

<vrh>Chapter 1</vrh>

<rrh>Focusing on tThe Visitor Experience</rrh>

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I love museums. I have loved museums since my first visit to the Museum of Science and Industry, in Chicago when I was a child. I was fascinated when I could hear my friend speaking from across the room in the Whispering Gallery. I waited patiently for baby chickens to hatch right in front of me at the Baby Chick Hatchery. I ate delicious ice cream in *Yesterday's Main Street*, and I was mesmerized by the most amazing fairy castle I had ever seen. That fairy castle was created by *silent-film star* Colleen Moore, and I felt like I had some sort of special connection to her, and the castle, based on our shared first name. A book about that castle is one of the first souvenirs I remember from seeing in a museum store. Everything in the museum seemed so exciting, and I couldn't wait to return.

Although I may see museums a little differently now that I have an insider's perspective, I still love visiting new museums of all kinds and returning repeatedly to my favorites. Apparently, I'm not alone. According to the American Alliance of Museums, nearly 900-nine hundred million people visit museums each year.<sup>1</sup> Like those millions of others, I am not always looking for the same type of experience. Museums can be social, calming, and educational, and can let you feel like a kid again. When I returned to that fairy castle as an adult, I'll admit, there were tears in my eyes. It's still a pretty magical sight.

Every museum has treasures that are meaningful to their-its visitors, and we don't always know which objects will resonate with each individual. Museums could choose to be vaults and

**Commented [ET1]:** AU: "Remember from a museum store" seemed awkward—did the author see or buy the book from the store? Since we don't know if she purchased it, I assumed it was safe to say she saw the book in a museum store.

to lock away all ~~of these~~their treasures for safe-keeping. However, the majority of museums are lively, active places that focus on connecting people to these objects. These ~~museums~~sy truly believe that ~~thei~~rese experiences can enrich and transform lives.

The connection with those objects will be different for ~~every~~-each visitor, and connecting the right experience to the right visitor is like solving a puzzle. I've always embraced this puzzle. I want to understand everything about each visitor, anticipate ~~their~~-each visitor's needs, and wow ~~them~~-him or her with an amazing experience. Ideally, I want to help connect all ~~900~~-nine ~~hundred~~ million annual museum visitors to an amazing and personal museum experience.

<a>What Could ~~B~~e Gained from an Improved Visitor Experience</a>

I've spent a lot of time talking with colleagues in the museum field, and it's clear when someone doesn't believe in prioritizing the visitor experience. When you talk about improving customer service or being more thoughtful regarding your visitors, some people dismiss this as an attempt to be "nice." They aren't vocally against the concept, but they don't believe that ~~it's~~-crafting a visitor experience is an intellectual pursuit or is something that should rank highly on the institution's list of priorities. They believe these are soft or frivolous efforts and that ,while museums are serious institutions with serious work to do. The condescension is clear ~~ins~~ these situations, and more than once, I've felt like someone wanted to pat me on the head as they used the word "nice."

Focusing on your visitor experience is not simply about creating a nicer environment, although I would argue that kindness is always important. It is about helping individuals connect to your collection. At its core, a great visitor experience helps you ~~achieve~~-realize your mission. How do we make the environment comfortable, so visitors are open to engaging and meaningful

experiences? How do we make the items in our collection relatable to our visitors? How can our staff members engage with visitors in a way that enriches their visits? How do we welcome people who don't feel welcome in other public places? How do we recognize the differences ~~amongin~~ our visitors and adapt experiences to suit their preferences?

~~If you can answer~~ Answering these questions and improvinge your visitor experience, ~~it~~ can help you ~~reach~~ achieve several of your institutional goals. These goals may include ~~goals~~ ~~focusing on~~ growing and diversifying your audience, increasing your visitor satisfaction scores, or connecting to your community. The visitor experience impacts every visitor and can either cost you visitors or help you solidify and grow your audience.

#### <a>People Make All the Difference</a>

The largest influencing factor on the success of your visitor experience is the quality of your front-line team, and a successful front-line team doesn't ~~happen-form~~ by chance. It requires careful selection of the right individuals, thorough training, support from ~~their~~ supervisors, and strong morale ~~amongst~~ the team. These individuals have the power to make or break the visitor experience. Unfortunately, they are not always given the training and support ~~that~~ they need to shine.

~~Regrettably, t~~ There are some common misconceptions about all levels of service or hospitality staff. Some people believe that these jobs require no skills or expertise. It is true that, like in any other entry-level position, many people can step into a front-line service role and perform the basic functions. Some of the basic skills come simply from having been a customer and having the ability to picture ~~ourselves-oneself~~ in the role of the visitor. There are people who meet the bare minimum and there are people who excel in this role, and the difference is

profound. Many people can cook, but there is a wide range of skill level from a decent home cook to an all-star chef. You want a team of chefs.

