

Audiences, value and the future of museums: a partnership with the public

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Abstract

Navigating the seas of change is the challenge facing all museums in this 21st century world. One of the significant dimensions of this changing state is found in our notions of and relationship to the 'public' including, but not confined to, that part of the public who visit museums. Taking account of an emerging role for the public as authorizers and legitimators of cultural value, we find that audience research can be used to examine what the public values about museums. This knowledge can be used to assist us in evidence-based advocacy and strategically engaging a sustainable audience base.

Introduction

I think that it is useful to revisit the quote within the programme that heads this session:

At the Malta conference in 2007, it was agreed that our museum audiences were changing and that we should be 'getting the maritime message across'. What is this message? Is anyone listening? Our message is a vitally important one and deserves to be better understood- that the sea has had and continues to have, a fundamental influence on our lives. But how do we get that message across? Do we look for partnerships and, if so, with whom? Theatres, film festivals, concert organizers, leisure entrepreneurs.....?

All of these proposed partnership options provide interesting possibilities and much potential. But my talk today focuses on another partnership with which I strongly urge you to engage. **A partnership with the public.** I suggest this partnership for three reasons:

1. It can help us determine how the museum brand is perceived and what differentiates it from other leisure attractions; in terms of this gathering, let us re-phrase that to say that it can help us determine how the maritime museum brand is perceived and what differentiates it from other museum types and leisure attractions;
2. It provides important substantiation of our Public Value to external stakeholders including funders, policy makers and bureaucrats; and
3. It can enable individual museums to take the pulse of local populations to find out how they can build sustainable audiences.

Context

The context for these arguments and for what I am going to discuss today is the emerging notion of 'value'. As with most emerging phenomena, 'value' has acquired prominence because of a convergence of factors. One of these factors is discourse around the role of museums within societies and the value ascribed to them and a second is new thinking in terms of public sector management and the implications for the role of the public.

Measuring the value of museums

The public management model which has dominated OECD countries for the last thirty years focused on efficiency, economy and effectiveness, balancing inputs and outputs and demonstrating tangible outcomes based on contributions to wider social and economic goals. This focus on contributions to wider economic and social policy has been termed 'instrumentalism'.

In many ways, 'instrumentalism' was an understandable reflection of the times. Other economic crises had necessitated a reining in of the expansionist public spending that characterized governments following World War II. And, in our increasing diverse societies where there is an amalgam of different values based on a range of creeds and cultural differences, governments have been necessarily preoccupied with establishing a unifying civics with the twin aims of social cohesion and building social capital. Museums have been part of this general social agenda. Concurrently, museums have been charged with demonstrating their contributions to various dimensions of the economy- through employment, through attracting tourism, as part of urban regeneration schemes, and to the knowledge and creative economies.

From within the museum sector, the response to instrumentalism has been various. Museum funding has been explicitly tied to providing demonstrable evidence of achievements in these areas, so compliance has been necessary. But compliance has also been willing because the aims of greater social cohesion, building social capital, contributing to aspects of the economy and encouraging learning are worthy and important social goals with benefits for the community at large as well as individual members of the public.

But the compliance has not come without criticism. The criticism has been sustained over a long period of time and, increasingly, has involved outright challenge. The debates have focused on perceptions that the instrumentalist agenda has been imposed from above, diverted museums from other core purposes and relegated the intrinsic benefits of culture and cultural experience to the sidelines through the preoccupation with utilitarian outcomes.

The very dominance of instrumentalism has fostered debate and discussion, much of it around the need for the less tangible outcomes and impacts of museums to be included in the equation and for assessment of museums' social contribution to be based on a more holistic model using a set of commonly agreed indicators.

So, **value** has entered the debate from the perspective of these conversations that recognize the need for a more holistic model on which to base museum accountability that includes, but is not confined to, instrumental outcomes and impacts. We have seen an emerging literature on what other values might be included any many of you will be familiar with the writings of McCarthy et al (*Measuring the Muse*, 2004) and John Holden (*Capturing cultural value (2004) Cultural value and the crisis of legitimacy (2006)*)

If museums are creating value, then it also follows that they are having an impact and making a difference for someone, somewhere. This implies individual and community beneficiaries of these outcomes and impacts. We find that the discourse on value necessarily focuses attention on the public recipients of our programmes and services as a crucial factor in accounting for what kind of value we are creating and how we communicate that value to external stakeholders. This leads into a second area which is adding to the discourse on value; this is the concept of Public Value.

