

Museums for visitors: Audience development

- A crucial role for successful museum management strategies

Christian WALTL

Abstract

Let's face it: museums without visitors would be like lifeless, empty halls with no purpose. This should remind us that the key role for museums is always to serve its visitors. To do this effectively and efficiently we have to understand the motivation and needs of different audience segments and create an atmosphere that offers a range of experiences. It is all about pulling down barriers and allowing visitor involvement and engagement, and at the same time conserving and securing the collection for future generations. The process of reaching new audiences and retaining repeat visitors is called "audience development." It is the perfect 'Zusammenspiel' of departments such as marketing, education, curatorial and visitor services to offer varied experiences, and an environment for learning as well as enjoyment. Museums with space for recreation, social interaction, contemplation and emotions are high on the agenda these days. The talk will explore the term audience development theoretically, its importance for management strategy, and highlight examples of work with different audience segments. It will also show that audience development is not the responsibility of only a few, but of all staff working in museums.

Introduction

Museums have entered a time of change: they are asked not only to justify their funding but also to redefine their role in society. Grand halls, real objects or comprehensive exhibitions do need visitor engagement in order to be rightfully called museums caring for our culture and for future generations. Despite substantial public funding museums survival is by no means guaranteed; an active dialogue with potential and existing audiences and special interest groups is also necessary. In a consultation paper in 2005 the UK government states that museums and galleries “play an essential role in helping its citizens to understand their place in the world and its heritage and that they connect our past with our present and our future” .¹ Stephen Weil argues that a museum, “... is still nothing more than a human fabrication, an organisational contrivance through which some group or other hopes to achieve some short or long-term objective. Whatever worthiness a museum may ultimately have derives from what it does, not from what it is” .²

In Austria today we see also a slight shift, in some cases a substantial shift, in the role of museums away from the main core functions such as collecting, documenting, preserving and research towards a *visitor orientated* approach. That is not to say that the core functions are no longer important but they need to be assessed in the context of what museums are all about. Even ICOM in its 2002 rewritten Code of Ethics sees a museum as a social space and defines a museum as: “... a non-profit making permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purpose of study, education and enjoyment, the tangible and intangible evidence of people and their environment” .³

Museum for the many

Museums are centres of knowledge and the mission to offer an educational experience is the key objective in serving our visitors. It is interesting to note that research in the US and UK shows that it is not the quality of the collection which is the main factor for potential visitors when deciding to visit a museum or gallery, it is much more the environment as a whole and the interaction with the collection that proves to be the key factor. It is very much about offering opportunities for engagement. This also means that museums are part of the service industry working in partnership with all stakeholders to achieve user satisfaction at a time when expectations on service quality generally are rising. According to Pine and Gilmore the desirable economic products are leisure experiences which are more highly valued rather than merely services or products. ⁴ It is not the question of learning versus entertainment it is a win-win phenomenon where both construct an experience that is engaging people “in educationally enjoyable experiences from which they can take their own personal meaning” .⁵

The process of establishing museums for the many goes hand in hand with a transformation of museums which engage and involve visitors and change from being ‘product led to audience centered’ .⁶ If museums are able to engage the visitor in a communication process so that the visitor is able to relate to his or her experiences, museums have to become more open and

¹ *Understanding the Future: Museums and 21st. Century Life*, DCMS, 2005.

² Stephen Weil, *Beyond Management: Making Museums Matter* in INTERCOM, *Study Series*, No12, 2006, p4.

³ *ICOM code of ethics for museums*, ICOM, Paris 2006.

⁴ Pine & Gilmore, 1999, *The experience economy: Work is Theatre and every business a stage*, Boston, p11-12.

⁵ Falk & Dierking, 2000, *Learning from Museums*, p76.

⁶ Black Graham, 2005, *The Engaging Museum. Developing Museums for Visitor involvement*, p3.

more accessible - better meeting visitor needs and achieving greater visitor satisfaction. An audience-focused museum has a dynamic relationship between the programme activities and the audience.

Some of these changes are hugely debated and museums are often criticised for 'dumbing down' but with the commitment of providing innovative programmes with the highest possible quality standard for a wide range of audiences, museums can establish themselves as centres of excellence, showcasing original objects which make a positive difference to people's lives. Having said that, it all depends on getting more people more often through the door and convince them with exciting programmes and challenging exhibitions that a museum visit can offer not only educational experiences second to none, but is also fun and entertaining.

