

# The Engaging Museum

Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement

Graham Black



THE HERITAGE: CARE-PRESERVATION-MANAGEMENT

# The Engaging Museum

This very practical book guides museums on how to create the highest quality experience possible for their visitors. Creating an environment that supports visitor engagement with collections means examining every stage of the visit, from the visitor's initial impetus to go to a particular institution, to front-of-house management, to the way the collections are displayed and qualitative analysis afterwards. This holistic approach will be immensely helpful to museums in meeting the needs and expectations of visitors and building their audience base. Because *The Engaging Museum* offers a set of principles that can be adapted to any museum in any location, it will be an invaluable resource for institutions of every shape and size.

Especially designed to be user-friendly, *The Engaging Museum* includes:

- chapter introductions and discussion sections
- supporting case studies to show how ideas are put into practice
- a varied selection of tables, figures and plates to support and illustrate the discussion
- boxes showing ideas, models and planning suggestions to guide development
- an up-to-date bibliography of landmark research

*The Engaging Museum* will appeal internationally to students and teachers from a wide range of postgraduate museum courses in museology, museum studies, gallery studies, heritage studies and management, as well as those studying tourism and visitor attraction management. It is also highly relevant to any professional planning a new museum exhibition or applying for grant aid for exhibition development.

**Graham Black** is a senior lecturer in Museum and Heritage Management at the Nottingham Trent University. He is also a professional interpretation consultant and his exhibitions have won the £100,000 Gulbenkian Prize, a Museum of the Year award, the Special Judges Prize at the Interpret Britain Awards and the English Tourist Board's 'England for Excellence' Tourist Attraction of the Year Award.

## THE HERITAGE: CARE-PRESERVATION-MANAGEMENT

---

The Heritage: Care-Preservation-Management is a series designed to meet the needs of both practitioners and academics in the global museums and heritage community. Each volume has strong practical foundations, integrated with awareness of the relevant conceptual frameworks.

The new generation of HCPM titles takes full account of the many developments that have occurred since the series was originated, to provide up-to-date support, instruction and insight for today's readers.

Previous titles include:

*Museum Basics*

Timothy Ambrose and Crispin Paine

*Museum Ethics*

Gary Edson

*Museum Security and Protection*

Edited by David Listen

*Representation of the Past*

Kevin Walsh

# The Engaging Museum

Developing museums for visitor involvement

Graham Black

# For my parents

First published 2005 by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017 (8th Floor)

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© 2005 Graham Black

Typeset in Garamond 3 and Frutiger by The Running Head Limited, Cambridge

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Black, Graham.

The engaging museum: an interpretive approach to visitor involvement/Graham Black.  
p. cm. — (Heritage)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Museum attendance—Evaluation. 2. Museum exhibits—Evaluation. 3. Museums—Educational aspects. 4. Museums—Marketing. 5. Museums—Management. 6. Museum techniques. 7. Museum visitors. 8. Interpretation of cultural and natural resources.

9. Cultural property—Protection. 10. Cultural property—Management. 11. Historic sites—Management. I. Title. II. Series.

AM7.B56 2005

069—dc22            2004061484

ISBN13: 978-0-415-34556-9 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-415-34557-6 (pbk)

# Contents

Preface ix  
Acknowledgements xi

**Introduction: meeting the demands placed on the  
twenty-first century museum 1**

## **Section 1 Museum audiences: their nature, needs and expectations 7**

- 1 ‘Traditional’ museum audiences: a quantitative and qualitative analysis 9**
  - Introduction: the rise of museum visitor studies 9
  - Audience segmentation 11
  - Market surveys 12
  - Quantitative visitor surveys 16
  - Qualitative data on visitor expectations, motivations and needs 22
  - Discussion: an audience in decline – trends and challenges 37
  - Case study: lessons from tourism research 41
- 2 Developing new audiences 46**
  - Introduction 46
  - Social exclusion and museums 48
  - Audience development 51
  - Audience development planning 61
  - Discussion: how will an audience development strategy impact on a museum’s public face? 64
  - Case study: developing museum content for young children and families with babies/young children 66

## **Section 2 Operating for quality 75**

- 3 Stimulating the visit 77**
  - Introduction 77
  - Awareness 78
  - Entrenched negative attitudes 79

The 'wrong' positive perceptions	80
Positioning the museum	81
Influencing the visitor agenda	86
Positive marketing	86
Marketing to diversify the audience base	87
Discussion: seven core issues	88
Case study: repositioning Manchester Art Gallery	91

<b>4 Visitor services: operating for quality</b>	<b>96</b>
Introduction	96
A central role for visitor services	97
How do you define quality in a museum visit?	101
Measuring visit quality	103
Discussion: managing for quality	109
Case study: adapting Servqual to measure visitor services quality	113

### Section 3 **Learning in museums 121**

<b>5 Museums and lifelong learning</b>	<b>123</b>
Introduction: the rise of 'learning' up the museum agenda	123
Museums and lifelong learning	125
Learning theory and museums	128
Discussion: applying learning theory to museum display and support	147
Case study: evaluating visitor learning in museums	150
<b>6 Use of museums by schools</b>	<b>157</b>
Introduction: museums and structured educational use	157
The agenda for structured educational use	159
How can museums best support schools use?	160
Discussion: enjoyment and memories come first	171
Case study: education resource packs/websites	173

### Section 4 **Planned to engage: using interpretation to develop museum displays and associated services 177**

<b>7 Applying the principles of interpretation to museum display</b>	<b>179</b>
Introduction: what is interpretation?	179
Modern museums and interpretation	183
Defining interpretive principles for museum display	185
Discussion: the impact of interpretive principles on museum display	208
Case study: exhibition standards/guidelines	209
<b>8 Interpretive master planning</b>	<b>211</b>
Introduction	211
Developing an interpretation strategy for a museum service	214

Developing an interpretation masterplan for a multi-collection museum	226
Discussion: the role of the project manager	230
Case study: process mapping	232
<b>9 Concept development for museum galleries</b>	<b>239</b>
Introduction	239
What: the collections audit	240
Why: aims and objectives	240
Who: specific audience targets	241
How: developing the concept and turning it into reality	242
Discussion: the impact of interpretive planning	255
Case study: a design brief for a small gallery at New Walk Museum, Leicester	258
<b>10 The engaging museum</b>	<b>266</b>
Introduction	266
The 'big picture' – a museum for the twenty-first century	268
Direct engagement with objects	271
Discussion: satisfying museum experiences and visitor take-aways	284
Case study: the visitor response	286
 Bibliography	 289
Index	302



# Preface

It is a wonderful time to be working in museums – at long last audiences are being given the priority they deserve. This book seeks both to add to the debate on how most effectively to engage audiences with collections, and also to support in a practical way those trying to achieve this. It makes no claims to be the only way forward, but will hopefully provide rich food for thought.