Public Value

Public Value is gaining currency in Western public management. It is being adopted by many OECD governments as an alternative paradigm to the model of public management that has dominated the public sector in OECD countries from the late 1970's and which was characterized by an emphasis on inputs, outputs and the achievement of tightly controlled performance targets in line with government policy.

Originating in the new public service theory of which Mark Moore is the main proponent (1995), one of the differences in Public Value is that it recognises the **public** as the *authorising* agent for defining value and, in our instance, cultural value.

If organisations are to create public value in their practices and use evaluative standards to measure their performance, then those values and evaluative standards must be authorised by the public (Blaug et al, 2006: 7)

The purpose of this public consultation is somewhat different to the audience research with which we are familiar. In the first instance, there is a degree of voluntarism with audience research in terms of using the findings. It appears, however, that Public Value consultation is emerging as something that may become mandatory as part of a much wider public sector reform and which will be a central feature in models of accountability for public funding in the future. We may be required to demonstrate that we create value that has public endorsement. The aim of this is to build (and sometimes, renew) trust in the public realm.

There are an increasing number of examples of Public Value being adopted as both a conceptual framework and a research direction by cultural organizations. In the UK, one of the first agencies to apply the principles of Public Value was the BBC when it sought to renew its license in 2004. It argued that it should have its license renewed on the basis of the Public Value it generated and cited *democratic* value through encouraging national debate and providing trusted and impartial news coverage; *cultural* and *creative* value through fostering talent, encouraging new programming and celebrating heritage; *educational* value through knowledge and skills building; *social* and *community* value by showcasing difference and encouraging understanding of difference; *economic* value through investment in creativity ;and *global* value

'by being the world's most trusted provider of international news and information, and by showcasing the best of British culture to a global audience' (BBC, 2004: 8).

More recently Arts Council England published a major study that sought to identify what people value about and want from the arts (ACE, 2008). The American Association of Museums and The Institute of Museums and Library Services (IMLS) in the United States are both committed to actively exploring the Public Value of museums in that country. And the Information Development Plan for culture and heritage produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2008 is located within a framework of Public Value. In our own museum sector, there have been studies about the public financing of museums (*Exhibiting Public Value*, IMLS, 2009) and the social and economic value of museums in UK (a study by Tony Travers for NMDC in 2006 and by Travers and Glaister in 2004). Both of these studies examined statistical and documentary evidence. Jane Legget (2009) and I (Scott, 2008, 2009) are two of the few who have engaged the public in studies of the value of museums.

And so, the nature of our work with audiences is changing. It is no longer just about visitors or about creating new audience segments. It is also about engaging the public in a dialogue about what they value about museums and what else they want us to do. This has implications for how we conduct audience research. In this area, we are, I believe, on the cusp of a important transition.

On the one hand, there is a greater trend in audience research to **population** studies. Traditionally, we have researched our visitors and considered potential new audiences. But increasingly, studies are tapping into the population-at-large. This includes visitors and potential visitors but it also involves non visitors- those who have never visited a museum and may never do so, but, for reasons that I will discuss today, may still have a stake in museums. In the future, we will be doing more research with the public as a whole.

Another sign of this transition is in the **type** of information we are seeking. We are beginning to explore both (1) what personal values people are trying to satisfy with leisure and (2) how museums are valued by the population at large.

And a third dimension is a trend to greater convergence across these areas where the information acquired can be used to address both the positioning of our sector as a whole with external stakeholders and the needs of single institutions to engage and sustain loyal audiences amongst the public.

Now value-based research can be applied in both these areas and I am going to present an example of each. The first example is a sector study that I conducted in Australia with both professionals working in and with the museum sector and the general visiting and non-visiting public. I sought both groups' perspectives about the value of museums. Today, within the Public Value context of this paper, I am going to focus on the findings from the public cohort from that study. The second example I will present shows how a value-based approach is influencing audience research where the focus is identifying the personal values that people are seeking to satisfy with leisure and the development of programmes and marketing aligned with these identified value states.