Audience development

Audience development is very much an Anglo-American led term, which has only slowly found its way into Central Europe that describes a powerful process of improving services to existing visitors and reaching out to new audiences. It is not a simple course of action but a planned and targeted management process which involves almost all areas of a museum working together to deliver the organisation's overall aims and objectives to high quality standards. For Hans Christian Anderson audience development means "enriching the experience of your visitors by helping them to learn more and deepening their enjoyment of what you have to offer. It therefore combines the aims of the curator, educator and marketer."⁷ Audience development also needs to ensure that museums continue to be relevant to all the different community groups. Thus the core elements of audience development are "The actions we take to involve people, to understand their needs and interests, and to create an environment and experience that

appeals to them."⁸

Audience development is about breaking down barriers in all its forms and shapes and engaging visitors in activities which they consider worthwhile. It is not only about numbers, and there are different approaches depending on the need of the specific target group. The basis of all audience development initiatives should be research - market research - knowing your audience is key to identify different needs but also to develop niche markets and convince more visitors to become regular museum goers. Kotler argues that successful museums need to "provide multiple experiences: aesthetic and emotional delight, celebration and learning, recreation and sociability"⁹. In delivering multiple experiences that are satisfying and engaging museums will meet specific needs of different target groups and also help individual audiences in their self-development process.

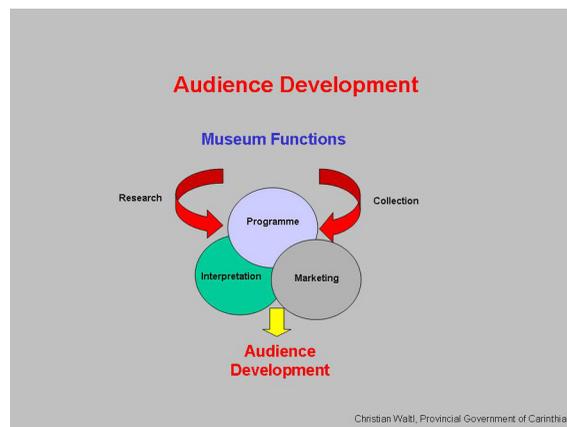


Diagram 1: Audience Development Model (© C. Waltl)

Successful audience development is the perfect 'Zusammenspiel' of almost all museum departments. In this model research and collections are core to be able to devise a programme that is communicated through interpretation and marketing. Together they

⁷ Anderson Hans Christian, *Museums Journal* 2005.

⁸ Audience Development Plan, Heritage Lottery Fund, UK, p4.

⁹ Kotler and Kotler (1998: 39).

bring the message across to the visitors and potential visitors.

Goals of a sustainable Audience Development strategy are:

- To refine and enhance communication with visitors
- To achieve an attainable and sustainable audience
- To turn non visitors into visitors, visitors into repeat visitors and regular museum goers into supporters
- To enhance access
- To offer multiple experiences
- To engage visitors (hands on & minds on)
- To establish an active network with special target groups.

Understanding your audience

Being audience-centred rather than product-led requires a profound understanding of visitors and non-visitors with respect to their nature, motivations, expectations and needs. To be able to do this, professional audience research is vital to make informed decisions on programme activities and to efficiently react to changes in behaviour patterns of society. Practically, visitor studies are an important management tool that should feed into all museum areas and lead to improvements in service quality as a whole and as Graham Black argues “... if museums acknowledge that they should be audience-centred, a properly resourced programme of visitor studies should be an essential, systematic element of museum's activities”¹⁰.

Changes in society have strong implications for museums and their services. One factor which needs to be taken into account is that in Austria, and this is probably true for other European countries too, the society is rapidly ageing and within 20 years from now a third of all Austrians will be over 60. Another challenging target group is families in all their guises from single parents to patch-work families. They all have different

needs and desires that should be best catered for.