The book has two sources of origin. One lies in my role over the last 20 years as a consultant interpreter, where I have spent a lot of my time training curatorial staff in interpretive principles, planning and techniques. The other lies in my role as a teacher, introducing a new generation of future museum professionals to the delights of engaging audiences. The two came together in my need for a text that would provide the groundwork from which I could build. There are a number of excellent books introducing environmental interpretation and interpretive planning, but I did not feel that any of them really sought to apply interpretive principles and techniques to the museum world. Equally, there is a huge library of museum texts now available, but I feel strongly that museum literature has lost touch with interpretation (and vice versa) over the last 20 to 30 years, so there was nothing that specifically fitted my needs.

So the book started with the intention of introducing an audience of museum professionals and trainees to a practical interpretive approach to museum and exhibition development. From there it grew. As interpretive planning encompasses all aspects of museum and exhibition development, and as I am committed to a holistic view of the museum visit, it proved essential to provide a background for visitor studies, image projection and visitor services. Because, like many museum professionals, I am committed to sharing my enthusiasms with as broad an audience as possible, a discussion of approaches to audience development and to meeting the needs of diverse audiences was central. As interpretive planning includes defining target audiences and then setting out to meet their needs it was equally essential to include, for example, the ‘building in’ of relevant project work for structured educational users. Because, like all interpreters, I believe that direct visitor participation leads to learning, it was necessary to engage in the wider learning debate – and the physical impact of a commitment to learning on museums.

At the same time, I was also seeking to expand the range of ‘interpretive principles’ that I use to underpin my own work specifically to reflect the circumstances of museums which are, in many ways, different to those pertaining to environmental

interpreters or park visitor centres. To do so meant not just listing them (adequate for me in my consultancy work), but also providing a justification to a wider audience.

The end result is a very practical book immersed within an academic text. I make no apologies for this. The objective of the book is to outline best practice as I see it, and to support this with a thorough academic underpinning. I hope that people who use this book will not only find that it helps them to think through practical approaches to individual projects, but also that they will have no difficulty in communicating why the approach they have selected is the most appropriate for their specific circumstances.

Graham Black  
Nottingham, 2005

# Acknowledgements

I must begin by expressing my absolute gratitude to Lynda Kelly, head of the Australian Museum Audience Research Centre; Kym S. Rice, Assistant Director, Museum Studies Program, George Washington University; and Pat Sterry, Director of the Centre for Heritage Studies, University of Salford. They very generously agreed to read and comment in depth on the bulk of the book. Without their support, the book would not have what depth of understanding it has. Errors, of course, remain my own.

I would also like to thank, in chronological order, Diane Lees, Director, UK National Museum of Childhood; Sally Manuireva, Project Manager for the Weston Park Museum, Sheffield redevelopment; and Nick Gordon, site manager of New Walk Museum, Leicester, for helping me get to grips with the practical application of interpretive principles to major new museum developments, and for their help in tracing images.

Others who gave invaluable assistance included:

Emily Allen for allowing me to quote from her work on Musequal.

Robin Conway for saving me comprehensively when my computer tried to die.

John Cross of Adult Learning Australia for an inspiring 'virtual conversation' on the nature of adult learning and on the central importance of reflection.

Larry DeBuhr for his comments on interpretation at botanic gardens and provision of a copy of the Chicago Botanic Garden model.

Annie Delin for kindly permitting me to use some of her material on disability access and for commenting on chapter 2.

Janet Elkington and Olwyn Ince for the substantial amount of work they did to make my text usable by the publishers.

Kate Farmery, head of Marketing and Business Development, Manchester City Galleries, for her invaluable assistance on the chapter 3 case study.

Isabelle Frochot of the Université de Savoie, France, for allowing me to refer in detail to her work on Histoqual and for commenting on my text.

Nancy Fuller of the Center for Museum Studies, the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, for her support and for putting me in contact with a number of people in the USA.

Liz Gilmore, Outreach Manager for Families and Young People, National Gallery, London for sharing her experience with me.

Jo Graham for her commitment to young children in museums and sharing her ideas and expertise with me, particularly in the case study in chapter 2.

Pamela Clelland Gray, Manager of Education and Public Programmes at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, for reading and commenting on chapter 5 and for adding to my reflection/reverie conversation with John Cross.

Phil Hackett, Assistant Director Visitor Operations, English Heritage West Midlands Region, for his comments on chapter 4.

Emily Johnsson of the London Museum Hub for giving me access to her research, for her comments on chapters 5 and 6 and for her help in locating images.

Eric Langham for his comments on chapter 2, for giving me access to some key research material and for his help in tracing images.

Kevin Osbon, Steven Fletcher, Anthony Barber and Mike Lee for keeping me focused at all times (or, at least, all hours!).

Liz Wilson, of East Midlands Museum Hub, for her comments on chapters 5 and 6, and for pointing me in the direction of key additional material.

My university colleagues – Stuart Burch, Angela Phelps, Deborah Skinner and Neville Stankley – for their practical and moral support.

And finally my students on the MA Museum and Heritage Management course at The Nottingham Trent University over the last five years, who have had to put up with me as I have developed the contents of this book, have frequently halted me in my tracks with searching questions and have generally inspired me to carry on with it.

Throughout the book I have tried to credit all those whose work I have consulted or adapted over the years, or who have inspired my own thinking. If I have missed anyone, it is by accident – the result of many elements of the interpretive approach being adapted constantly over time, and of my basing this book on course notes developed over a number of years. Please bring any omissions to my attention for what I hope will be the second edition.

