

Ivory tower or welcoming neighbor? Engaging our local communities

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Abstract

The Yale Peabody Museum is situated in the economically and ethnically diverse urban environment of New Haven. For over ten years the museum has run extremely popular cultural festivals that attract a diverse audience of thousands, but we discovered that attendees rarely came from the city itself. Clearly, having high-quality programming was not enough to attract our local community. To investigate this issue the museum launched a year-long research study to address the following questions: What is the perception that residents have of the museum and what are the barriers to their engagement with the museum? How can we serve visitors from our neighborhood? How does being part of Yale University affect people's relationship with the museum? Our results were comparable to other studies by urban institutions but there were some differences that are of particular interest to university museums. For example, we discovered that negative opinions about the university were a significant barrier. There was also confusion as to our target audience, and a perception that our programs would not be of interest to "regular" people. University museums need to make considerable efforts if they hope to attract and serve non traditional museum goers – particularly changes in how they communicate and partner with the community. New initiatives at the Peabody include programming for local teenagers, diversity training for frontline staff, new outreach programs, and targeted marketing plans.

"Sustainable diversity entails mutuality between the institution's decision makers and community leaders; ongoing relationships with current and potential audience members ... Sustainable diversity is not: relying solely on outreach work with underserved audiences and offering a heritage month event once a year ..."

Eric Jolly, Director, Science Museum of Minnesota, 2002

An urban museum

The Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History is situated in the economically and ethnically diverse urban environment of the small city of New Haven. Yale University is the major employer in the city with over 11,000 employees and is the city's largest real estate taxpayer. The Peabody, like many university museums, is one of the most visible (and visited) parts of Yale and serving audiences outside the university is a fundamental part of the Museum's mission. However visitor surveys have shown that our current audience is not representative of the local population and, in common with many other museums, the Peabody Museum has a significant challenge in engaging all of the New Haven community.

Research has consistently demonstrated that while all people are potential museum visitors the probability of visiting a museum either on a school trip or as a leisure-time activity varies greatly among different groups. Museum visitors are still more likely to be white, middle class and well educated. Significant variables that account for under-utilization of museums by certain segments of the population include socio-economic factors, such as education, income; institutional factors, such as real or perceived institutional bias; and cultural factors, such as the lack of a museum-going tradition in many communities (FALK 1993; JOHNSON & GREEN 1997; JOLLY 2002, AUST & VINE 2007). In particular, studies have found that the single best predictor of museum visiting behavior is education (MCCARTHY & JINNETT 2001). The Peabody visitor demographics are a typical illustration of these issues: 65% of our visitors have a college degree compared to 29% of the New Haven population;

16% and 8% of our visitors are African American and Hispanic respectively compared to 39% and 23% of the New Haven population.

In-depth studies of visitors and non-visitors give some clues as to how to reach new audiences. Researchers have found that a crucial factor in the enjoyment of a visit is feeling at ease and welcome in the surroundings (OSTROWER 2005). This finding is particularly important for visitors who do not regularly visit museums and has a significant effect on whether they would recommend a visit to their friends (JOLLY 2002; OSTROWER 2005). Perhaps surprisingly, going on school trips does not necessarily encourage museum visiting behavior later in life, while going with your family does (McCARTHY & Jinnett 2001; SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION 2007). This makes initiatives to encourage communities without a strong tradition of museum-going tradition, through explicit and culturally appropriate means, even more critical to reaching future generations.

Over the last ten years or so there has been steady improvement in diversifying the Peabody's visitors. In 1990 94% of the museum's visitors were Caucasian/White whereas in 2004 it was 67%. The Peabody, like many museums, has developed a number of programs specifically targeted at diverse populations, which is the likely cause for this, as they have been highly successful. For example, the Museum's annual Martin Luther King Jr. Festival of Environmental Justice attracts around 5,000 people over two days, over half of whom are people of color. However, like many efforts to diversify museum audiences through adaptation or development of existing offerings, such as exhibition and public programs, there is only a temporary shift in audience composition (see SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION 2001). More recently such initiatives (for example, Black History month), although important in raising awareness, are increasingly considered tokenistic and even patronizing (JOLLY 2002). Another initiative the Peabody began many years ago was to give all New Haven students that visit with their schools free family passes so they can return to the Museum without paying admission. However take-up of that opportunity was extremely low – clearly free admission was not the answer as has been discovered by several practitioners (JOLLY 2002).

Engaging our communities

In 2004 the Museum began an audience research project *Engaging Our Communities* working with the evaluation firm Randi Korn & Associates. The goal of the project was to find out how to develop the Peabody's relationship with New Haven. We had a number of questions: What is the perception non museum goers have of the Museum and what are the barriers to their engagement with the Museum? How can we attract visitors from our local community and encourage repeat visits? And how does being part of Yale University affect people's relationship with the Museum?

The specific research objectives were:

- Understand New Haven community residents' perceptions & attitudes about the Museum.
- Determine New Haven community residents' emotional and cognitive barriers to visiting the Museum regularly.
- Determine New Haven community residents' leisure habits.
- Determine New Haven community residents' ideal museum experiences.

