

Effective Adult-Oriented Activities in the Museum

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Introduction

Adult-oriented activities are critical to a museum's success. For most museums, adult learners make up a large portion of visitation and are a significant market share. Effective adult-oriented activities in museums share a number of characteristics. For the adult participants, they are relevant, meet community and personal needs, generate meaning and learning, and offer a transformative experience. For the museum, activities are measurable, meet the museum's goals and mandate, generate direct or indirect revenue and bring in new and repeat visitors.

Challenging what is "Known"

In order to be effective, adult-oriented activities must offer a transformative experience. This may be as big as changing world views or as small as learning a new skill. **In short, we must change hearts, minds and lives.** While attainable, a number of forces work against us. The mind is programmed with numerous cognitive biases to reject new information. We become uncomfortable when exploring contrary evidence (cognitive dissonance) and further entrench ourselves in our existing opinions.

How can program designers overcome this to create transformation? Experiential, affective (emotional) and inquiry-based activities tend to have more success than narrative or direct instruction methods. A general rule of thumb is: don't tell when you can show, don't show when you can do. Participants who feel they have a strong self-identity and are respected are also more likely to feel secure enough to accept

change. We know when a learner enters our museum, a shared authority exists. Museums that respect the knowledge, identity and experiences of their visitors do better at engaging them in transformation. You may need to layer activities ahead of your main activity to build confidence and respect and to develop your learner community.

Who Are Adults?

There is no such thing as a general adult audience. A clearly defined, well understood target community is the key to an effective activity. Adults are one of the most diverse groups you can work with: from seniors to digital natives, encompassing all possible demographics, needs, and expectations. There is a temptation for adult designers to design for what they like, but we must remember we are not all alike. Use your museum's mission, vision, mandate, strategic plan and statistics to identify existing communities and use community asset mapping and regional demographics to find potential new communities. Accessing existing communities is about playing to strengths and repeat visitation while fostering new communities is about growing visitation, community development, and often social responsibility.

Traditionally, audiences are defined by demographics but more recent scholarship suggests grouping targets by their motivations. There are several models you can explore such as Falk's typologies or Discover Canada's Explorer Quotient. Most designers today use both demographics and motivations to understand target audiences.

Accessibility and Inclusivity

How well will your activity serve all of the target community? Consider not just physical and mobility needs, but also ethnic and racialized diversity, neurodiversity, socioeconomic status, religious needs, gender identity and sexuality, level of education, immigration status and family structure, just to name a few. Explore ways in which you can make your activities safe and enjoyable for all and eliminate barriers to participation. Involving target communities in the design process will help you to discover barriers and opportunities you might not have otherwise been aware of.

Once you define your target, you'll need to

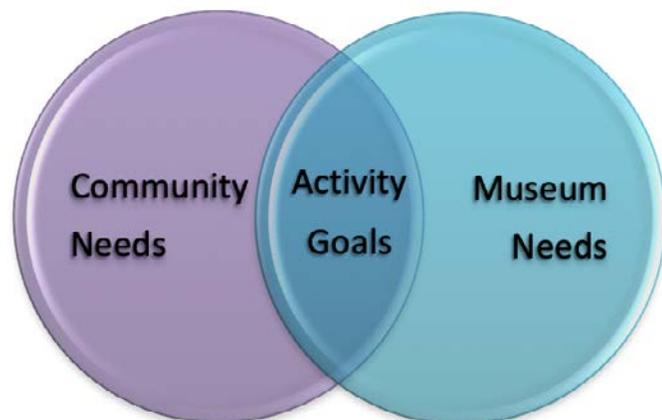
Community-Led Design

further refine your understanding in your own region. Visit a place where your target community is comfortable and willing to talk. Take off your museum hat, integrate and listen openly. Consider this an opportunity to know them with no agenda. What are their experiences? What do they love? What problems are they facing? Only after you've spent time listening, look for patterns and trends and find ways in which your museum can help while staying true to mandate.

This model is about fitting the museum to the community not the community to the museum.

Set Goals

In order to determine if your activity has been effective, you'll need to define what this means for you in the form of clear and measurable goals. Take time in crafting your goals to ensure



they are what is really wanted by your museum and by your community. Use where your needs as a museum overlap with your communities' needs as a guide for what goals to include.

You'll likely want to include business goals (visitation, revenue, staff achievement etc.), learning or knowledge based goals, skills based goals including things like historical thinking or critical thinking, satisfaction goals, quality and performance goals and community directed goals.

Examples of Poor Goals:

- This activity will give learners a better understating of internment.
- This activity will increase visitor satisfaction by 20%

Examples of a Measurable & Specific Goal:

- After this activity, learners will be able to identify groups targeted for internment in Canada during WWII.
- This activity will receive an average score of 7 on a 1-10 overall learner satisfaction scale.