Where I have used figures and tables from other publications, I have made every attempt to locate copyright holders to obtain permission. Any omissions brought to my attention will be remedied in future editions.

# Introduction

## Meeting the demands placed on the twenty-first century museum

Opening a heritage site or museum collection to the public used to be easy. Art galleries saw their primary roles as the collection, preservation and display of artworks, and the promotion of public appreciation of these works. Museums of archaeology, history, science, etc., saw their sites as educational institutions, with a responsibility to create knowledge through the development and research of collections, and then to disseminate that knowledge through the provision of formal scholarly displays.

Both types of institution believed that they did not ‘own’ their sites and collections, but held them in trust for future generations. As such, they viewed the unique nature of the assets for which they were responsible as a non-negotiable background, which conditioned the purpose of and approach to their presentation. Access was almost grudgingly provided to the public in return for a sense of reverence and gratitude, reflected in an authoritarian protection of the site – ‘temple’ architecture, cordoned routes, glass cases, security guards, ‘do not touch’ signs, etc.

However in recent decades, while protection of the site or collection has remained the first priority, at least in the eyes of the profession, there have been increasing pressures for change in the way the material is presented to the public. These pressures have come from a number of directions – from above (governing and funding bodies), from below (audiences) and from within the profession itself.

From ‘above’, there has been the gradual development of national, regional and local strategic goals for museums and heritage sites, and the relating of these directly to sites through conditions placed on public subsidy. This can be seen most clearly in the development of the roles of museums and heritage sites in:

- supporting lifelong learning and structured educational provision
- enhancing ‘access’, diversifying their audience base and reflecting the make-up of their communities
- meeting the needs and requirements of local communities
- generating income in their own right
- supporting local regeneration initiatives
- supporting economic and social regeneration
- the drive by governments to enhance the quality and value for money of public service provision.



A child engrossed in a colouring and cutting activity in the Leicester Museum's 'Discovery Gallery'. © Leicester City Museums

*From 'below', the growing demands of the 'traditional' white professional audience have been joined by those who have previously felt excluded from what museums and heritage sites have to offer:*

- The competition for use of leisure time has given the 'traditional' museum audience much greater choice. It will only visit museums if the experience obtained matches or exceeds that provided by other activities.
- The high quality requirements demanded by visitors. The traditional audience is increasingly experienced and educated. Visitors are no longer willing to be passive recipients of wisdom from on high, but want to participate, to question, to take part as equals, and to receive as high a standard of service as would be offered at any other type of leisure site.
- The increasing competition from alternative information sources that individuals can control for themselves – not least the Internet.
- The increasing demands from previously excluded or marginalised audiences for the right to representation and to a say in how a site or museum is managed and presented.

*From within the profession*, despite continuing and at times heated debates around the issue of ‘dumbing down’, it is possible to sense:

- an increasing recognition that the traditional audience is not ‘one’ but a plurality – a mass of separate audiences each seeking its own experiences and outcomes from what is basically the same product
- a commitment to meeting the needs and expectations of visitors and the recognition of an obligation to meet those needs by deploying the most appropriate approaches possible
- a growing vision of the potential partnership role for museums in association with local communities, reflecting their histories and perspectives
- a belief that heritage has a role in enhancing people’s lives and supporting community regeneration – to engage/involve *all* audiences/potential audiences with the available sites/collections/heritage – optimising the opportunities for visitors to achieve their full potential
- a belief that the work of museums can be used to broaden and retain support for conservation and retention of the heritage
- a continuing passion among museum professionals to share knowledge and enthusiasm for ‘their’ subject area.

Putting these elements together places very different demands on the twenty-first century museum. Rather than a repository and display facility for objects largely reflective of middle-class, western values worthily made available to the public, we see instead a more audience-centred role, reflected in Box 0.1.

The items in Box 0.1 reflect a huge transformation in attitudes toward the roles of museums in society. In seeking to champion such roles, this book states unashamedly that if museum or heritage site managers believe that everyone has a right of ‘access’ to our shared inheritance in museum collections, and that museums can make a profound difference to the lives of communities and of individuals, they should face up to the consequences and seek a practical reflection of these ideals. This is not to deny a belief in the continuing importance of collections, their conservation and research, and the documentation related to them. However, if the museum profession is to talk about purpose at the start of the twenty-first century, the focus must be on audiences and on the role of museums in society (see, for example, Smithsonian 1996, 2002c).

This book is not so much about the developing roles of museums within their communities but rather focuses on a central element of this – the concept of museums responding to audiences as partners in a joint enterprise. A key step along this route is for the museum to cease to be product-led and become audience-centred in approach. To be audience-centred means taking into account the personal context of the visitor and the holistic nature of the museum visit. Museums need to think of their role in motivating and supporting visitors as three interlinked tiers, defined in Box 0.2, of which only the third is directly about approaches to museum display. The exploration of these three elements, and of their links, provides the framework for this book.

Being audience-centred requires a commitment to gaining and constantly updating a real knowledge and understanding of visitors. Section 1 of the book explores

**Box 0.1 The twenty-first-century museum**

A museum is now expected to be:

- an object treasure-house significant to all local communities
- an agent for physical, economic, cultural and social regeneration
- accessible to all – intellectually, physically, socially, culturally, economically
- relevant to the whole of society, with the community involved in product development and delivery, and with a core purpose of improving people's lives
- a celebrant of cultural diversity
- a promoter of social cohesion and a bridger of social capital
- a promoter of social inclusion
- proactive in supporting neighbourhood and community renewal
- proactive in developing new audiences
- proactive in developing, working with and managing pan-agency projects
- a resource for structured educational use
- integral to the learning community
- a community meeting place
- a tourist attraction
- an income generator
- an exemplar of quality service provision and value for money.