Public value and museums

The purpose of this first study was to develop a typology to describe the value of museums as a sector, a set of indicators based on the typology and an examination of the evidence base to substantiate these value-based indicators.

A purposive, in-depth sample was recruited by a professional recruiting agency using specifications which I determined. I sought a diverse public (both visitors and non-visitors to museums), dispersed across three Australian states, living in a variety of communities (a large city, a smaller city and six regional centers) and reflecting four lifestyle groups (18-24 year olds; parents with children under 12 years; adults without children 35-50 years and seniors 55+).

RECRUITING SAMPLE	Small city	Regional centers	Large city
Young adults 18-24 years	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors
Parents with children under 12 years	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors
Adults without children 35- 50 years	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors
Seniors 55 +	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors	Museum visitors Non museum visitors

Fig 1: Recruiting sample

The question of value was approached from the perspectives of meaning, contribution and loss. Members of the public cohort were asked to describe the personal significance of having museums in their community, to outline the perceived contributions of museums to individuals, communities and the economy, and to reflect on what (if anything) they (personally) and the community would lose if museums ceased to exist. I found that the public in this study valued museums across four dimensions:

1. Instrumental value: Going beyond core functions and having aspirations to a wider agenda of social change
2. Intrinsic value: Inherent qualities of things, often intangible, described in affective language, without a utilitarian dimension
3. Institutional value: Processes and practices which agencies adopt that build trust in governments and the public service which government funded agencies provide.
4. Use value: often the effort expended to engage with something- the time travelled to the attraction, the time spent there, the monetary cost, the degree of engagement. So use value encompasses direct use but increasingly it also refers to non-use value. And non-use value is described as existence, future and bequest value.
 - Existence value could be phrased as 'I don't go to museums, but I think that they are good to have in a community because they reserve our heritage';
 - Future value is phrased as "I don't go to museums now, but I may do so in the future'; and
 - Bequest value is expressed as 'I don't go to museums now and am unlikely to do so in the future but I think that museums are important because ever do so, but I think that they are important because they pass our culture and heritage to the next generation'.

Within each of these four dimensions, this is what the public cohort in this study valued about museums:

	Instrumental	Intrinsic	Institutional	Use
Individuals	Learning Self-directed learning/ five senses especially visual through objects/ fun and entertaining	Cognitive Discovery/ Enrichment/ Excitement/ Inspiration/ Reflection Well being Joy/ Pleasure Empathetic Perspective/Awareness/ Insight		Direct use Non-use Existence/ Future/ Bequest
Community	Community capacity Community learning resource/ educational resource for schools/ leisure/ cultural capital/ civic pride Social capital Engagement/interaction Economy Tourism/ employment/ value adding	Historical Communal archive/ cultural transmission/ experience of the past/ learning the lessons of history/ cultural continuity Social Sense of place/ Identity/ Belonging Economy Knowledge archive/ inspiration/ creative ideas	Public access to collections	

Fig 2: Public Value of Museums (Scott, 2009)

I want to highlight 4 things from this typology for our discussion today:

History

Over the last two decades, we as sector professionals have been so focused on addressing the wider social and economic policy goals of governments that it is confirming to learn that this study found that the single most important value attributed to museums is their role in preserving and presenting history. The public values the role that museums have in providing '*[a]repository for items which are too significant to discard, a sort of communal 'attic' where items of interest can be deposited*' (Public cohort: male, non-visitors, 55-70, urban resident).

One of the strongest differentiating attributes of museums in the minds of the public is their role in providing a '*key to the past*'. This is affirming at a time when history is being taught less in schools and is no longer a core subject in most. However, in spite of that, the majority of public respondents in this study (76%) value the connection with the past that museums offer and believe that museums are unique in their capacity to show what the past was like.

And it is in the reasons that they value history that we find that key. The respondents were interested in presentations of the past that are relevant to the present, that show how far we have come and what we can learn from the past for the future. They believe that sharing diverse perspectives on the past in a common forum can build a sense of shared values, tolerance and understanding. They believe that museums have an important role to play in cultural transmission and continuity, belonging and sense of place.

