

Fairfield Museum and History Center
Fairfield, Connecticut

A Summary Report of its Audience Studies, 2008-09

Summary

In September 2007, the Fairfield Historical Society in Fairfield, Connecticut began a new chapter in its 105 year history when it reorganized itself as the Fairfield Museum and History Center in a new 13,000 square-foot museum, library and community education facility on Fairfield's historic Town Green. With a re-defined community-oriented mission and improved facility, the Fairfield Museum began a multi-faceted audience study in spring 2008 to better understand its constituencies and to direct future program development. The study was made possible through the generous support of the Connecticut Humanities Council. By the study's conclusion, the Fairfield Museum had gained useful information on its audience and practical experience in audience research methodology. The Fairfield Museum would like to share its experience in order to assist other museums wishing to conduct similar studies. This paper summarizes the museum's methods, shares results, and analyzes the strengths and weaknesses of the study as a whole.

Methodology

To help direct and frame the larger study, the Fairfield Museum began by surveying its members. Museum staff believed members would be more likely to participate and would provide constructive criticism that would help inform and direct subsequent phases of the study. In spring 2008, the museum hired undergraduate marketing students from Sacred Heart University who, with the guidance of university faculty and museum staff, designed a telephone survey that explored why the members joined the museum, their views of the museum's changes, and reactions to potential program directions. Approximately 10% of the museum's membership was surveyed.

In summer 2008, an intern from the Cooperstown Graduate Program in History Museum Studies (CGP) led twenty-four one-on-one interviews with leaders of local organizations, key museum supporters, and community representatives. The interviews included specific questions regarding the museum's transition from an historical society to the Fairfield Museum, its re-defined mission, the impact of the museum's programs, and new program ideas. That same summer, museum staff held four focus groups with community members. With the assistance of a volunteer marketing research executive, the CGP intern and museum staff led two adult focus groups: one with people familiar with the museum and another with people who had no previous interaction with the organization. The museum hosted a third focus group with senior citizens at the local senior center and the final group included teenagers and young adults. Museum staff

selected participants for the focus group of individuals familiar with the museum. Senior center staff helped gather participants for the senior citizens focus group by handing out flyers promoting the study. The museum recruited participants for the other groups through advertisements posted at local businesses and notices in the museum's e-mail newsletter. Teens and young adults recruited for their focus group were recruited through advertisements at a local juice bar. During the focus groups, participants discussed their reactions to the museum's new facility and refined mission, the effectiveness of advertising methods, and programming ideas.

The Fairfield Museum also participated in two broader survey projects in the summer of 2008: the Connecticut Cultural Consumers Study (conducted by Reach Advisors in partnership with the Connecticut Humanities Council and Connecticut Landmarks) and the American Association for State and Local History's (AASLH) Performance Management Project. In the Connecticut Cultural Consumers Study, in which twenty-four Connecticut cultural institutions participated, the Fairfield Museum sent a link to an on-line survey to more than 2,300 subscribers to the museum's email newsletter. This study focused on participants' attitudes toward cultural events and organizations and was designed to provide important regional context and demographic information.

The AASLH Performance Management Project was a detailed visitor intercept survey that gathered visitors' opinions on the museum and its exhibitions at the conclusion of their visit. In addition to the survey's standard questions about the respondent's visit, the museum added three custom questions that probed its role as a community center, potential community events, and the effectiveness of its advertising. The CGP intern synthesized the results of all five aspects of the study and summarized the results in a report that is informing the museum's ongoing strategic planning process.

Results

Overall, the study's results demonstrated that the Fairfield Museum has an excellent product for its audience. People had positive reactions to the new facility, applauded the museum's efforts to become a community center and perceived the museum as friendly, open, and welcoming. The results also indicated that the museum's audience was pleased with the organization's expanded programming schedule. Respondents wanted the museum to continue increasing its number of programs by reaching out to underserved demographic groups, such as teenagers and lower income students. Throughout the study, the museum collected ideas for new programs that tested well among participants.

Data from the study also made a strong case for increasing the museum's marketing efforts. While the museum's investment in marketing was in line and often exceeded that of similarly-sized organizations and had dramatically improved its community reputation, participants indicated that they were often unaware of the museum's advertised programs. The study

identified the primary resources through which the museum's audience learned about cultural events, indicating that newspapers, e-mail newsletters, and recommendations from family and friends were the most effective means of advertising.

Methodology Strengths and Weaknesses

Overall, the museum's methodology was effective and efficient, and the study yielded very important data that continues to guide strategic planning and audience-focused programming. The study collected information from a broad regional demographic and the results from each method generally corroborated and complemented each other. There were, however, a few demographic areas where the research failed to reach. While the museum tried to gather information from both supporters and those unfamiliar with the museum, the majority of the information collected was from people who were familiar with the museum and willing to participate in the study. Gauging the interests of people not previously involved in the museum and understanding their motives for not being involved proved difficult.