**Box 0.2 The three-tier route to visitor engagement**

- 1 Provide the stimulus to visit in the first place – this should include site image, quality of marketing and PR, word-of-mouth recommendation by previous visitors, prior personal experiences, supporting learning agendas, reflecting leisure trends, etc.
- 2 Place visitors in the 'right frame of mind' on site so that they wish to engage with collections and exhibitions – this should include operational and service quality and a sense of welcome and belonging.
- 3 Provide the motivation and support to engage directly with the site and/or collection – this should include quality of interpretation, learning provision and displays.

what we know of museum audiences – the nature, needs, expectations and motivations of both 'traditional' museum visitors, and the broader audience of potential visitors – and what this should mean for the way museums develop. Museums need to talk to people on a regular basis and be flexible enough to respond to their needs. What motivated them to come in the first place? What are their expectations of the visit? What thoughts and experiences do they bring with them to the visit? What thoughts and memories do they take away with them? We must also spend time observing, tracking and listening to visitors to define what they actually do on site. Equally, museums must look at the barriers discouraging people from visiting and seek both to overcome these and to actively stimulate visits. Regular consultation



and evaluation is critical. The importance of this approach cannot be overestimated – it is a framework for continual improvement.

Section 2 examines the importance of the external image presented by museums and the quality of visitor services on site, in terms of placing visitors in the ‘right frame of mind’ to engage with collections. For visitors to have a quality experience, museums must promote a positive but accurate external image, provide a ‘sense of occasion’ on arrival, welcome them as equals, meet the highest possible standards of service and do their best to encourage audience motivation to become involved. From the moment of arrival, operational quality also means ensuring that belief in, commitment to and enthusiasm for the site and collections shine through.

Equally, through the visitors’ stay, museums must be able to respond to their expectations in a way that meets the increasingly high demands of audiences accustomed to quality service standards elsewhere and to insist that these are provided by museums. The concept of quality has always been fundamental to museums and galleries, in terms of site, collections, etc. Now the museum profession must appreciate that quality standards should also be applied to every aspect of public provision, from front-of-house operations to exhibitions and associated services. Nor is this a one-off activity. All of us must recognise that, over time, expectations will change – so pursuing the quality agenda is a dynamic concept. Aspects of this have been recognised for some time but, beyond a few enlightened museums, visitor services specialists are a rarity and there is little momentum to achieve, let alone further develop, quality standards. A key challenge is, therefore, to seek to outline an approach that responds to the quality agenda for museums in the twenty-first century and to provide a positive direction forward for museums and galleries to enable that agenda to be achieved.

Section 3 introduces the concept of the museum as a learning environment. This issue is currently at the top of the political agenda for museums across western society, and much has been written on the subject in recent years. The section does not attempt to repeat previous work, but instead focuses on key practical questions. If we accept the potential for museums as learning institutions, what do the relevant learning theories mean in terms of the physical way that collections are presented, and the ways in which we should support this presentation to meet the differing needs of users – effectively in terms of how we develop ‘learning environments’? The section looks briefly at provision for structured educational users, particularly schools, but concentrates on the non-structured learning experience of the independent visitor.

Finally Section 4, the largest in the book, attempts to bring together the conclusions reached in earlier chapters to build up a picture of the principles and planning processes involved in seeking to create the ‘engaging museum’, looking service-wide as well as at the master planning for individual sites and at concept development for individual exhibitions. In the past, exhibitions were the key means by which museums sought to communicate with their audiences. Now they are only one of a range of elements in a museum visit, although still the most important one. Also, where exhibition development was once the domain of the curator, it is now a team effort and where once the priority was scholarly display, the objective now is the production of audience-centred participative and engaging exhibitions, but ones still underpinned by academic rigour. A ‘one size fits all’ approach – the very basis of most



Exhibition previews at Manchester Art Gallery now attract a more diverse audience.  
© Manchester Art Gallery

past and current museum exhibitions – will not work in presenting collections to twenty-first century audiences. Museums must seek to provide both a palette of display approaches and a layering of content, to meet the needs of different audiences and support their engagement with collections.

Finally, a brief word on the structure of the book. The approach seeks to be progressive in the sense that its contents, framed around the three tiers defined in Box 0.2, are intended to build inexorably toward chapter 10 (and beyond). Having broken the book into four sections, I provide a brief introduction to each. I then provide a structure for each chapter, finishing with a brief discussion and a ‘case study’. I am not sure the latter is the correct term, but have failed to come up with a better one. What I seek to do in the case study is to highlight an issue relating to the chapter that provokes thought from a different angle. Some of these are straight-forward – for example, I have a straight site case study at the end of chapter 3. Others are tangential – for example, I use the case study at the end of chapter 1 to contrast the way tourism researchers interpret the quantitative data they gather with that of museum researchers studying the same audience segments.

# Section 1

## Museum audiences: their nature, needs and expectations

---

Instead of only placing our objects on pedestals, it's time we placed our visitors on pedestals as well.

McLean (1993: 5)

Once we recognise that the public face of our museums must be audience-centred rather than product-led, the central challenge for museums at the start of the twenty-first century becomes:

- to understand the nature, motivations, expectations and needs of existing audiences, and to build an enduring relationship with them (chapter 1)
- to develop and then retain new audiences (chapter 2).

The starting point in planning a strategy to meet these objectives is to find out about visitors and non-visitors. This section explores:

- available quantitative information on the nature and extent of existing and potential audiences
- qualitative material on visitor needs, motivations, perceptions and expectations as well as the visitor response to the whole experience
- the impact of current trends in leisure activities
- the identification of non-visitors, the barriers that prevent their use of museums and ways in which these barriers can be removed or reduced.

The objectives are both to underline the need for individual sites to gain a real understanding of their own actual and potential audiences, and of how more general leisure trends are influencing these, and also to show how essential it is that museums then use this understanding to underpin future policies as they strive to develop the 'engaging museum'.

# 1 'Traditional' museum audiences: a quantitative and qualitative analysis

Our mission is to educate. We cannot do that if we are not serving visitors. We cannot survive if we are not assessing and satisfying the needs of our constituents.

