Strangers, Guests or Clients?

Visitor Experiences in Museums

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**Abstract:**

The paper, *Strangers, Guests or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums*, defines what strangers, guests, and clients mean to the museum. Strangers represent the museum’s focus on the collection and not the public’s opinion. Guests represent the focus on the public’s opinion and their learning experience and education opportunities in the sense of a mission. Clients represent the museum’s adoption of new social trends and forces “museums to adopt attitudes and behaviors in which the museum is accountable to the visitor” (Doering ii). The paper also focuses on four categories that describe types of experiences and what visitors find the most satisfying during their visit to museums. The categories are, social experiences, object experiences, cognitive experiences, and introspective experiences. Social experiences centers on more than one person, is the experience of all visitors together. Object experiences “give prominence to the artifact or the’ ‘real thing” (Doering ii). Cognitive experiences focus on how the visitor interprets the experience. Introspective experiences emphasize the visitor’s reflections which are triggered by some object or setting in the museum. The paper concludes with a discussion on the museum settings that either support or detract from the visitor’s experience.

*Strangers, Guests or Clients? Visitor Experiences in Museums* is a review on the many visitor experiences at museums and other education institutions that are categorized as libraries and college campuses. The article focuses on the transition of museums from a scholarly role to excepting the public into its community and then finding more ways of presenting a full experience to its visitors. During the late 18th century and the early 19th century museums were meant to keep collections of artifacts that held significant historical importance used as a center for scholarly learning. Museum’s “resident scholars took part in scholarly discussion, research and teaching” (Doering 2). During this time visitors were strangers, they were visiting to obtain a higher education on the material provided by the museum, not to be entertained as museums work today. Eventually, schools that were supported by public funds, opened their collection to the open as they were developing into social institutions. Unfortunately, during this time, museums still saw themselves as having an educational role and strayed away from opening their collections to the public.

Within 25 years, all museums focused on presenting their collections to the public and then eventually focused on entertaining its clients and seeing how to advance everyone’s experience throughout the museum. The author wrote this article to inform the reader on the transition of museums and the fact that they happened. Most people believe that museums have always been what they are today, a collection of history that is imposed on the public to teach the public about history so that it is not destined to repeat itself. However, museums have not always gone out of their way to entertain their visitors, for some time, museums have only been used for scholarly learning and inaccessible to the public. It was only recently when museums have decided to open their collections to the public for education and entertainment purposes.

In 1992 there was an estimate count of 8,200 independent museums that were running in the United States. For most of these museums, they had a mission of education for their visitors. “An education mission implies a relationship with visitors akin to that of’ ‘hosts’ ‘and’ ‘guests,’ ‘in which museums are not only more accommodating to visitors but also take some responsibility for what happens to them” (Doering 3). Museums found that the expectations of the visitors are more sophisticated, complex, a challenging then they originally thought. These museums decided to draw attention to their collections through advertisement, outreach programs, and affordable membership programs. Museums also built restaurants, shops, and theaters inside their building to be added as amenities to their collection and draw more attention to their collections. In the late 19th century, museums focused most of their time on ways to entertain the public.

There was much research done on what visitors wanted from their experiences at museums. Museums found that visitors expected four different experiences during their visit to museums. Visitors expected social experiences, object experiences, cognitive experiences, and introspective experiences. The social experiences were spending time with friends, family, and other people, as well as seeing their children learning new things. For the object experiences, visitors wanted to be moved by beauty and see rare/uncommon/valuable things. For the cognitive experiences, people wanted to enrich their understanding, gain information or knowledge, and reflecting on the meaning of what they were looking at. Finally, for the introspective experiences, people wanted to feel a spiritual connection, imagine other times or places, think about what it would be like to own such things, recalling their travels/childhood experiences/other memories, and feeling a sense of belonging. People wanted to experience different things during their visit, and the museums did their job to implement these experiences into their collection.

Museums have come a long way since the late 18th century and early 19th century. They started out as collections for scholarly research and were closed to the public. Eventually they started to open their collections to the public and focus their attention on entertaining the public and providing them with multiple experiences. Today museums provide amazing experiences and have become more enjoyable to spend a whole day there. Even though museums are better than before there is always room for improvement, by providing new experiences through new technology, such as augmented reality and virtual reality. Museums are getting better and the world is changing for the better.