In addition, the study did not fully include certain groups of people who visit the museum regularly, such as library researchers and teachers. While efforts were made to include those groups in one or more of the study instruments, those efforts were unsuccessful. Some of the projects' questions also overlapped, resulting in repetitive data. As the Fairfield Museum continues its audience research, it will attempt to address these research gaps with a better understanding of each method's strengths and weaknesses. Each part of the Fairfield Museum's process is evaluated here to assist other museums in conducting an audience study.

Surveys

Survey length was an important factor in their successful administration. Short, on-line questions, like those in the Connecticut Cultural Consumers Study, were less intimidating to participants. Longer surveys yielded more information, but often frustrated respondents. For example, some visitors completing the AASLH survey, which had 44 questions, stopped midway through the survey. In addition, surveys that participants completed at their leisure, like the Connecticut Cultural Consumers Study, were more convenient. In these types of surveys, however, participants based their answers on their memory of the museum, rather than their immediate reaction to it. Surveys that visitors completed at the conclusion of their museum visit, like the AASLH survey, were more successful in gathering participants' immediate opinion of the museum, but were often administered at an inconvenient time for the visitor, i.e., when they were leaving the museum.

Survey distribution was labor intensive and required dedicated and trained staff. College students conducted the initial membership telephone survey. However, since the students had no connection to the museum, they were often less devoted to collecting high-quality results and

probing for more useful data. The CGP intern administered the AASLH survey early in the surveying period; but, once she left, museum staff found it hard to balance administering the survey with the demands of other job duties.

One-on-One Interviews

While careful thought should be given to who should participate in interviews as opposed to who should participate in focus groups, interviews did allow the museum to collect useful information from busy people who could not commit to a date for a focus group. However, coordinating schedules for the interviews was more time-consuming than anticipated. Interviews were successful in teasing out specific information that might not otherwise come up in a group setting. For example, interviews with leaders of local cultural organizations focused on specific areas of potential collaboration. Given that the responses of many of those leaders reflected their own organizational interests, however, museum staff had to consider their biases while evaluating the data generated.

Focus Groups

The focus groups yielded important information for the museum. The format fostered discussion and creative brainstorming about program ideas among participants. Focus group participants unfamiliar with the museum helped museum staff understand how they could meet the wants and needs of new audiences. Participants familiar with the museum used their knowledge of the museum's background to contribute creative ideas. To gather this information, however, the museum underwent considerable preparation. Gathering focus group participants was challenging and time-consuming. Museum staff selected participants for the focus group of those familiar with the museum. Senior center staff helped recruit participants and holding the focus group at the senior center increased participation. On the other hand, many participants unfamiliar with the museum cancelled at the last minute or failed to attend. The museum held the teen focus group at a location where this demographic congregates, but was unable to gather as many participants as it would have liked.

Before each focus group, museum staff prepared a discussion guide, which kept the conversation on track. Ground rules for the focus groups were important. At the beginning of each gathering, museum staff reminded participants to speak one at a time and not to criticize other's ideas so that each thought could be recorded. Two staff members led each focus group; one staffer guided the discussion while the other took notes. The museum videotaped each focus group in order to review the discussions at a later date.

Recommendations

As a result of its experience with audience research and evaluation, the Fairfield Museum has recommendations for museums undertaking this process. First, all board members, staff, and

volunteers must understand the importance and the process of an audience study before it begins. While only a few staff members may conduct the research, all those involved with the museum should know in advance how the study and its results will impact the museum. Conducting a multi-phased audience study is a time-consuming affair that often disrupts normal museum operations. Staff must assess how much time they can devote to the research process and consider hiring outside support. Advanced preparation is crucial. During the planning stage, staff should clarify research questions, specify demographic groups they want to reach, and carefully consider each method's strengths and weaknesses. Finally, the museum should commit to making audience research an ongoing part of museum operations. An audience study will provide useful information, but it will also provoke more questions that need to be answered through subsequent study and research.

Conclusion

As the Fairfield Museum and History Center plans for the next chapter in its history, it can do so with an abundance of valuable data gathered through its audience study. The museum plans to continue audience research as it moves forward, but with a better understanding of the methodology and with an effort to reach community segments that did not fully participate in the earlier study. The Fairfield Museum believes that thoroughly understanding audience wants and needs is an essential ingredient in planning for the future. Any changes a museum undergoes should be customer driven and based on properly conducted audience research and evaluation.