Hill (2001: 12)

## INTRODUCTION: THE RISE OF MUSEUM VISITOR STUDIES

---

The analysis of audiences and potential audiences for museums is usually defined as 'market research', although this term does not define the full range of participants researched (for example sponsors, corporate users, etc.). However, this type of activity represents only a part of the work now being carried out by museums as they seek to develop a fuller understanding of visitors, their motivations, needs and expectations, the way they explore and engage with exhibits, staff and each other, and what they gain from the experience. This much wider exploration now comes under the heading of 'visitor studies', still a relatively new activity in museums, although its origins date back over 80 years. A brief summary of the development of museum visitor studies can be found in Hein (1998) or Kelly (1998), and a fuller one in Loomis (1987). The visitor surveys carried out in the 1950s by David Abbey and Duncan Cameron, at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada, are generally acknowledged to be the first systematic visitor surveys undertaken in museums (Rubenstein and Loten 1996: 3). The substantial development of visitor studies first occurred in the USA in the 1960s, although it was not until 1988 that the First Annual Visitor Studies Conference was held in Jacksonville, Alabama. In 1989 the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) was established as a standing professional committee of the American Association of Museums, while the USA Visitor Studies Association was formally incorporated in 1992. Visitor studies first became established in the UK and Australia in the 1970s. Across the western world, rapid growth in museum visitor studies only occurred in the 1990s. This included the establishment of the Visitor Studies Association in Canada in 1991, the Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group (EVRSIG) of Museums Australia in 1995 and the Visitor Studies Group in the UK in 1998.

Thanks to a study commissioned by Museums Australia (Reussner 2003), we know most about the current state of visitor studies in Australian museums. This



Tracking visitors in the Uncovered Exhibition, Australian Museum, Sydney. © Lynda Kelly

revealed visitor satisfaction to be the subject area of broadest interest, followed by basic attendance and postcode/zipcode data and classic visitor socio-demographics. It also reflected the established range of data-gathering techniques, from comment cards through tracking and observation and questionnaires to discussion groups and in-depth interviews. The report showed how effective visitor research can be when applied to the improvement of the visitor experience (a subject previously explored, for example, by Loomis 1993). It also revealed the limitations of what is done at present and – most worryingly – the continuing failure of many institutions to act upon the findings of the research carried out. Audience research can be an irritant to those curators accustomed to developing the museum product as they see fit. It can also provoke resistance where it challenges prefigured beliefs and assumptions. However, if museums acknowledge that they should be audience-centred, a properly resourced programme of visitor studies should be an essential, systematic element of a museum's activities, with the museum director as a key advocate.

## AUDIENCE SEGMENTATION

No introduction to visitor studies can begin without a basic understanding of market segmentation. Audience appraisals and most visitor surveys provide basic quantitative data on audiences. As marketing tools, both use established market segmentation techniques to provide audience breakdowns. Classic market segmentation breaks down 'traditional' heritage audiences in terms of:

1 *Demographics*, i.e. age, gender, education, class/occupation. Family status is heavily used in heritage segmentation, as it can be such a major predictor of behaviour (dependant; pre-family; family at different stages; older marrieds and empty nesters). In the past, ethnic origin has been a rare factor in visitor surveys, but this is changing as museums seek to respond to the needs of local communities and broaden their audience base.

2 *Geography*, i.e. resident/local, day tripper, national/international tourist.

3 *Socio-economics* – although the UK government introduced a new National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC) in 2000, the JICNAR (National Press Joint Industry Committee on National Audiences and Readership) classification is still the most commonly used by heritage sites and museums in the UK because it enables comparisons to be made with previous surveys. The groups are classified as:

- A higher managerial, administrative or professional
- B middle managerial, administrative or professional
- C1 supervisory, clerical or managerial
- C2 skilled manual workers
- D semi- and unskilled manual workers
- E pensioners, the unemployed, casual or lowest grade workers.

4 *Structured educational use*, i.e. primary/elementary (to age around 11/12), secondary/high (aged around 11 to 16/18), student (college/university)

5 *Special interest*, i.e. subject specialist, self-directed learning, booked group, for example, a local history group. This can also be referred to as a part of *behaviouristic* segmentation, linking groups of people according to interest in or relationship with particular subjects/products.

6 *Psychographic segmentation* which relates to lifestyles, opinions, attitudes, etc. This is still infrequently used, although it is becoming more common to hear references to these terms as museums increasingly take leisure trends into account.

## MARKET SURVEYS

Market surveys, providing quantitative information on potential audiences, are examined first, largely because they provide essential baseline data on the nature of potential target audiences. This can allow museums both to prioritise interpretation toward the needs of defined audiences and, at a later stage, to evaluate their effectiveness in actually attracting the audiences they have set out to achieve.

Owing to the expense involved, a general market survey/assessment of audience potential (often called ‘audience appraisal’ in the UK) is normally only carried out as part of a feasibility study and grant application preliminary to the creation and marketing of a new or substantially revamped museum – and normally only defined in terms of actual numbers rather than other factors. Its functions are to assist in establishing the viability of the project and in drawing up the business plan, and to ensure that the proposed scheme can cater for the likely visitor numbers and types and operate within the likely available budget. Because of the links to market analyses and business plans, this sort of research also tends to concentrate on traditional audiences and to largely ignore under-represented groups which are unlikely to make an immediate impact on the perceived ‘success’ of a project, if this is measured largely in terms of visitor numbers.

### A basic market appraisal

Much of this sort of work tends to be carried out, often at considerable cost, by a leisure consultancy, which will define the likely market in terms of the potential audience, seen through the usual market segments (see audience segmentation above) and the quality of communications. Linked to the latter, the consultancy will break down the local resident and day trip market in terms of 30-minute, 30- to 60-minute and 60- to 90-minute drive-time.

The consultancy will attempt to assess the likely level of ‘audience penetration’ – i.e. what percentage of the defined potential audiences a site or museum could or should aim to attract – through an analysis of the proposed ‘product’ in terms of contents, identity, image, branding, price and the like, and the attractiveness of this package to the potential market. It will take into account:

- the scale of the audience for other museums and visitor attractions in the catchment area of the project
- the audience for similar museums and related sites
- the physical location of the project – nationally, regionally, locally; other features nearby which could encourage additional use; long-term development proposals for the area, etc.
- the location/place of the project within the attraction spectrum.

The end result should be defined visitor projections for the museum, usually for years one, three and five after opening. They will often quote a top, median and bottom

estimate, take proposed admission charges into account where relevant – and always add the proviso that the suggested figure(s) depend on the eventual contents and quality of the product itself, its marketing and its daily operation.

## Visitor projections and the business plan

---

Visitor projections are a crucial element in developing an ongoing business plan, particularly for a museum that is not in receipt of substantial revenue or endowment support. They will impact on both income estimates and expenditure.

