

Fairfield Museum and History Center
Fairfield, Connecticut

Audience Study Key Findings, 2008-09

As the Fairfield Museum and History Center transformed from a local Historical Society to a more regional, community-focused modern museum, its audience expanded and became more sophisticated in its interests. The community's reaction to the organization's new image was overwhelmingly positive and a broader audience with a wider demographic makeup emerged. What follows are the key findings of a seventeen month audience research project designed to dig deeper to understand this new audience and identify the needs of distinct audience segments.

Museum as a Community Center:

Respondents indicated that they highly value their community and its history, and that they perceive the Fairfield Museum and its programs as an important part of their community. They praised the museum's new building for its appearance and recognized it as a place that brings the community together. The museum's role is simultaneously seen as a center for history, education, tourist destination and a community center. Free events the museum holds annually, such as a Memorial Day picnic and a Fall Festival, go a long way to fulfilling this role.

Drivers of a Positive Museum Experience

Key drivers of a positive experience at the Fairfield Museum were staff and impact. A museum with staff and volunteers described as available, helpful, friendly and knowledgeable will go a long way to a positive visitor experience. Given this information, museums should reward their staffs for excellence. Impact refers to whether a visit to the museum had a positive impression on the visitor. Exhibitions and programs should be designed to make a large impact on a visitor's experience so they feel the visit was a worthwhile experience. Additionally, the inclusion of interactive components to exhibitions and programs were determined to expand that experience.

Exhibitions

Research found that frequent exhibit rotation was important to the museum's audience. The Fairfield Museum has provided eleven small exhibitions since its opening two years ago, with a major regional history exhibition on display throughout that time. Allocating the necessary resources to meet the need for larger changing exhibitions is one item being addressed in the museum's current strategic planning process.

Expanded Programming

Early on in the research, study participants indicated a strong desire for the museum to further expand its programming to include specific demographic audiences not already served, including senior citizens and teenagers. The museum took action by creating popular teen-focused programs such as scavenger hunts and a junior curators program, and for seniors, the museum developed "grandparent days" marketed directly to the community's senior center. The expansion of public programming into these markets has

improved the community's perception of the museum. While the museum has only just begun to implement these programs, by hosting a variety of programs that reach out to a multitude of audiences, the public perceives the museum as more welcoming and open than it has been in the past, and perhaps equally important, interested in making the effort to reach those groups.

Collaborations

Discussions with leaders of area organizations led to many ideas of how the museum could join forces with other groups. Exhibitions curated by other institutions and joint programming with local groups and clubs would expand the museum's reach into the audiences that these organizations attract. Acting on this information, the museum developed a student-directed exhibition with a local private primary school, collaborated programming with area churches and clubs, and plans to host an exhibition curated by the CT Audubon Society in the spring of 2010.

Marketing

Efforts to change the organization's image are noticed and received positively. Looking at promotion tactics, the study showed that the methods of promotion on which people most rely for information on local cultural events were primarily newspaper ads and articles, e-mail newsletters and word of mouth recommendations. The surprising discovery that the most of the museum's audience received its information through traditional newspaper media, has led the museum to dedicate a majority of its marketing resources to developing press releases and press invitations, along with email newsletters, website management and local e-calendar promotion. Research found that the museum should expand its advertising efforts.

What's Next

Armed with audience research data, the museum can make more informed decisions for its future allocation of resources. As the museum's Board of Directors now moves through a strategic planning process, it will seek to build on the museum's successes by supporting efforts that are at the intersection of audience values and positive museum performance. Focusing on things like staff excellence, exhibitions and programs that involve the community more directly in the process of history and making the museum a welcoming space for the community to come together to better understand the present, as well as the past, is all part of what the research says makes this museum's audience fulfilled. Given the response to the museum's expanded programming, the museum's schedule must continue to add fresh, new programs to garner new audiences. Finally, as the museum moves forward it should increase its promotion and advertising; letting people know about the wonderful things the museum has to offer.

The conclusion of this research study should not be the end of audience research for the museum. This audience research project proved the benefits of understanding an audience. Now is the time for the museum to dig deeper into the research findings and have its audience continually monitor and evaluate the museum's performance. Small questionnaires soliciting feedback and asking specific questions about audience needs and desires will only further the museum's success.