

FACTS FIRST: AN INFORMATION BASED APPROACH TO MAKING MEMBERSHIP MATTER

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Reprinted from *The Planetarian*, September 1993 (Vol. 22, No. 3)

The leaves are beginning to turn and the weather's cooler. It's the time of year when people renew their search for indoor activity and entertainment. Couple this fortunate change in the weather with the start of the academic year and you've got heightened interest in scientific and cultural resources. Autumn is a smart time to take a new, critical look at your institution's membership program. This program offers you important revenue opportunities particularly when you structure and manage it to respond to current and prospective visitors' preferences, interests and visiting patterns. It's not as mysterious as it sounds. In this article, four strategies for evaluating and revising planetarium membership programs are briefly introduced. Using these techniques, you'll gain a better understanding of your visitors and potential members, and that's the kind of information you need to create a productive, proactive membership program.

Strategy #1: Develop an Accurate, Objective Baseline Portrait of Your Planetarium's Visitors.

Develop an onsite guest survey, to be completed after visitors attend one of your programs. The survey should include questions about demographics (age, education level, income range, number of people in family, ZIP code, etc.). In addition, the survey should include questions about the guest's visiting patterns, including how often s/he attends your programs and those offered by your competitors. Think broadly when defining competitors, because this includes more than just the museum down the street. Naturally, you'll want this baseline survey to include questions about the visitors' perceptions of the program you presented and you'll want to know about barriers and motivations for this specific visit.

The easiest approach to gathering these baseline facts is to develop a self administered survey, which can be placed at the entrance/exit of your facility and in other prominent places. The data you gather will then help you segment your visitor audience and learn more about age and demographic specific

preferences. This is critical as you build and strengthen your membership program. Keep your questionnaire short with no more than 15-20 questions, one page printed both sides. Give all visitors equal chance to complete the form.

Strategy #2: In Depth Focus Group Studies.

Once you know which demographic groups are your best prospects, it's time to dig deeper. The technique most useful is a focus group, in which 8-12 participants, representing your target visitor audiences, spend 1/2 to 2 hours answering open-ended questions asked by a trained professional market researcher so the information and feedback you receive is as objective and valuable as possible. Questions should cover programming, admission prices, reactions to presentations, level of enjoyment/satisfaction, perceptions of quality, interest in and expectations of potential membership, and intent to return for future visits. Focus groups can give you the kind of in depth information you simply can't gather from a written survey. In some cases, focus groups even include "clips" from planetarium programs or tours of the facility to gather visitors' perceptions of these important elements.

Focus group data is extremely useful in planning and promoting specific programs because it gives you insight into your target audience's preferences and perceptions. Focus group data can also help you identify new groups of potential members. It might even be helpful to include people who have never been to your planetarium, to assess their needs and interest levels. Most important, focus group information can help you structure membership programs that respond to people's needs, wants and expectations.

Strategy #3: Use visitor data in your membership program.

It's not enough to "have" information. The key is to put the data to work. For example if your baseline study indicates that you have a larger percentage of students as visitors, you may want to create new and/or additional student categories for your membership program. Focus groups will help you identify what kinds of programs students will pay for and attend. Similarly, if senior citizen attendance is lower and your focus groups indicate interest from this group, you may want to revamp your seniors membership program, create special presentations for seniors, or develop other programs that will help you boost membership and revenues from this important market segment. Guest information is the key because it's the guideline for membership. In your community, family membership may be an important revenue generator. In another market, special programs for children under school age and their mothers may be a viable strategy. The whole concept is to know your market. Market research is the best, most accurate and cost-effective way to gain this kind of specialized insight.

Strategy #4: Make guest information an ongoing part of your planning process.

Frequent onsite surveys and annual focus group interviews can be an excellent source of continual audience evaluation and insight. You can use this data to compare to your baseline information, to measure audience growth, audience changes, and to anticipate future programming needs and preferences. On-site self-administered visitor surveys are inexpensive to conduct and tabulate, and several computer programs are available to help you tabulate data quickly and conveniently. Regular visitor information keeps your marketing and promotion activities on track and targeted and it helps you manage your membership program to attract and keep members who can contribute significantly to your overall revenue picture.

Creating an information-based approach to membership doesn't have to be complicated or extraordinarily expensive. It does have to be thorough, disciplined and objective. The rewards can be substantial, ranging from increased attendance to a larger, more sustainable membership group. Information is power, particularly when it comes to programming marketing, membership and revenue generation. Get to know your audience ... the rewards can be substantial.

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