Their influence on estimates of revenue income will include:

- an outside analysis of the suggested product, especially can it achieve the visitor targets sought?
- an assessment of visitor numbers, including the percentage of each target segment for the:
  - variation in numbers and nature through the year
  - estimated average entrance charge (projected from likely adult, concession, group and discounted ticket sales)
  - estimated shop spend per head
  - marketing targets to aim at
  - planned seasonal promotions.
- comment on suggested pricing levels, especially their likely impact on visitor levels
- comment on potential levels of secondary spend.

Their influence on forward planning for revenue expenditure will include comment on:

- staffing required at different times of the year to cater for projected visitor numbers
- opening periods/hours
- maintenance programme likely to be required
- marketing spend required
- timing and funding of events, temporary exhibitions, major renewals, etc., to attract and retain audiences.

## Can we believe visitor targets defined by market surveys?

---

In recent years, the UK has witnessed a series of high profile new museums and heritage-type attractions fail abysmally to achieve their visitor targets, the most potent symbol being the spectacular failure of the Millennium Dome in London to come near its targeted 12 million visitors. The visitor projections for the chief UK culprits – the Millennium Dome, the Royal Armouries in Leeds, the National Centre for Pop Music in Sheffield, the Earth Centre near Doncaster, the Cardiff Centre for the Visual Arts and the Welsh National Botanic Garden (and others currently 'at risk') must be



seen in context, however. They formed a key element in the development of business plans that were designed to show that the sites would be financially self-sustaining in the medium and long term. Clearly those wanting to see their projects happen would be their own worst enemies here, in terms of a willingness to believe high visitor targets were both achievable and sustainable. Of course, it is not always bad news. At the Eden Project in Cornwall, visitor numbers have vastly exceeded original projections. Does this all mean visitor projections are a nonsense? Because a market survey approach has been used in the wrong way it does not make the process itself untenable. Far from it – ask any big retailer how it selects sites for stores, or check how to research locations for any roadside café chain. It is a very professional business.

So why do visitor projections for museums and heritage sites seem so fickle? There is always the suspicion that the political impetus behind these projects encourages a rose-tinted view, or at least discourages a more conservative analysis. While this can never be proven, what is certain is that market surveys carried out by national consultancies rarely take specific local circumstances adequately into account – and these will normally *reduce* the likely audience. For example:

- The precise physical location can have a huge impact – ask any retailer about this.
- The use of travel patterns for day-trippers means there will not be an equal spread from across the 60-minute drive time area. Much depends on a tradition of travelling in a certain direction.
- Unless the museum is in an established tourist destination it is unlikely to attract many independent tourists or coach tours.
- The contents of a site may put off a member of the crucial family audience and so hugely reduce your trade – for example, in the UK, the Royal Armouries specialises in weapons, not always attractive to women or as a destination to which parents wish to bring children.
- The approach the museum is proposing to take to the presentation may itself be unsatisfactory as a visitor draw, or discourage use by repeat visitors.

Each site is different – each must look at its own situation. This will vary from a need to develop a strong base within its local community to its ability to sustain high tourist figures from both the domestic and inbound trade.

### How much does a market survey approach tell us about heritage audiences now and in the future?

This sort of market research, as currently carried out, is a consummate example of the use of quantitative data only. In effect the consultancy will say, here are the available market segments of the museum-going public and, using business models, here are the percentages you should receive. They pay insufficient attention to qualitative issues. They also have problems with an over-simplification of the basic segmentation process itself.

Equally, such research provides little information on the motivational structure underlying the demand for heritage visits. There are two widely accepted views of how

demand arises or is formulated. A 'consumer' view will explore mass demand arising within specific segments of the market, based on demographics or lifestyle/attitude influences and, from this, attempt to generalise demand so it can be satisfied through simple formulae of design and delivery. This is the classic market research approach. The alternative is a view that a visit to a museum or gallery is motivated by an essentially unshareable, individual, personal or social group/family interest. From this it follows that visiting groups are market segments in their own right, selecting their personal choice of site to visit and, once there, of which aspects to view and interpreting the resulting experience in their own individual ways. If this view is taken, it follows that the basic market research approach will not function – one needs to take a much more sophisticated approach to the varying needs and motivations of social and family groups within market segments.

The increasing attention being given to this latter view appears to parallel a similar shift in consumer demand toward greater freedom of choice, customisation and individual service. It is hard not to agree that segmentation approaches are at best a vague approximation because museum visitors are motivated principally by personal interest and this does not always coincide with other more convenient indicators such as age, gender, family status or lifestyle. Within at least the marketing of museums and heritage attractions, there is a real tension discernible between mass segmentation and the needs of individual visitors. Yet the museum or heritage product (the site/collection) is perceived as the opportunity to experience something out of the ordinary, something entertaining, sensorially stimulating, 'magical'. Should this make museums easier to tailor to individual needs?

### A sustainable audience?

Experience suggests that maximising audiences is the wrong approach to take; yet this is the approach on which most visitor projections are based. In terms of traditional audiences, what really matters is not year-one figures for a new or largely redisplayed museum, but those achieved in years three and beyond when a project is no longer new or a tourist destination has lost its initial attraction. Most museums and heritage sites are not located in areas that are major tourist destinations. They depend on local residents, day-trippers, schools and visitors staying with friends and relatives (VFRs). For those which largely depend on admission charges for their revenue income there is a real risk, if they seek to maximise their audience, that everyone who wants to come will have done so within three to five years of opening – but the site will have no money to make the major changes needed to bring people back. Having been closely involved in it, I can refer to one such example (see Figure 1.1).

The swift decline in audience attendance at The Tales of Robin Hood exhibition, Nottingham, UK, was not due to the poor quality of the exhibition – the winner of many awards – but to the lack of a renewable audience and of the funding required to redevelop the product.

The current approach to market surveys therefore needs a careful re-examination, not only in taking both local influences and family/social group needs into account but also in the way targets are arrived at. It is far better to plan for a realistic, attainable and

**Figure 1.1** Product life cycle: visitors to The Tales of Robin Hood, Nottingham

sustainable audience – by which I mean a stable annual attendance. In financial terms, this will allow museum managers to work to a budget known to be achievable and to cut marketing spend, but it will also mean no museum or heritage site should rely on visitor income covering more than 50 per cent of revenue costs (for museums, with substantial collections to support, I would say preferably no more than 30 per cent). It should also enable museums to enhance the quality of the visitor experience by designing and staffing to cater for specific targets.