In their extensive research Hood and Kelly made it clear that the motivation for a museum visit must be seen in a larger social context:

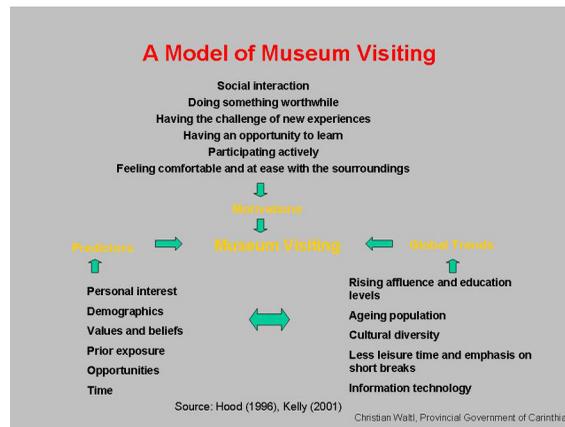


Diagram 2: Model of Museum Visiting (after Hood 1996; Kelly 2001)

A visitor survey of the state museums in Vienna in 2004 found that over 58% of the visitors are visiting a museum because of a special exhibition and another 14% because of an event or special programme. That means that two in three Austrians pay a visit to a museum because of special programmes or exhibitions. This information is crucial for strategic planning meaning that museums do have to have special exhibitions in addition to their permanent displays, otherwise they fail to attract their full audience potential.

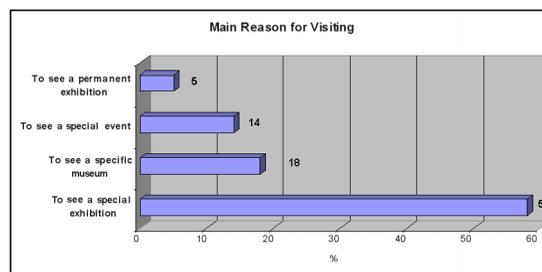


Diagram 3: Reason for Visiting (Source: FESSEL-GfK, Österreichische Bundesmuseen 2004, n=1000)

¹⁰ Black Graham, 2005, p10.

Visitor needs and their impact on management strategy

Nowadays museums are more accountable to their public and people are better educated, more affluent, more experienced and have therefore higher demands and expectations of customer care. Society is also more culturally diverse and museum strategies have to link all operational aspects of museum's businesses towards an agreed mission that reflects this way of modern life.

Numerous market research projects have been undertaken but none of them seems so groundbreaking as work done by Morris, Hargreaves and McIntyre, a company in Manchester, specialising in audience research and arts marketing. From extensive research in the North of England they developed a chart based on a hierarchy of visitor engagement which reflects Maslow's pyramid of human needs. Their model is a useful way of segmenting visitors by their main motivations.

The classification has been grouped into four key drivers: the socially-, the intellectually-, the emotionally- and the spiritually-motivated visitor. Each of them are hierarchical, beginning with the socially-motivated visitor who makes about 48% of visits to museums, the intellectually-motivated visitor (39%), the emotionally-motivated visitor (11%) and the spiritually-motivated

visitor (3%). For galleries the numbers are quite different with 18% of the spiritually-motivated visitors. The higher visitors move up the hierarchy the more fulfilling and rewarding the museums visit was. Thus the aim of good programming and visitor engagement seems to be core to the work we do.

Visitor engagement & involvement

Not all visitors are in a position to make contextual links with what they see on display without any interpretative help. This did not seem too problematic in the past since museums and galleries often served more educated social classes and also saw their existence more in researching, collecting and preserving rather than providing an educational as well as social experience for visitors. As a consequence large parts of the public simply stayed away from museums, with the attitude that museums “held nothing in particular to see” or they are “in general boring or not for them”¹¹.

Nowadays with museums broadening their audiences and trying to make collections more accessible to the public, more sophisticated - technically as well as methodically - interpretation tools become an important part in the process of engaging the visitor. Tools such as audio guides, computer interactives, multi-layered text labels as well as specially trained mediators are helping to make the museums experience more worthwhile for visitors by linking the visitor experience with the collection displayed and initiating a communication between the visitor and the object. Engaging visitors in an interactive experience is much more likely to result in a positive museums experience and visitors come back for more.