Learning

60% of the public cohort in this study clearly valued the learning opportunities that museums provide. In part, this is as a community learning resource and as an adjunct to the formal educational system. But what is interesting is that people value, not just learning, but the type of learning *specific* to the museum setting.

This is another one of the differentiating features of museums which is part of our brand. What people in this study value about museum learning is the freedom of choice, the opportunity to learn through using all senses, the role of objects and the fun in museum learning. And they speak of it in these terms.

The opportunity to learn in a relaxed non- structured environment whilst socializing at the same time (Public cohort: female, visitor, 35-50, urban resident).

....providing information for all five senses! Reading interesting facts, seeing displays, feeling samples and hearing, smelling and sometimes tasting new experiences or environments- greater understanding of the impact of environmental changes through actually seeing extinct species (Public cohort: male, visitor, parent, urban resident)

A particular way of learning through objects- for children museums are a great visual and interactive reminder of history and can be a better tool for teaching (Public cohort: female, visitor, parent, regional resident)

Nature of the Museum Experience

Brand researchers (Hwang, 2002) speak of symbolic, emotional, and intangible aspects related to what a brand represents. If we look at the 'Intrinsic' values that individuals attribute to museums, we can see that the *nature* of the museum experience is expressed affectively. People describe the museum *experience* in terms of discovery, enrichment, excitement, inspiration, reflection, joy, pleasure, perspective, awareness and insight. This is powerful language for positioning and branding because it resonates with the values that people are already associating with museums- and they express it as follows

[museums] give a chance to view oneself within the fabric of time and space; a perspective of history and where you fit within the frame (Public cohort: male, non-visitor, 55-70 years old, urban resident)

[a museum is] a quiet place to look back over time and reflect on things that have happened over time (Public cohort: female, visitor, parent, urban resident)

[Museums offer] possibilities to look at both the familiar and the unexpected. New discoveries among the old friends at every visit (Public cohort: female, visitor, 55-70 years, urban resident)

[Museums] allow us to be armchair travelers (raises questions about why, how and where without having to travel all around the world!) (Public cohort: female, visitor, parent, urban resident)

And this wonderful quote from a young woman....

Having a museum in my city means that I don't have to go far to learn and see and touch the history and life style of my culture and many others, past and present. This to me is an amazing experience. To be able to walk through and see inventions and designs of the world and how much time has changed peoples perceptions and sense of design. How much technology has expanded with the human mind and how primitive life was in centuries before. I can appreciate life in so many more ways. To me, a museum in my city is a privilege (Public cohort: female, visitor, 18-24, urban resident)

Use

The final thing I want to highlight from this study is the dimension of *use*. A primary indicator of the value of museums required by funders is evidence of direct and indirect use- the number of people coming through the door and the number of people visiting our websites and participating in our outreach programmes. That is a valid indicator. But another area that emerged from this study is the significance of non-use value. Non-visitors in this study were clear that they valued museums irrespective of directly engaging with them. Examples of non-use value were evident across this study.

a) Existence value

Personally it doesn't mean a lot as I don't visit them, but I can see the benefit of them being here. I would recommend them to visitors if asked (Public cohort: female, non-visitor, parent, regional resident)

b) Future value

Even though I do not visit often, I would still feel the loss personally if museums no longer existed. I anticipate that in retirement I may have the time and be more inclined to visit (Public cohort: male, visitor, 55-70, urban resident);

c) Bequest value

I don't think I would lose much sleep if museums ceased to exist; however, it would be sad for future generations not to have the opportunity to see our history other than in photos, books etc. (Public cohort: male, non-visitor, parent, urban resident)

This and similar studies suggest that the percentage of the population that values museums is far in excess of the numbers demonstrated through direct and indirect use. And more importantly, when contingent valuation studies are conducted, they often find that not only does a large percentage of the population of non-users value museums and are willing to pay taxes to fund museums irrespective of use, they sometimes also find that they are often willing to pay more for their upkeep than they do already. This is research that we need to have to hand when we come to argue the case for museums with external stakeholders (particularly bureaucrats, funders and policy makers). I encourage museum leaders to undertake contingent valuation studies because it is a measure of the value of the sector across a population as a whole instead of just that portion who choose to visit.

Applications

Now how can we use this knowledge of what the public values about museums?