## QUANTITATIVE VISITOR SURVEYS

Visitor surveys are much more commonplace than full-scale market survey exercises – they are in fact the most common form of visitor study. While most visitor projections are there to set overall targets (from traditional audiences), surveys will reveal what percentage of those audiences is already coming. This, in turn, can enable museums to define which groups are missing or under-represented. As in visitor projections, the information recorded is there largely to meet the needs of the marketing office but surveys can also be used to form the basis for a structured approach to audience development. Many visitor surveys will also seek to look at the impact of the museum visit, exploring visitor satisfaction, learning and other potential elements that can be measured to reflect museum or government policies. Visitor satisfaction surveys are discussed below in chapter 4, and the evaluation of visitor learning in chapter 5.

Few museum visitor surveys are published and most are site-specific rather than relating to more general audience research. However, the quantitative information they contain can give us key insights into the nature of museum audiences and into visitor trends – who the visitors are (in terms of market segmentation analysis), where they are coming from, who they are coming with, how they are getting to the site and maybe how often they are coming. Hood (1993, 1996) provides an effective summary of USA surveys. Davies (1994) remains the classic quantitative ‘survey of surveys’ for museums in the UK, while MORI (2001) includes analyses of life-stage

profiles, regional differences, social class and ethnicity and the attitudes of school-children as well as limited comment on the impact of changing leisure trends.

### What the surveys reveal: who visits museums?

Davies suggests most age ranges are represented relatively equally in UK museum audiences, but with smaller percentages for 16- to 24-year-olds and those over 55 years old. The more recent MORI survey suggests increasing problems in attracting the adult audience under 35 years. Rubenstein and Loten (1996) place most adult museum visitors in Canada within the 35 to 44 age range. At the Australian Museum, Sydney, 28 per cent of visitors are within the 35 to 49 age range, 25 per cent are over 50 and 22 per cent are aged between 25 and 34 (AMARC 2003). People tend to visit in groups or families, as a social outing, rather than on their own, although more people go on their own to art galleries. At the Australian Museum, Sydney, 45 to 55 per cent of visitors come in family groups, 15 per cent come with a partner, 15 per cent come alone and around 15 per cent come in organised school parties.

Potentially, up to 33 per cent of museum visitors are under 16, making it highly likely that 60+ per cent of visitors include children in the group – either as families or on organised school trips. Rubenstein and Loten state that, for Canadian museums, family groups are the key audience, particularly baby boomers with their children. Percentages will, however, vary from site to site and exhibition to exhibition, depending on the approach taken to the presentation, marketing and operation of the site, and specific exhibitions and programmes.

The two genders are relatively equally represented at museums, with perhaps a slight majority of females, although this is dependent on the nature of the site – in Canada, for example, art gallery audiences are 60 per cent female and 40 per cent male (Rubenstein and Loten 1996). Much less information is available on the ethnic origin of visitors, although what there is suggests strongly that non-white visitors are under-represented. The MORI survey (2001) suggested just under 30 per cent of white and Asian people in the UK visited museums and galleries in the 12 months up to November 1999, but only 10 per cent of black residents.

For Canada, Rubenstein and Loten suggest most visitors are either local residents or tourists. In the UK, the research suggests most visitors prefer to travel no more than one hour to a museum, which is crucial in defining catchment areas. This can vary depending on the scale and popularity of the site and whether it is on a green-field location with easy access and free parking or in a traffic-packed city centre, but it rarely takes more than 1.5 hours. A market survey of museums in the East Midlands carried out in 1994–5 (one of the largest of its type carried out in the UK) showed that 83 per cent of visitors travelled less than one hour, with 60 per cent travelling less than half an hour (East Midlands Museums Service 1996). These are the classic local resident population and 'day-trippers', generally domestic residents, who make up the core market for most heritage sites and museums, except for those in some of the major tourist destinations, including London. Most museum visitors in the UK, except in central London, travel by car. In general, they do not wish to travel



Conducting a focus group with older audiences, Bathurst, New South Wales. © Lynda Kelly

too far given they have only one day or less for their leisure activity. From the limited research available, local people represent the bulk of repeat visitors, reflecting an unwillingness to travel much more than 30 minutes to revisit a site. Some day trips can require pre-planning and booking but the majority do not, which means they can be a spontaneous decision. The weather can, not surprisingly, be a real influence on choice.

For sites outside the major tourist destinations, by far the most substantial tourist audience at UK sites is the VFR and the accompaniment of VFRs also accounts for a substantial proportion of repeat visits by local residents – people want to, or feel obliged to, take visitors out and preferably to places they have been to and liked. The VFR market is notoriously difficult to measure as it is mostly domestic, comes in its own transport and does not stay in commercial accommodation – so there is very little data on its scale. The general view, however, is that it is increasing as families and friends are separated by work and other reasons and more people have cars and housing that can accommodate visitors comfortably. One perhaps surprising factor seems to be the importance of students to this market, as they study away from home, make new friends and visit each other, and are visited by family and friends.

However, the most striking evidence from visitor surveys, revealed by any analysis of adult museum visitors, is that the largest group and the most over-represented in comparison to their percentage within the general population, consists of the better educated, more affluent, white professional classes (even more extreme for art galleries than for museums). The average educational profile among visitors at the Canadian

Museum of Civilisation shows 48 per cent with some university education or higher, 22 per cent with pre-university college, 22 per cent with high school and only 8 per cent with elementary school (Rabinovitch 2003). Rubenstein and Loten (1996) reinforce this for Canada as a whole, stating that most adult visitors are professionals with post-secondary education. Visitor studies at the Australian Museum, Sydney, suggest 50 per cent of their audience have a university education or above (AMARC 2003). Hood (1993) summarised the traditional USA audience as 'in the upper education, upper occupation and upper income groups . . . This social class factor applies across the spectrum of museums – from zoos, science-technology centres and children's museums to historical sites, botanical gardens and art museums' (Hood 1993 quoted in Hein 1998: 115–16).