In Austria there have been for some time successful projects which had their main

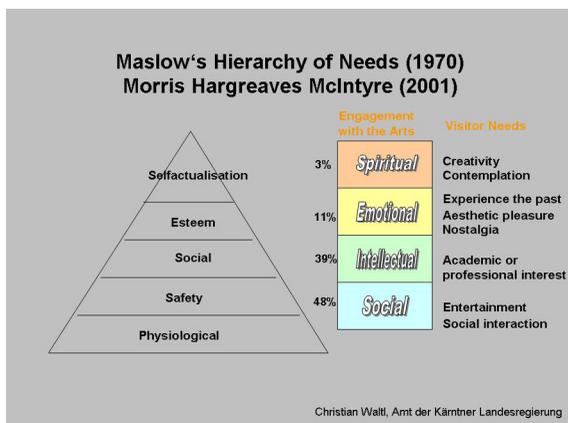


Diagram 4: Needs Hierarchy after Maslow (1970) and Morris, Hargreaves, McIntyre (2001)

¹¹ MORI, Visitors to Museums & Galleries in the UK. Resource: The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries, London, 2001.

focus on working with special target groups to improve access to museums and collections. For example ambitious projects for youths were initiated by the Buro für Kulturvermittlung, a non governmental organisation, working with apprentices who traditionally have no or hardly any interaction with museums or the arts in general. Most of these programmes were offered by freelance educationalists, sometimes in cooperation with museum education departments and mostly co-funded by public bodies. However these projects were often not part of an institution's marketing strategy and were by no means utilised by managers and integrated in museum forward plans.

The provincial museum in Carinthia devised some innovative programmes for the traditionally sporty, non museum attenders. During the annually organized Roman Week a mountain race to an archeological park on top of a historic hill brought new people to the event. Runners were surprised by an original roman award ceremony which brought them into contact with the history of the location.



Another successful audience development programme was targeted at teenagers. For the special exhibition featuring parasites the museum offered in cooperation with a local school a programme of events where the pupils took centre stage in most of the activities. They took ownership of the exhibition and were also responsible for the great success of the exhibition.



Conclusion

Since Museums with space for recreation, social interaction, contemplation and emotions are high on the agenda these days a major cultural change is imminent in the Austrian museums sector.

Successful museums have to be proactive in planning their audience development strategies. A well grounded strategic plan will help museums to move efficiently from where it is now to where it wants to be. Devising a forward plan that reflects visitor needs means that organisations need a good understanding of the environment in which they work. The strategic plan as a framework helps to devise reasonable goals, allocate resources to agreed priorities and at the same time reflect the overall mission and professional standards on the care of collections. Graham Black refers to audience development planning as a “long-term challenge” and argues that “in setting out to develop new audiences, you are actually seeking to change human behaviour”¹²

This emphasises the importance of collaborative work towards a shared vision and common goals and shows that successful museums have to be aware of the interrelated issues of “*cohesive leadership and visitor focused public programming*”¹³ and make sure that visitors have easy access to all that museums do.

¹² Black Graham, *The Engaging Museum. Developing Museums for Visitor involvement*, 2005, p61.

¹³ Des Griffin, & Morris Abraham (2001). Effective Management of Museums: Cohesive Leadership and Visitor-focused Public Programming. *Museum Management and Curatorship* 18 (4), 335-368 (2000).

About the author

Christian Waltl (MPhil, MA) worked as a curator for education in the museums and cultural sector in Vienna, Austria, for more than seven years and was subsequently Project Manager for Acoustiguide, a company producing guided tours for museums and visitor attractions. In 1997 he moved to London and after gaining his MA in museums management he worked as project coordinator and research fellow at the University of Greenwich Business School's Department for Museums, Heritage and Arts Management Studies. Christian's special research areas included visitor services management, visitor surveys, audience development and museum management training.

In December 2000, Mr. Waltl moved to Canada where he worked as the Operations and Communications Manager for the Victoria Independent Film and Video Festival. The festival turned out to be the most successful to date both in terms of visitor numbers and income generation. His move back to Europe was primarily to get back into the museums sector and also to be closer to family. He took over management at Woodhorn Colliery Museum in June 2002 covering for the museums officer who has been seconded to the Heritage Lottery Fund bid project.

In December 2002, Waltl moved back to Austria to work as manager of the Provincial Museum Carinthia, where he had broad responsibilities and moved the museum successfully from a scholarly-based to a more visitor-friendly institution. In August 2006 he was appointed Secretary of Culture working for the Arts Minister of Carinthia.