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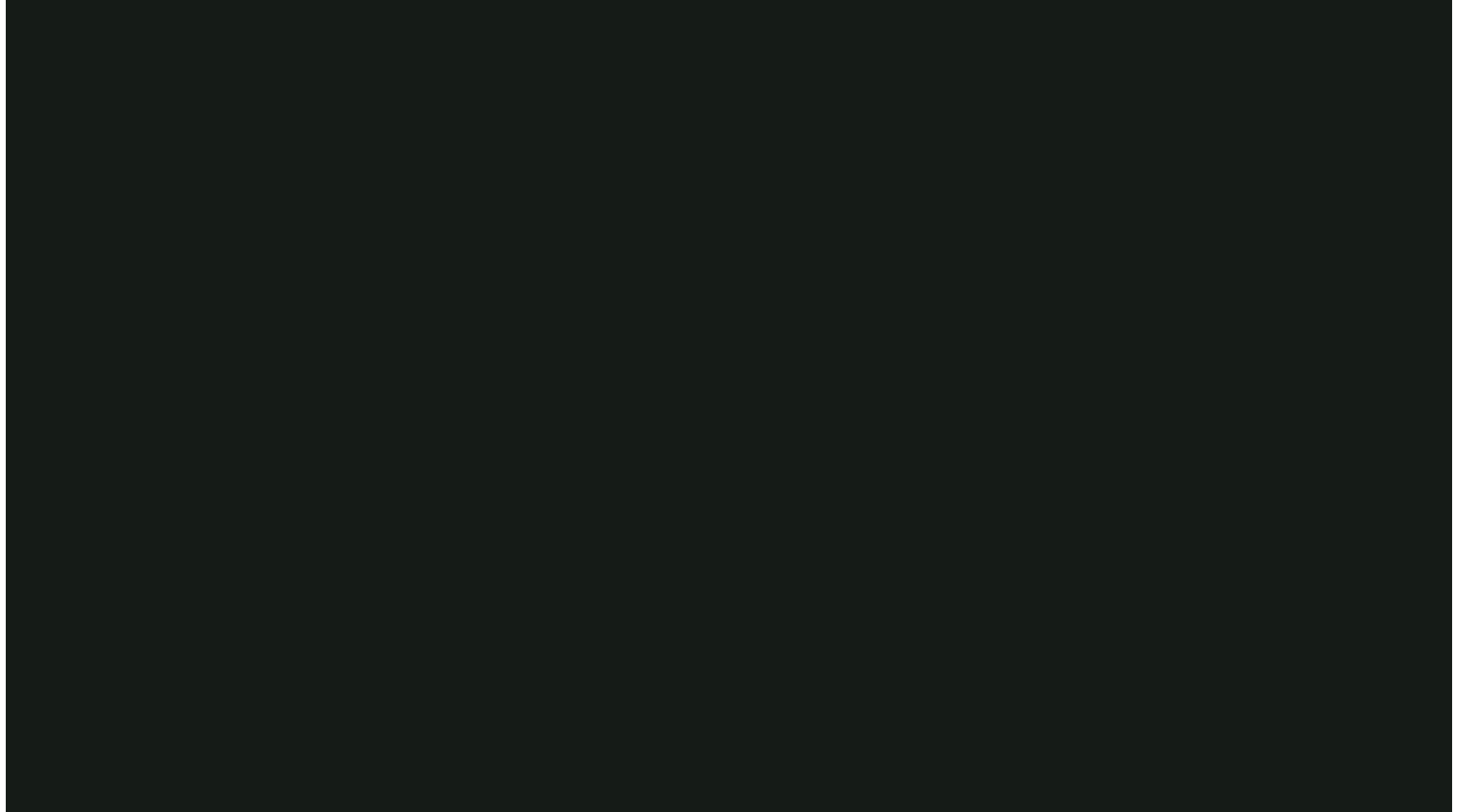


What Makes a Museum Successful?

DAN WEISS AUGUST 03, 2016

Museums must remain relevant to a contemporary audience while upholding a mission to preserve human culture for posterity. Daniel Weiss '85, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, explains the challenges and opportunities that come with managing a cultural legacy.

