhibited. They focus on parts that move them to remember, desire, or fear. The objects become triggers, and visitors do as they please, spending much time with an object that evokes a memory and little or no time with an object that conveys no personal meaning to them. Like our dreams, the museum dream space has images and meanings, and they are personal. The second level is the *pragmatic space*. Annis's pragmatic space is like Graburn's *associational experience*. The visitor and his or her companions become the primary symbol, and the museum has little influence on the meanings that are created. "Being there in some particular social union is both purpose and product." Finally, like Graburn's educational need, Annis describes a *cognitive space* where the viewer manipulates the environment to lead to education.² This is where visitors and exhibition developers see eye to eye, but, of course, there is no guarantee that visitors learn what planners want them to learn.

Paulette M. McManus, a British museum consultant in communications, studies the social aspect of a museum visit. She says, "The social aspect of visitors to the museum is not a mere enjoyable overlay adding pleasure to the museum experience for visiting groups. It is, rather, at the core of that experience and a fundamental source of satisfaction in museum visiting which is brought to the museum."³ Lois Silverman, in her research, discovered that "visitors . . . make meaning, rather than 'receive' it" and that "besides learning, visitors value reminiscing, associating personal experiences, recognizing things that they know, describing what they see, exercising their taste, appraising the worth of objects they own, expressing their competence and expressing their identity."⁴

Ernst Hofmann, a professor at the Institute of Museum Studies in Berlin, believes that the meaning of objects and material culture rises not only from the objects themselves but also from within the looker and all he or she brings to it. Again, there is a similarity to Graburn and Annis. The meaning made from the objects is "determined through the individual and social character of the perceived subject and through his or her resulting contained values, interests and above all through previous knowledge." These ideas are not new. And while some exhibits support and take into account visitor experiences in addition to learning, many are still developed only within the learning experience framework. Hofmann thinks "we should examine more carefully which objects provoke questions from our potential visitors because they above all offer the chance of an actual communicative result." He goes on to say that "effective museum work is essentially dependent on our capability of knowing which interests, associations, and emotions the objects release."⁵

Eleanor Duckworth, a professor of education at Harvard, agrees. "Objects are known to people only as taken in by them through the frameworks that they have developed and bring with them."⁶ She, too, advocates that our museum exhibits make a place for people's own ways of understanding. If we ignore the ways in which people experience their surroundings—surroundings that in museums are objects and ideas—we must resign ourselves to the fact that we may not be engaging visitors or affecting them.

Several museum practitioners have written and talked about the visitor experience in relationship to our self-assigned role as educators. Marlene Chambers of the Denver Art Museum, who has worked hard to create the experience-driven paradigm for interpretive labels, talks about our wanting to control the content of the discovery visitors make. She acknowledges that this desire is quite natural for those in a teacher role but goes on to say that the "ultimate goal of providing a discovery opportunity is to give . . . [visitors] a sense of being competent and in control and a chance to find new, personally significant insights in the activity. . . . These feelings of satisfaction—not the information learned—motivate the repeat experience and continued learning."⁷

Marlene Chambers is onto something here. Are many of us going about exhibit development all backwards? If we focus on enhancing and supporting the personal experiences our visitors have with objects, will learning naturally be a product? Museums that use the didactic

framework when developing exhibits miss the learning boat because they have neglected to use the other visitor experience frameworks that appear to motivate visitors. Thus confidence, satisfaction, and personally significant experiences for the visitor are left by the wayside, and so is motivation and continued learning.

As hard as it might be, we must acknowledge the way people are and not the way we want them to be. It also is helpful for us to acknowledge the way we are as museum visitors and learners. Our visitors are not passive, and they can't be manipulated to do what we want them to do. They have active minds and are in control of their own actions and thoughts. They may not be thinking about and feeling what we want them to be thinking about and feeling, but they *are* thinking and feeling. We seem to forget that the learner is in control of the learning.