I would suggest that it can be used in at least three areas:

- It provides evidence to argue for the public value of museums to external stakeholders;
- It offers a language for communicating with these stakeholders and the public;
- It provides points of differentiation for positioning and branding the sector.

In these difficult times, our negotiations for a sustainable future need to be substantiated by evidence of Public Value. We can use this evidence in our dealings with external stakeholders to leverage our case for a portion of the public purse. As importantly, knowledge of what the public values gives us a language to use in our discussions, arguments and our branding as a sector. And the latter is important. We are competing with a growing range of leisure options and vying for the attention of a public with multiple opportunities for choice. We need to 'put our sector out there' using the language of the people and what they value about museums.

Essential to promotion and positioning is knowledge of our brand. Though brands may originate with the company, sector or organization that develops the product, brands have a life of their own. They move beyond the walls of the institution into the external world. They become mental constructs. They are, 'the sum total of all human experiences, feelings and perceptions about a particular thing, product or organization' (Gregory, 2002: 1). Finding out what constitutes these experiences, feelings and perceptions is crucial to brand development and management. What we can expect to get when we ask the public for intelligence about the museum brand, is a wide range of tangible and intangible factors that can be used for sector positioning and differentiation

Values- based audience research

The concept of value-based research has also permeated the audience research field where it is applied to the needs of specific institutions seeking to build audiences. Here, the focus is on attracting audiences through aligning institutional marketing and programme development with motivational drivers for leisure choice. There are some similarities and some differences with the study I have just described.

A similarity is found in the nature of the sample: Like the sector study, value-based audience research is sampling a population. Visitors, non-visitors and lapsed visitors are all included. And, like the sector study, we are dealing with values. But in this case, the purpose is to identify the values that drive *personal* leisure choice, test them on a representative sample of the population and then create market segments. The multiple deliverables provided by these types of studies include:

- Clarifying the values that people are seeking to satisfy with leisure and identifying how these values motivate individual leisure choice;
- Constructing audience segments in relation to these underlying values;
- Explaining how these values can be used to construct specific types of *experiences and programmes* to build visitation; and
- Demonstrating how aligning these experiences and needs through customised *marketing* can attract visitors.

Methodology

Implementing these studies follows a two-stage process. In the first stage a demographic sample of frequent, infrequent and lapsed visitors as well as non-visitors are recruited. These respondents are engaged in a lengthy in-depth discussion which explores:

- The values people are seeking to satisfy with leisure and how they describe their 'Ideal' attraction on the basis of these values;
- How different attractions are evaluated against the ideal;
- How attractive the museum which is the subject of the research is in relation to other attractions and in relation to the ideal;
- Experiences/perceptions of the museum which is the subject of the research;
- Reactions to elements prepared by the museum which is the subject of the research (marketing and branding, programmes and services) which might inspire a visit; and
- Perceivable barriers to engagement.

The combined responses are distilled to about 20 statements that encapsulate the range of issues that respondents are seeking to satisfy in leisure choice. These statements are then tested against a much wider population sample (900) which again includes visitors, infrequent, lapsed and non-visitors to find where these statements coalesce demographically and what percentage of the total population subscribes to them. From this process, market segments are developed which identify the values people that are trying to satisfy with leisure, the experience they are seeking, the programmes that could interest them, the communication formats by which they can be contacted, where a specific institution sits in relation to the 'ideal' and to other competitors- and- barriers to engagement.

The usefulness of this type of study is that it provides robust information to both access audiences perhaps unknown to the museum as well as building loyalty with existing audiences by refining programming and marketing in ways that resonate with their expressed value states.

Example

The following is an example of what a study like this can provide. The example is hypothetical, but I have based it on a distillation of three studies with which I am familiar and my meta-evaluation has focused on the common elements emerging from each¹.

A strong value which emerged across these three studies was the need to socialize with others; for many people, sharing their leisure with others- be it family or friends- is critically important. The opportunity to bond with significant others and experience something together is one value which is called '*connection*';

All these studies also found a value that was at the opposite end of the continuum. These people are seeking to augment their sense of self through leisure. They place a strong value on '*personal identity*'.

Learning emerged as a significant value in each of these studies where a large proportion of the populations in question were seeking leisure attractions that would provide a learning experience. These people are active seekers of knowledge and either interested in self- development or seeking to share their learning with others.