There were two primary research methods: 4 focus groups of 20 residents were held downtown in the public library and a project officer interviewed 25 community leaders. Participants in the groups either "never" visited museums (42%) or did so "infrequently" (40%). The evaluators specifically sought to include African American (68%) and Hispanic (24%) participants. Only 22 percent were college graduates.

Project results

Focus group participants were frank about what they saw as the major issues surrounding their engagement with the Peabody. First there were general factors that affected their views of visiting any museum, which included the amount of leisure time they had to spend, the likelihood that they would not feel welcome if they did, and the fact that they did not consider museum visiting as an option for their free time:

“I wanted to say [one thing] about another reason why you don’t see a lot of African Americans or Hispanics at museums – its because a lot of parents don’t have the time. You don’t have that extra time to go to a museum. You barely have time to properly cook dinner and get them ready for the school the next day ... I remember doing a lot of sacrificing just so [my daughter] would be well rounded. But I had to know that my daughter was going to enjoy the place I was taking her and that she’d get a lot out of it. I had to know in advance that it was worth our time.”

“Maybe you haven’t been to a museum before so you don’t [have] the right manners. Since there are no guided tours or anything you are left [asking] ‘What do I do? I don’t know how to act, where do I go next? Is there anybody to show me?’”

“First and foremost it has to be a place that I would feel comfortable taking ... my grandchildren”

“I feel like one of the reasons that African Americans don’t go to museums [is] because of a lot of us haven’t been exposed to it ... If I hadn’t gone with my school I don’t think I would have [gone to a museum]. My parents, I don’t think they’ve been to a museum either ...”

Second, there were five specific issues that emerged about participants’ views of the Peabody, and the likelihood that they would visit:

1. Participants believed the Museum had no real connection with the community, expressed negative feelings about the University and were skeptical about whether the Museum was really committed to being part of the community:

“Yale needs to get up and come out here. Start knocking on doors, meeting the neighbors and shaking hands ... They need to say ‘Hey let’s share this stuff – come to the Museum’.”

“All my children are grown now, [but] when they were young we used to go to the Peabody Museum but there wasn’t a sense of consistency. They went because ... of something to do with school. The teacher gave them a flyer ... but after that was over there wasn’t a consistent ... connection to the Museum. The Museum is sitting there but it’s set aside ... from the community.”

2. Participants felt the Museum’s content did not connect with the community and that the dinosaurs and other animals (that were perceived as the main displays) did not connect with them personally:

“These big bones [have] absolutely nothing to do with me ... you need to show me how they connect with me. Why is it here? Why is it important?”

“As a Hispanic, my kids have grown up here, they were born here, and they’re very Americanized but I do want them to grow up knowing more about South America. They wouldn’t have to do away with what they have - the dinosaurs. They just need to include people ... like say this fossil came from South America, so you can make some sort of correlation between the two places – between people and bones.”

3. Participants felt that the Museum did not adequately communicate with the community and were unaware of the Museum’s local marketing efforts:

“Every couple of months send out a flyer ... regardless of whether it’s African Drumming or whatever. Start inviting them to all the events. Then people will not feel [like] you just wanted them there for MLK day and that’s it.”

“I think you need to advertise the Museum ...”

“[Advertise in] grocery stores, Spanish grocery stores, and mom and pop stores. Beauty salons. Churches. The places where regular people go.”

4. Participants felt the Museum’s target audience was not clear. The subject matter of the displays – such as dinosaurs – suggested it was for children but the lack of interactive displays indicated to them it was not.

“I like the Peabody Museum. But you’re not going to go there every Saturday ... I’m not sure the Peabody is really a place for kids. ... [kids] need hands-on interactive stuff ... they don’t want to go there and just look.”

“It’s a Museum that children can’t touch ... but when you are taking children that is not a good thing – they have to be welcomed.”

“You have to be very mature to understand the Peabody, you have to have background history to have any idea what the exhibits are about.”

5. Participants felt the Museum experiences offered were uninteresting and static. Most often this was a recollection of a childhood visit that was remembered as a negative experience:

“I know they’re not going to get rid of that big fossil ... but if they could liven it up with lights or something ...”

“My first experience going to the Peabody Museum was boring. I was little, but I didn’t want to go back again. My suggestions would be entertainment ... maybe even a little video for the kids ... they should put fireworks in the parking lot next to the Museum ... the Jazz festival on the green is really fun – the Museum should do something like that.”

Project conclusions

The Peabody carries out visitor surveys on a regular basis. Almost all find that most visitors enjoy their experience and are very positive about the Museum. This finding is completely different to the comments of the focus group participants (non museum goers who had not visited the Museum or not visited for many decades). These differences seem to be primarily attributable to three reasons: museum visiting patterns; past experiences at the Peabody; and attitudes towards Yale itself. Non-visitors had specific expectations for their free time – many emphasized the importance of the entertainment, multi-sensory and social experiences that they thought the Museum would not provide. Non-visitors felt they had ‘bad’ experiences in the past, particularly on school field trips, and this affected their interest in visiting the Museum decades later. Finally, non-visitors had a negative attitude towards Yale University that added to the perception that the Museum was elitist, and acted as a barrier to visiting.