◆ LEADERSHIP ◆ SOCIAL ENTERPRISE ◆ COMPETITION AND STRATEGY



Recently, a number of museums noticed a surge of visitors, particularly of young adults—the demographic most prized by institutions anxious to replace their aging audiences. Were young people being pulled in by blockbuster exhibits or perhaps by evening events offering a chance to mingle surrounded by artwork? Well, no. The museums eventually determined that the new arrivals were Pokémon Go players in search of virtual characters hidden in the galleries.

Kathy Sharpless of the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum was philosophical about the influx, telling Bloomberg that the Boston museum is “delighted to be included in the craze.” She added a caveat: “We hope that once inside the museum, visitors will focus on the beauty rather than the game. If the game helps them get here and then they want to relax and enjoy, everyone wins.”

Should an art museum’s goal be to simply get people through the door? What makes a museum successful?

At one time, the size and importance of the collection was the key consideration. Exhibiting the work was something of an afterthought. But conserving and building a collection is expensive and inextricably requires public support. While hiding away much of the art might be cost

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effective, it would defeat a key function—documenting and inspiring the ongoing endeavors of humanity.

Today, public engagement is a core function of museums, and a trio of metrics are imperfect surrogates for impact: the number of museum members, the marketability of exhibits, and overall attendance. But how to measure and use those numbers remains a matter of debate. Maxwell Anderson, the former director of several museums around the country, calls for a more considered approach in a 2004 essay for the Getty Leadership Institute. “Over the last generation,” he writes, “art museums have shifted their focus away from collection-building and toward various kinds of attention to the public—without balancing these two imperatives and without a consensus on what constitutes best practices in the latter.”

On top of membership, exhibits, and attendance, some institutions have layered other performance indicators, including energy usage per square foot, the percentage of the collection on display, or the ratio of adult to child admissions, according to John Jacobsen’s in *Measuring Museum Impact and Performance: Theory and Practice*. While each might have some use, the data can serve to obscure the essential concern, Jacobsen writes: “The field still lacks an accepted way to measure impact.”

In part the challenge comes from not having a single bottom line as a measure of success. But that shouldn’t change, according to economists Bruno Frey and Stephan Meier, who write in a [2003 paper that “it is crucial to go beyond the market” to understand the economics of museums](#). “Museums create social values, for which they are not compensated in monetary terms,” they write. Think of what the Louvre does for the prestige of Paris or the Guggenheim Bilbao does for Bilbao. Iconic museums enrich the lives of locals and draw tourists. They offer educational opportunities through classes, guided tours, and the chance to simply wander and absorb the art. An additional yield, Frey and Meier assert, is the “bequest value” that comes from protecting the thread between past and future generations.

However “priceless” art museums may seem, the realities of running such an institution require putting dollar values on every aspect of collecting, protecting, and exhibiting the artistic history of humanity. Limited budgets create tensions around priorities and short-term versus long-term obligations. Daniel Weiss ’85, president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, discussed with *Yale Insights* the challenges of effectively navigating a museum’s multiple, intersecting missions.

To Weiss, the Met’s collection remains the source of its worth and its top priority. “The Met is the repository of the cultural legacy of our civilization. We have 5,000 years’ worth of art; our first job is to protect it,” Weiss said. “Unlike many commercial entities, universities and art museums are perpetual institutions. We’re here for the duration. We have to change with the times but not so much so that we lose our way.”

The museum itself is nearly 150 years old, and has its own traditions, deeply entwined with the life of New York City, its donor class, and the art world. “Any plan for change or strategic vision has to be predicated on deep understanding of the DNA of the organization,” he said. “That’s a discussion that requires lots of voices and a lot of reflection because it isn’t as obvious as it may sound.”

In launching new initiatives and programs, and in its use of new technologies, the Met must find a balance between reaching new audiences and honoring its mission. “If no one is interested in our programs, then they are not meaningful programs,” he said. “On the other hand, if all we’re doing is pandering to the public, then we’re not really respecting our mission.”

But no new programs, formats, or technologies are off the table as long as the Met continues to protect, preserve, and collect the best art while making it available to scholars and the public, he said. “The rest of it is negotiable.”



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