¹ The values which emerge could be culturally specific and could differ if the study was applied in a different cultural context. .

At the other end of the continuum another value emerged; variously described as '*pleasure*' or '*entertainment*', people with a strong orientation to this value were seeking fun in their leisure and expected the experience to provide enjoyment. The outcomes can be represented by the following figure:

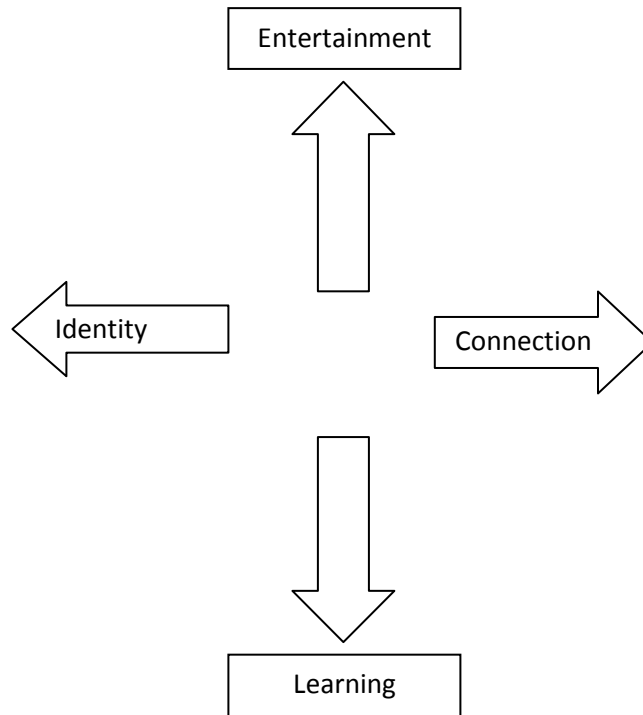


Fig 3: Values motivating personal leisure choice

These studies provide both depth and breadth of information. The language provides us with 'hooks' that speak directly to the values that people are trying to satisfy which we can use in our marketing and promotions. In the following figures, we can see other examples of the information in terms of the average proportion of each segment within the populations sampled by these studies, what each segment is seeking to satisfy with leisure, what types of experiences would interest each segment and the kinds of programmes that could deliver these experiences.

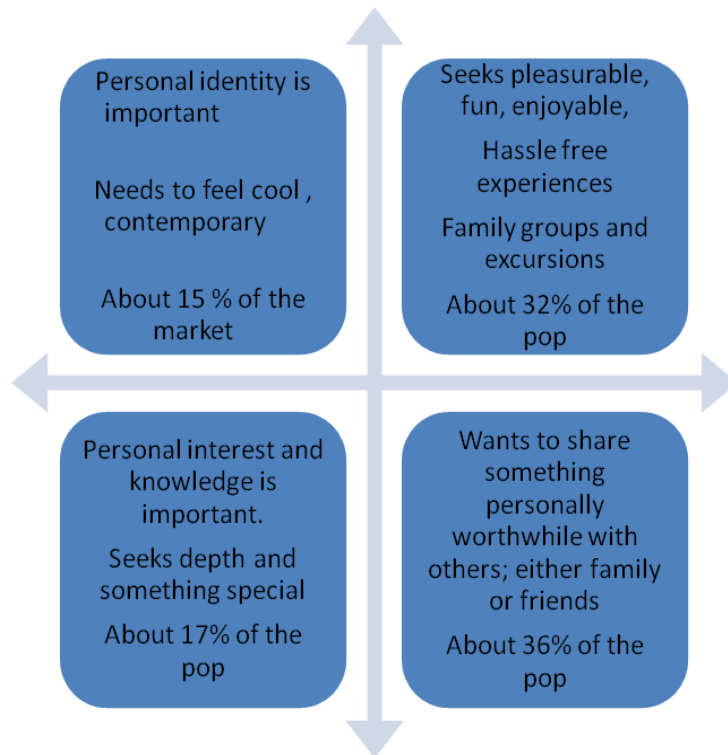


Fig 4: What each is segment is seeking to satisfy with leisure/ hypothetical proportion in each segment.