The ~~next-second~~-largest factor is the culture of service throughout your museum. The front-line team members, including the managers, don't have the power to create meaningful change without the support of the institution. They need other departments to believe in their goals, see them as colleagues, support their efforts, and put an emphasis on visitors. The visitor experience will be best if all museum departments are ~~also~~-focused on how their work impacts visitors.

The ~~Gallery-gallery-h~~Host program at the Chrysler Museum of Art is successful because the gallery hosts are strong and talented individuals who are respected and supported by their managers and the museum as a whole. The museum has invested in this program, ~~that-which~~ blends security and service in the galleries. ~~A-~~and the hosts are only one component of the visitor experience. ~~Every-Each~~ department is focused on providing a strong visitor experience, broadening the museum audience, and engaging ~~their~~ local community. The gallery hosts open the door for each visitor, and this is a gesture of hospitality as well as a symbolic gesture. With the combined focus of the entire staff, the museum is trying to open doors and remove barriers for everyone.

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<a>Strong Connections to Your Museum</a>

We all spend a good portion of our time at home and work. However, there are additional places ~~where~~-we spend our time that are just as important to us, and these locations can be referred to as our "third place~~s~~". This term was created by sociologist Ray Oldenburg and refers to places

beyond work and home where people can have a good time, build relationships, and exchange ideas.<sup>2</sup> These places are community builders. They help us feel whole as individuals and help us connect to others who share our interests.

Our third place ~~These places are~~is unique to each of us. ~~For some, it~~It may be the coffee shop ~~they-we~~ visit daily, ~~their-our~~ yoga studio, the church where ~~they-we~~ worship, the golf course, a favorite restaurant, or ~~their-our~~ local museum.

One of the groups that has the strongest connection to a museum is the dedicated ~~group-of~~ volunteers that help fulfill the ~~museum's~~ mission. ~~These volunteers~~is could be your docents, who look forward to the training sessions from curatorial staff, gather for coffee with their fellow docents before leading their weekly school tours, gain fulfillment from presenting to the children on their tours, and stay for lunch at the museum after their job is done. They may also be frequent attendees ~~of~~at your evening member programs and some of your best customers in the museum store.

You may have other volunteers who gather weekly to arrange flowers for your public spaces or events, trustees who connect with fellow board or committee members, volunteers who help organize your donor events, greeters who help you welcome visitors, and volunteers who ~~may~~work in your museum store. For all ~~of~~these volunteers, your museum is an important part of their identities.

In addition to volunteers, you probably have regular visitors who know your museum ~~know~~ well. ~~These people~~is may include visitors who gather regularly in ~~your-the~~ courtyard to discuss philosophy, finding the museum a fitting setting that showcases the history of humanity. ~~They~~It could be ~~someone-people~~ who participates in ~~your~~studio classes regularly ~~for a~~ , ~~providing them with a~~ much-needed creative outlet. They may feel so connected to the

instructors ~~that~~, they bring ~~donuts-doughnuts~~ every time they take ~~a~~ morning classes. ~~A~~ ~~Teenagers~~ may visit every day after school to explore as well as to work on their homework in the courtyard until their parents ~~picks~~ them up. ~~V-A~~ ~~visitors~~ may come frequently to play ~~your~~ ~~the~~ public piano. ~~A-group-of-w~~ ~~Women~~ may hit the dance floor at every evening party. Parents of infants may visit the museum frequently to ~~visit-see-with~~ other adults while they push their strollers through the galleries. Teachers may use your galleries as an extension of their classrooms, showcasing the museum in lessons of all kinds.

Not every visitor will see the museum as ~~their-his or her~~ third place, at least not initially. However, ~~the idea of a third place~~is showcases what museums can mean to their communities and the types of connections ~~we-can-form~~~~that can be formed~~. Even smaller connections can make a big impact.

#### <a>One Size Does Not Fit All</a>

Museums are often reflections of their communities~~ies~~, and the visitor experience at each institution will reflect ~~their-the museum's~~ collections, ~~their~~ visitors, and ~~their~~ local community. ~~They-Each museum is are each~~a unique institution~~s~~, and what works in one location may fail miserably in another.

This can sometimes be a product of geography~~;~~, what is considered friendly and welcoming in a small town may be off-~~putting~~ and over the top in an urban environment. Museums that are located in cities with several other museums and experienced museum-goers may start their orientations differently ~~than-a-from~~ museums ~~who-that~~ sees more novices. ~~These visitors are starting with a different level of experience-~~The content of your museum matters as well~~;~~, what works in a science museum~~;~~ may not work ~~at-in~~ a history museum, even in the same