

# Redefining the Visitor Experience in the Exhibit Development Process

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Researchers have been talking with and observing visitors in exhibit halls for decades. Even though this research has caused many to think and talk differently about the visitor experience, some exhibit developers continue to create exhibits in a traditional framework that assumes all visitors are there to receive the museums' messages and to grasp or learn information. In fact, "learning" is the word that is often used by museum professionals in the context of exhibit development to describe how we want visitors to experience our exhibits.

Many exhibit development teams, with the prodding of museum educators and evaluators, religiously ask, "What will the visitor know or understand after they visit the exhibit that they didn't know or understand before?" This question contains the assumption that exhibits will change visitor behavior, which, in the minds of many, is connected to visitor learning. We have worked hard to get people to address that question, but it is only *one* of the questions we could ask during the exhibit development process. In fact, museum visitors have a variety of experiences which are not considered during the exhibit development process.

If exhibit developers have an understanding of the potential visitor experiences other than learning, they are not integrating them into their exhibits. Learning should not be ignored, but there is a continuum of visitor experiences in addition to learning which deserve attention as exhibits are developed. Learning is not the only justifiable outcome.

What are some of those other visitor experiences so often neglected in the exhibit development process? The most efficient way to discuss these experiences is to refer to the work of a few scholars and researchers who have written about and understand the visitor experience. Their ideas and classifications of visitor experiences confirm conversations evaluators and researchers have had with visitors, and they describe the visitor experience in simplified terms. As you read the following, reflect on your own experiences as a museum visitor – that is, the times you have visited a museum at your leisure without your "museum professional" hat.

### The Museum Visit as a Social Experience

The ideas of anthropologist Nelson Graburn (1977) were embraced by the Commission on Museums for a New Century. He identifies three human needs that a museum can fill, one of which he terms as "associational." The museum is a place where we can associate with each other, have a social experience and that shared experience becomes the visitor experience. Graburn is not alone with this idea. Sheldon Annis (1986), a geographer who refers to the visitor experience as "symbolic engagements," describes a pragmatic space. The visitor and his/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" (Annis, 1986, p. 170).

Paulette McManus (1988), a British museum consultant in communications who specifically studies the social aspect of a museum visit has much data to support Graburn's and Annis' ideas. 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" (McManus, 1988, p. 43).

### The Museum Visit as Objects and the Visitors' Past Experiences

During a museum visit, objects are often the focus of a visitor's attention. Annis (1986) sees visitors moving through an exhibit uninhibited. 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. This, he calls the "dream space." Like our dreams, the museum dream space has images and meanings, and they are personal. Supporting this notion and idea that museums should research the relationship between visitors and objects is Ernst Hoffman, a professor at the Institute of Museum Studies in Berlin. He believes that the meaning of objects and material culture not only rises from the objects themselves, but also from within the looker and all that he or she brings to it. He suggests that "We must 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" (Hoffman, 1988).

### The Museum Visit as Education

Education, the long-standing mission of museums, does maintain a space in the visitor experience. Graburn defines education as not information gathering or mind or behavior changing, as we often refer to it, but as a sense making activity (Graburn, 1977). Each visitor is on a personal quest. In Graburn's own words, "The museum is a stage on which a production is presented which allows the visitor the freedom of movement, thought and timing to interpret the representations in their (sic) own familiar terms" (p. 18). Annis (1986) describes a cognitive space where the viewer manipulates the environment to lead to education. This is where visitors and exhibition developers see eye-to-eye, but there is no guarantee that visitors learn what planners want them to learn.

Putting some of these ideas to practice is Marlene Chambers of the Denver Art Museum, who has worked hard to create the experience driven paradigm for interpretive labels. Instead of controlling the discovery visitors make, she says 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 continue learning" (1988, pp. 14-15).

What if exhibit planners integrate research findings that support the personal experiences visitors have with objects? Will learning naturally be a product? Museums that use the didactic framework as their only framework for developing exhibits miss the learning boat because they have neglected using other visitor experience frameworks that motivate visitors. Thus, confidence, satisfaction and personally significant experiences are left by the wayside, and so is motivation and continued learning.

Exhibit planners must acknowledge the way people are and not the way they want them to be. They should also acknowledge the way they themselves behave as museum visitors and learners. Museum visitors are not passive and they cannot be manipulated to do what we want them to do. They have active minds and are in control of their own actions and thoughts. 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.

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 in our spaces, physically, conceptually and emotionally? We can continue conducting front-end evaluation procedures that focus attention on the visitor while exhibits are being conceptualized and developed. Aside from questions that support the notion of visitor learning, questions that support the other

visitor experiences need to be addressed and researched and then integrated into development plans. For example:

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

If museum exhibits are for the visitors, then planners must begin a process of exploration that will provide them with visitors' perspectives, attitudes and experiences. They need to loosen their grip on museum learning and let the other museum experiences into their way of thinking about exhibit development. Learning is not likely to happen until the visitor is better accommodated on other levels.

### References

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