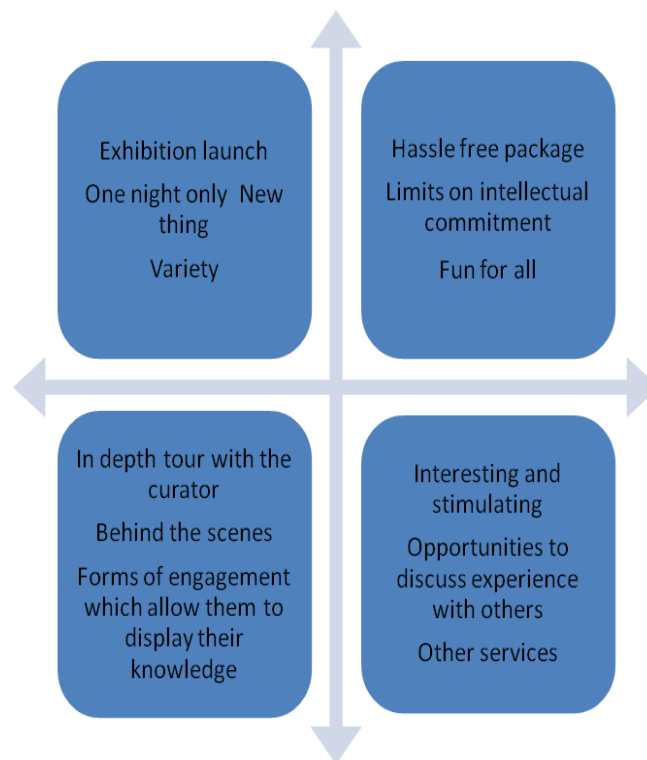


Fig 5: Programmes that would satisfy each segment

Applications

Information from these value-based audience research studies is being mainly used for:

1. Programme commissioning: Museums use the segmentation to guide the development of exhibitions and events. They considered new ideas in the light of whether and which market segment the proposed exhibition would attract. Not every proposal had to attract every segment but there had to be evidence that at least one or two segments could be interested. Eventually, staff began to think of their proposals with these segments in mind and to build their programmes with the aim of satisfying the needs of the sectors they were trying to attract. In this respect, these studies also proved useful in uniting staff around a common approach to audiences and to developing programmes using the results of audience research.

2. Marketing

The information has also been used to select which segments offer the best return on an investment. It can be easier to begin by focusing on a few segments whose values are most closely aligned to what a museum has to offer than to try to engage all simultaneously. Targeted marketing can communicate to the segments based on their specific leisure needs and the values they are seeking to satisfy based on those values. Museum branding can leverage the intelligence that these studies provide to build positioning.

Conclusion

The late Stephen Weil in his book, *Making Museums Matter*, (2002) argued that museums are instruments to carry out particular goals, and they fail, *if* they cannot articulate their value and measure the value the audience places on the resulting experience. In other words, if museums are not valuable to their communities they will always be seen as a luxury expendable in difficult times (Weinberg and Lewis, 2009: 254).

And, we are living in difficult times. As museums argue their case for sustainable funding in an increasingly uncertain economic climate, try to adjust their service delivery and programmes in a Web 2.0 environment and compete with other leisure attractions, we need to take the pulse of the community to find out where our value lies and whether our efforts are aligned with the value that the public is seeking.

We are in a period of transition in relation to audiences and the transition that we are witnessing goes beyond the trend to a more visitor-centered orientation in relation to programming and service delivery. It is deeply embedded in a new culture of public sector management that is putting the public at the centre stage of cultural value identification. In the future, accountability for the receipt of public funding will seek evidence that we are satisfying the cultural value that the public perceives as important.

Undertaking 'values' based research, therefore, is a real asset in our futures toolkit. It provides a basis upon which we can formulate a powerful and encompassing *language* with which to argue the case for museums to external stakeholders including funders, bureaucrats and policy makers. It opens the door to formulating a set of *indicators* that holistically assess the multiple benefits of museums. It can be used to *build sustainable audiences* through target marketing and programmes that satisfy individual values and needs.

But most importantly, partnering with the public builds the widest possible constituency for museum support. And this is going to be an important factor for our future sustainability.

Thank you

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