Assess, Assess and Keep Assessing

Ongoing assessment of our goals serves a number of functions: it improves staff and institutional capacity for better activity design, it continues to engage our community, it improves the quality of activities and communicates to stakeholders how effectively the museum meets their priorities. We know that we don't work to improve what we don't report and we don't report what we don't measure. **It is critical that you measure each of your activity's goals.**

Design activities your target community can complete to show you if they've met the goal or not. In some cases you will be able to observe easily if the goal was met (eg. counting visitation) but in other cases you will need a quiz, a game, a participatory activity or a feedback form to get the information you need. Designing good assessment is its own skill and takes time and thought. Museum assessment is particularly tricky because no one wants to go to a museum and take a test so you will need to be more creative about how you are going to assess your goals. You will also need to design how you will record your findings (eg. chart, tick boxes, excel, online form, in your museum's CMS) and how you will report your results (eg. internally, externally, web, blog, staff meeting report).

If you plan to turn your activity into a longer term program that will be run multiple times, you may wish to assess it before fully launching it as well. Piloting a program also gives you an opportunity to make sure assessment tools and logistics are working well. Many museums will do a pilot using their staff/volunteers and/or a pilot offered free to a community group.

Instructional Methods/ Techniques

You are finally ready for the fun part: deciding what activities you will use to meet your goals. Instructional techniques range from lectures to knitting circles to online games. Your goals and your community will lead you to which are best. Strategies that tend to be engaging for adult learners include activities that respect them and their lived and learned experiences, are learner-centred, peer directed, and inquiry-based. Adults want to understand the relevance of what they're learning and they tend not to be satisfied with learning facts, but instead are motivated to understand the context behind things. Adult learners appreciate holistic design that includes the intellectual, physical, emotional and social. Include participation and interactivity. Adults may enjoy challenging and difficult activities just as much as light and fun ones. Adults must feel the

activity has value to them. Teachers, librarians, science centres, Disney, cruise ships, community centres, parks and other museums are some possible sources for inspiration.

Then and Now

Some strategies are tried and true in the museum context. They are comfortable, familiar and expected. Newer strategies have emerged to engage new learners and to change expectations of what museums can be. There is nothing wrong with any of these strategies for the right target and the right goals but below is an illustrative chart to give you an idea of how museums are changing their activities.

Examples of Traditional Strategies

- Guided tour
- Curator or Guest Lectures
- Book Readings/Clubs

Examples of Alternative Strategies

- Panel Discussions
- Museum Hack, Augmented Reality
- Curator for a Day Programs
- Sleepovers, Classes
- Simulations, Games

Designing Activities

- Step 1 – Define a specific target community
- Step 2 – Learn about and from your target community
- Step 3 – Look for a way your museum can meet needs
- Step 4 – Set goals
- Step 5 – Design assessment
- Step 6 – Design activities
- Step 7 – Review for accessibility and inclusivity
- Step 8 – Coordinate logistics
- Step 9 – Pilot (optional)
- Step 10 – Assess

Conclusion

Creating effective adult-oriented activities in museums is both an art and a science. The process of playing with design, taking risks, and even failure is part of creating more effective activities. **Enjoy the journey.**

Further Reading

Cognitive Bias

<https://www.businessinsider.com/cognitive-biases-2015-10>

Shared Authority

Frisch, Michael. *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990.

Community Asset Mapping

http://communitycrewhub.com/assests/Asset_Mapping_Workbook.pdf

Community-Led Design

https://www.librariesincommunities.ca/resources/Community-Led_Libraries_Toolkit.pdf

Falk's Typologies

Falk, John H. *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press Inc., 2009.

<http://www.museumsontario.ca/newsarticle/publications/imuseum/pdf/RTAudienceResearch-FalkVisitorMotivationHandout.pdf>

Explorer Quotient

<https://www.destinationcanada.com/sites/default/files/archive/206-Explorer%20Quotient%20Toolkit/toolsexplorerquotienttoolkitjul2018en.pdf>

Museum Dashboards and Transparently Communicating Results

<http://www.freshandnew.org/2008/03/museum-transparency-and-the-ima-dashboard-an-interview-with-rob-stein/>

Interaction and Adults

<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2012/01/designing-interactives-for-adults-put.html>

Inquiry-Based Learning

<https://www.prodigygame.com/blog/inquiry-based-learning-definition-benefits-strategies/>

Adult Museum Program Design

Sachatello-Sawyer, B. Fellenz, R. et al. *Adult museum programs: Designing Meaningful Experiences*. Toronto, ON: Alta Mira Press, 2002.

Historical Thinking

<http://historicalthinking.ca/>

Critical Thinking

<https://tc2.ca/>

How Different Types of Knowledge are Assessed

http://www.cala.fsu.edu/modules/assessing_knowledge/

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