Why is museum visiting such a professional class pursuit? Lack of access to private transport is often given as a key reason for lack of use by lower socio-economic groups, particularly as many heritage sites are in a rural location. But visitor surveys show that, on the whole, there is no significant difference in the social class profile between rural and urban sites, where public transport is more readily available (Light and Prentice 1994: 92). High admission charges are also given as a key cause, but work by Prentice (1989) and others seems to show that manual workers were not being deterred at the gates of heritage sites by high admission charges – instead they were not arriving at the sites in the first instance. As Been *et al.* (2002) suggest, increasing the admission fee will only have a limited effect, more so for museums that are major tourist destinations rather than dependent on local visitors:

A main reason for the limited price elasticity of visiting museums is the small share of entrance fees in the total costs of a visit: about 17 percent (Bailey *et al.* 1998). The other 83 percent consist of travelling expenses, food, drinks and in some cases even accommodation costs. The weight of these costs increases along with the distance to the museum. Therefore foreign tourists are hardly influenced by the level of the entrance fee. The research of Johnson (2000) confirms this thesis.

Been *et al.* (2002: 3)

Free admission was reintroduced to UK national museums in December 2001. This has resulted in a surge in their visitor numbers, which would seem to contradict Prentice. However, it will be interesting to see a socio-economic breakdown of these new audiences – early anecdotal evidence suggests they are 'more of the same' rather than reflecting previously under-represented groups.

A central issue to consider is whether the make-up of the museum audience is limited not by constraints but rather by choice. To what extent do the professional classes see their use of at least an important part of their leisure time as comprising goal-oriented activities satisfying perceived needs, and does this go some way to explaining their disproportionate use of museums and heritage sites? Are we seeing their motivations for leisure activity deriving from learning? There is now substantial evidence that an important motive for visiting museums really is a prior interest in the past and, as a consequence, the desire for discovery, learning and understanding about the past (e.g. Thomas 1989: 86). Research suggests that the extent to which

different social groups require learning from their leisure time varies considerably. Patmore (1983) noted that those with more skilled and responsible occupations, and with a longer period in education, tend to lead a more varied and active leisure life. This group is also more likely to see leisure time as something to be used constructively. As Hood put it:

they are attracted to the kinds of experiences museums offer and they find those offerings and activities satisfying . . . These folk emphasise three factors in their leisure life: opportunities to learn, the challenge of new experiences, and doing something worthwhile for themselves.

Hood (1993) quoted in Hein (1998: 116)

Thomas (1989: 90) noted that professional and managerial workers were more likely to visit monuments to be informed, whereas manual workers were more likely to visit for relaxation and entertainment. This subject will be returned to in chapter 5.

Professional class museum visiting may also be based on past experiences. As Light and Prentice (1994: 98) put it, those activities which an individual has previously experienced as rewarding are more likely to be repeated, and so behavioural consistency is maintained. Important influences on this process will include the activities with which an individual has been socialised – and here the family is a key agent. Is professional class heritage visiting self-perpetuating, passed on from one generation to the next? Production or supply of heritage is similarly, and traditionally, in the hands of the professional classes, who make up the bulk of museum curators. So, white professional-class producers define, present and interpret museum collections, and heritage in general, for white professional-class consumers. The presentation of heritage resources inevitably reflects the values and philosophies of their producers. Museums will have to work very hard to break this cycle.

## When do people visit?

It is vital to consider not only how many visitors a museum will receive and who they are, but also when they will come and how long they are likely to stay. Visitor throughput is a crucial issue for the business plan, for the physical layout, and for the provision of activities, etc., that a museum is proposing, as well as for the quality of the visitor experience. The figures given in Table 1.1 are a summary based on audience analyses I have been involved in, and from my experience of a range of sites. The figures are only a guide – it is vital to produce site-specific ones. The ones produced here may attribute too high a percentage to August, but they provide a useful starting point for comparison with actual sites.

As the table shows, there is wide seasonal variation in visitor numbers and, in the UK at least, attendance is normally linked closely to school holidays. While Easter Monday is likely to be the busiest day, the peak month is normally August, with 17–20 per cent of the annual total. The worst months are November and December, where only 2–3 per cent of the annual total is not uncommon, reflecting the poor weather in the UK and an annual engagement in the ritual of Christmas shopping.

**Table 1.1** The seasonal nature of museum visiting in the UK

<i>Month</i>	<i>% visitors</i>	<i>Example Year 1 visitors</i>	<i>Example Year 3 visitors</i>
January	3.1	3,100	4,650
February	3.4	3,400	5,100
March	7.9	7,900	11,850
April	9.1	9,100	13,650
May	11.9	11,900	17,850
June	9.0	9,000	13,500
July	13.6	13,600	20,400
August	17.5	17,500	26,250
September	8.6	8,600	12,900
October	7.5	7,500	11,250
November	5.9	5,900	8,850
December	2.5	2,500	3,750
	100.0	100,000	150,000

Note: March and April figures will vary, depending on the location of Easter. May reflects UK school half-term. June and, particularly, July contain school activity day outings.

January can be equally bad, reflecting the penury to which people are reduced by Christmas excesses.

Clearly these figures will vary from country to country. Research at the Australian Museum, Sydney, suggests their busiest time is during the winter school holidays in July, followed by the latter half of January. This may be a reflection of a different sort of summer weather to that in the UK when it is so hot that people perhaps prefer the beach to a museum visit.

In business plan terms, this extreme seasonality means that, for the many UK museums and heritage sites that charge admission, income streams are concentrated into the busiest weeks in the summer, at Easter and bank holiday weekends. This makes it difficult for many of these sites to provide year-round employment and ensures that most museums live on a perpetual knife-edge of uncertainty:

Only 28 per cent of attractions hit maximum capacity levels, and that occurs only a few days a year (13 days of 248 days open). Most operate far below capacity most of the time. Visitors are used to visiting attractions 'on demand', with pre-booking being rare.

English Tourism Council (2000a: 13)

Seasonality also severely affects planning for site-carrying capacity, but is not alone in this. Visitor habits go beyond varying levels of seasonal use to the time of day when people like to come, reflected in the 'design day' analysis in Table 1.2 overleaf.

The 'peak hour' reflects the tendency of UK users to visit city centre museums