I have talked to quite a few museum practitioners about visitor experiences, not just visitor learning. There seems to be some agreement that the visitor experience is diverse and personal and may not always include visitor learning. If we realize this, why do we continue to pursue the didactic framework when we develop exhibits? It may be because we are comfortable and familiar with a vocabulary, process, product, and framework that are politically and socially safe. But this approach to exhibit making is incomplete since it considers only one part of the visitor experience. The source of meaning for the visitor, or the source of the visitor experience, is not generated solely or even primarily from the exhibit or the museum's frame of reference—although sometimes we act as if it is. As Michael B. Alt and Stephen A. Griggs have pointed out, "The answer lies not in the exhibit, but in the way the visitor perceives the exhibit. An understanding of how people respond to exhibits requires an understanding of people not exhibits."⁸

We must begin to ask ourselves, What form do our ideas take in our visitors' minds? What can we do to support and understand affective visitor experiences? What can we do to welcome the visitor perspective into our exhibits? What can we do to help our visitors feel comfortable—physically, conceptually, and emotionally—in our spaces? Well, we can begin to focus attention on the visitor while exhibits are being conceptualized and developed. I am a firm believer in front-end evaluation—audience evaluation that is done at the beginning of and during the exhibit development process—so developers can be gently reminded of how nonexperts approach, think about, and understand an idea. Aside from questions that support the notion that visitors come to museums to learn, questions that support the other visitor experiences need to be addressed and researched with the public and then integrated into development plans. For example:

- What is the visitors' frame of reference to the proposed exhibit topic?
- What do visitors think and talk about when they are confronted with specific objects, settings, and ideas? What meaning emerges from their encounter?
- What do visitors say to their companions about what they are seeing and experiencing?
- Which objects and visuals catch visitors' attention? Why? What do they mean to visitors?

■ Are memories awakened as visitors go through the exhibit? If so, what are they?

If our exhibits are for our visitors, then we must begin a process of exploration that will provide us with visitors' perspectives, attitudes, and experiences. We need to loosen our grip on museum learning and let the other museum experiences in to our way of thinking about exhibit development. Besides, learning is not likely to happen until the visitor is better accommodated on other levels. We need to study our visitors and acknowledge and integrate into our exhibits what is really happening to them.

Notes

1. Nelson Graburn, "The Museum and the Visitor Experience," in *The Visitor and the Museum*, ed. Linda Draper (Berkeley, Calif.: Lowie Museum of Anthropology, 1977), p. 18.
2. Sheldon Annis, "The Museum as a Staging Ground for Symbolic Action," *Museum* 38, no. 3 (1986): 168, 170.
3. Paulette M. McManus, "Good Companions: More on the Social Determination of Learning-Related Behavior in a Science Museum," *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship* 7 (1988): 43.
4. Lois Silverman, "Of Us and Other Things: The Content and Functions of Talk by Adult Visitor Pairs in an Art Museum and a History Museum" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1990), p. 269.
5. Ernst Hofmann, "Can Exhibited Objects in a History Museum 'Speak?': Remarks on the Basic Problem of Museum Education," in *Museum as Learning Resources Seminar: October 1988* (Gaussig, Germany: International Research and Exchange Board, 1988), n.p.
6. Eleanor Duckworth, "Museum Visitors and the Development of Understanding," *Journal of Museum Education* 15, no. 1 (Winter 1990): 5.
7. Marlene Chambers, "Improving the Esthetic Experience for Art Novices: A New Paradigm for Interpretive Labels," in *1988 Program Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1988), p. 220; Chambers, "Beyond 'Aha!': Motivating Museum Visitors," *Journal of Museum Education* 14, no. 3 (Fall 1989): 14-15.
8. Michael B. Alt and Stephen A. Griggs, "Psychology and the Museum Visitor," in *Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice*, ed. John Thompson (London: Butterworths, 1984), p. 392.