

Museum Practice



Ask the Expert: audience research

Kayte McSweeney, 09.12.2014

The Visitor Studies Group's Kayte McSweeney answers your questions

Q: I am the manager of a small volunteer-run museum in a region sold as an adventure destination for 20 to 40-year-olds – not our key demographic. We have limited resources other than the opportunity to ask a few quick questions as people come through the door: what are the most useful questions to ask or statistics to collect?

Kayte McSweeney (KM): With limited resources it's important to think about what it is you are hoping to find out from your visitors.

There aren't really any standard "useful" questions – it is more about what can be most useful to you in your future decision making and planning.

Do you want to survey your current visitors about their experience and your offer? Or, are you interested in increasing visitor numbers by attracting more of the 20 to 40-year-olds visiting the area?

For both audiences I think it would be useful to collect their expectations of your museum and whether these were met or not during their visit. In a tourism hotspot, don't underestimate the research potential of online websites such as [TripAdvisor](#).

Engaging fully with websites that list and review visitor experiences in your area can really open up an important communication and feedback channel with your visitors and potential future visitors.

Q: Why do you think university museums have difficulty attracting non-academic audiences?

KM: Many university museums, in my opinion, are often hidden or off the radar of most non-academic audiences. They haven't done as well as other cultural institutions in fighting for a slice of the leisure time of the museum-visiting public.

These visitors don't always see university museums as places for them. They are either intimidated by the university affiliation or often wrongly assume there won't be the kind of experience they like or the range of opportunities they are looking for on offer.

There is also a fear or caution from some of these museums that opening up their collections, designing their interpretation for non-academics or developing a more non-specialist offer will cause their regular visitors to feel displaced and even displeased.

University museums need to think more clearly about just who they are trying to target (it can't be everybody) and why, and what it is they have to offer non-academic audiences.

Some of the more successful university museums have worked hard at targeting new non-academic audiences like school groups and local families. With the right balance of programming and interpretation, and a considered marketing strategy, both academics and non-academics should be able to share the same space.

It is worth looking at the universities who have successfully managed to change their demographics to include more non-academics for tips and guidance. Examples include University College London's [Grant Museum of Zoology](#), Cambridge University's [Fitzwilliam Museum](#) and the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh's [Surgeons' Hall](#).

Q: Do you have any tips on carrying out audience research on our [social media](#) followers and people visiting the website?

KM: Tip one (this applies to all visitor research): have a clear research brief. What do you want to know and why? How are you

going to use the results? This will determine the questions you ask and how you ask them.

Tip two: Remember that in all cases when carrying out research on your online or social media audience you are always speaking to a very specific subset of your museum audience. Particularly in the case of social media it is worth analysing the social media demographic in relation to your audience demographic.

Tip three: what is the incentive to participate? Without an incentive you will limit your data even further to those who either deeply invested in your site or have time to kill "surfing".

Q: I hear a lot about qualitative versus quantitative data but which do you think is the most important for museums?

KM: Whether you choose a qualitative or quantitative method depends on what it is your museum is trying to find out.

The latter will give you top level information – the majority view; how many people think or do something; demographics; numbers; and satisfaction ratings. It will give you those instant facts and statistics that funders often ask for.

Qualitative data can reveal more in-depth information – the range of views; the reasons behind behaviours; why people do and think things; attitudes; feelings; and ideas.

This sort of audience information is preferential when developing new offers. One is not more important than the other; they are both useful for museums and it simply depends on what you kind of evidence you are looking for.

Q: I work in a small local authority museum where we ask volunteers to regularly carry out audience research questionnaires. But other than some standout suggestions (for example, providing large-print information guides) we don't do anything with the findings. Could you suggest a way to collate and evaluate this research?

KM: Everyone can fall into the routine of collecting data for data's sake and suddenly you are drowning in unused and useless questionnaires. Having a clearly-defined and focused research strategy with a regularly reviewed set of aims and objectives should put a hold to this.

While you will want to be collecting key information regularly it might be an idea to concentrate on only one or two issue-based extra questions.

These extra questions should be asked over a set time period to collect a large enough sample size but should focus on key concerns, ideas or interests that will feed directly into museum planning and decision making.

Less is often more useful when it comes to collecting data and is certainly more manageable.

Q: We have a lot of problems getting front-of-house staff on board with undertaking visitor questionnaires and also filling in observation forms themselves. Do you have any advice on making the case to staff for this work?

KM: **Front-of-house staff** are not only an invaluable asset for collecting research from visitors but also for being fonts of knowledge about visitor behaviour and needs.

Acknowledging this expertise and their pivotal role in collecting this intelligence may help in changing their attitudes towards doing this work.

Firstly I would set up a series of skill-sharing and training sessions where staff and managers can practice the methodologies, discuss the challenges and collaborate on writing the objectives for undertaking this work with visitors.

While evaluation is often considered an extra it can easily be planned into the regular interaction or facilitation work done by front-of-house staff and so feel more embedded and integral to their role rather than onerous and additional.

Giving more authority to staff in designing the questionnaires, planning the observations and delivering the research findings might also allow them to feel more ownership over this element of their role and so increase motivation and buy-in for it.

Q: We'd like to set up some advisory panels of regular visitors to feed back to the museum. What approaches have other museums tried that have worked?

KM: There are a number of different models for working with advisory panels, but a tried and tested method which [Glasgow Museums](#) has been utilising for almost 10 years is one based on creating panels to represent key target audiences such as teenagers, schools, families and visitors who have sensory impairments.

This model works well and means that you are able to consult with key audience groups on issues directly affecting their experience in the museum.

In terms of recruiting members for panels, displaying posters in the museum or calls for participants on social media works well for frequent visitors; for access groups, approaching organisations in your local area is an effective recruitment tool; and for young people, approaching local schools is a great way to recruit members and build relationships with teachers too.

However, it is worth noting that while these panels can be invaluable for trialling new programmes, co-creating content or testing new concepts, the participants you are working with will become accustomed to the way your museum works, have insider understanding of your ambitions and after a while not represent the uninitiated, "regular" visitor we are often catering for.

Essentially, having advisory panels doesn't eliminate the need for doing audience research as well.

Kayte McSweeney is a senior audience advocate for the audience research and advocacy team at the Science Museum in London and co-chair of the [Visitor Studies Group](#). Susie Ironside, the visitor studies curator at Glasgow Museums, and Lyndsey Clark, a freelance consultant, also contributed to this article.

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