To address these issues the Museum needs to make significant changes in how it communicates and partners with the community and in how programs are delivered. Staff identified three ways to begin this process:

- Promote the Museum more effectively to New Haven by reaching out to the community.
- Modifying the setting in which people experience the Museum by being more welcoming to the community.
- Adapting Museum offerings to make them more attractive to the community.

Reaching out to the community

The Museum began *Peabody On the Road* to provide programs offsite in the greater New Haven area. This outreach program works within existing community events and networks, which demonstrates the Museum's commitment to those neighborhoods, adds authenticity to the Museum's programs, and promotes acceptability to non-traditional museum audiences. Volunteers take a group of objects to a variety of community events from large festivals (such as the church-run GospelFest) to school science fairs and local libraries, to provide hands-on demonstrations and activities. Since the summer of 2007 it has reached several thousand people. In addition to talking with attendees about the objects they also give out free admission passes. This enables passes to come with an explicit invitation rather than anonymously in a child's backpack, and has resulted in a much greater use of them.

A new after school program for New Haven teens, *Evolutions*, is developing ambassadors into the community. The students, who are in the Museum several times a week, are encouraged to bring family and friends to the Museum. Their enthusiasm for the program, and the Museum (many treat it like a second home) is a fantastic way to improve word-of-mouth about the Peabody. Finally, targeted marketing, for example advertising in local Spanish language publications, has been increased.

Welcoming the community

All visitors need to feel welcome in the Museum to have an enjoyable experience. However this is even more important for people who are not regular museum goers (JOLLY 2002; OSTROWER 2005). The Museum has increased support for the front-of-house staff, who are the only staff that most visitors see, with diversity and other customer service training. Employing members of the community, and increasing the number of docents and volunteers from New Haven is an ongoing priority.

Recently the Museum has extended its *Evolutions* program to provide a career ladder program¹ for older teens who often need to work to save for college. This program puts students on the floor with themed 'carts' in different galleries to talk with visitors when there are no special events taking place. The focus has been on those galleries with limited interactivity (for example, the diorama halls) and, so far, the feedback from visitors has been extremely positive.

Adapting museum offerings

To build an ongoing relationship with non traditional audiences a museum needs to permanently modify its offerings (within its overall mission) to meet the needs of these groups (SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION 2001; JOLLY 2002). The project offered a number of suggestions for how the Museum could do this: carefully consider exhibition strategies; increase interactivity of school tours; and craft educational programming that is entertaining, social and involves hands-on activities. For example, children and families want to visit museums that are highly interactive. While it is not appropriate for all galleries, there are a number of places where interactive displays can supplement existing permanent galleries (e.g. adding a computer kiosk that explains information about the iconic Zallinger mural in the dinosaur hall); be incorporated into a new permanent gallery; and be a focal point of temporary exhibitions. In addition, the Museum brings in hands-on interactive exhibits as part of its traveling exhibition program. When planning new exhibits the Museum also tries to answer the question "Why is this important to me?". For example, in the recently renovated Hall of Minerals, Earth and Space, there is a strong emphasis on Connecticut geology and the impact of minerals on society and human wellbeing. *Engaging Our Communities* also underlined the importance of a child's experience on a school field trip and the fact that their experience on such a trip profoundly affected their perception of

¹ Based on the long-running program at the New York Hall of Science.

the Museum for a very long time. The Museum has always carried out extensive content training for docents but has now added more information on engaging children in active learning, and using hands-on specimens in classes.

A challenge for university museums

University museums have a number of specific opportunities and challenges when reaching out to non traditional audiences, particularly (as is so often the case) when those audiences are part of the Museum's neighborhood. On the positive side universities usually have a diverse population with people who can speak for and relate to relevant communities. Secondly university-wide resources are available, such as staff training opportunities. The Museum can also collaborate with other departments and student groups, which also want to engage local communities, thereby gaining access to new resources and more 'bang for the buck'.

However there are some specific areas that are especially challenging for university museums seeking to broaden their audience. Perhaps the most difficult, and one that is a challenge for all museums, is that efforts to diversify audiences can create tensions with existing audiences (JOHNSON & GREEN 1997; SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION 2004). For example, making galleries more interactive can disturb visitors who come to a museum for a more contemplative experience. This is especially problematic for museums that also serve an academic audience where exhibitions are used regularly in classes that dictate the objects on display. Such content makes it difficult for a wider audience, and this can add to the common perception that university museums are not for people outside the university. Fortunately there are ways to address these potential conflicts, particularly through creative programs, that can help content be broadly accessible.

Perhaps the most difficult (and fundamental) question for all museums is how to attract a more diverse audience that is truly representative of the population. For universities the 'town-gown' relationship significantly adds to that challenge. While there are few riots like the ones that rocked 14th century Oxford, there are always tensions and expectations that need to be managed and can establish real (or perceived) barriers to engagement of the broader community. Reaching out to new audiences is a long-term process that requires a commitment from the top down and willingness to embrace fundamental organizational change. University museums need to make considerable efforts if they hope to attract and serve non traditional museum goers.

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