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Success Guides

Successful
Visitor
Experience –
Getting it Right





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Leeds Castle

Successful Visitor Experience – Getting it Right

The public have become more discerning in the way they consume, and are less afraid to be critical.

Much as we love our collections, a museum without users is very unlikely to survive. It is also missing the point. Never before have consumers had as much choice, or as much money to spend, on their leisure. In theory at least, we have far more leisure time and holiday than our ancestors, even if we feel 'time poor'. Yet there is so much competition for that time, and for our leisure pound. And standards are being driven ever higher. Not only do you have to compete for attention before you receive any visitors, you have to offer them something that they perceive as worth leaving the sofa and TV for.

So getting the visitor experience right is vital. It will ensure your collections or your site are better appreciated and understood; your museum or heritage site is properly valued (by funders and by your community); and that more people visit, and are willing to pay for their experience, encouraged by positive recommendation both by word of mouth and from online review sites. Ultimately, a museum collection is a

pointless bunch of objects unless people can see them, appreciate them, and learn from them.

Yet they won't be able to do that unless you've got the basics right; the visitors can find you; they know what you are offering; and once on site, they feel comfortable, able to access what you have, and are enjoying themselves.

Getting ready to tour Leeds Castle, Kent.



Learning to meet visitor expectations and make their day will also ensure your team and volunteers are positive about the challenges they face; making people happy is something almost everyone enjoys.

In this guide, I hope to help suggest:

- a) How you can find out more about what your visitors think of you – without that knowledge, you haven't a chance of getting it right
- b) The steps you can take to give yourself a 'visitor experience healthcheck'.

Know your visitors

The experience of your museum begins well before visitors even reach you. Unless they are tourists working out of a guide book, most people will visit either because they've heard about you, or because they've looked online. So they already think they know something about you. How much do you know about your visitors?

We are blessed with an incredible resource our predecessors did not have. Fifteen years ago, if you wanted to know what visitors you had, and what they thought of you, you had to spend money on customer research. As a result we imposed our own vision on customers, and were left rather in the dark if they didn't come. Now, with our ability to capture information online, or to look at social media websites, we can find out a massive amount. You can see where people come from; what they thought of the experience; and how they like other places. Tripadvisor, Google, Twitter and Facebook should be your best friends.

The public have also become more discerning in the way they consume, and are less afraid to be critical. They tell you – and others – about their experience. That can be scary for the museum – all those opinions flying around, and with no ability to counter them yourself – but actually, it's the most amazing tool for you. Your



The personal touch on arrival at Leeds Castle, Kent.

challenge is first how to engage the visitors, and then how to channel the free advice they give you after they've visited into improving the experience for others. Even if you think online reviews are rubbish, this is why you need to take notice of them:

- 30% of people who read your advertising material will trust it unquestioningly
- 70% trust online consumer opinion, BUT
- 92% trust personal recommendation (including via social media).

So you first want to get your staff, volunteers, friends and visitors talking about you, spreading the positive messages. Then you want to try to influence – but emphatically not fake – online opinion, in order to get it looking positive.

Think about how you respond to feedback online. If you get negative feedback, it's easy to be really defensive. There's also a real risk of getting into an online slanging match, or of being seen as insincere in any apology. You want to try and show you are concerned, but not to get into protracted explanation online. There's a real danger of breathing more oxygen into the fire – if something is toxic, you want to cut it off. We've found that by

Impressive front entrance, which shows exactly what you have come to see, at the Heritage Motor Centre, Gaydon.



responding to negative social media by saying something like: “We’re really sorry to hear this – get in touch direct and we’d really like to help sort this out” it gets it out of the public eye, and calms things down. And you may learn something by talking direct.

You can also be proactive. Make sure you find ways of capturing contact details. This may be through feedback forms; Gift Aid forms; competitions in which people have to give their e-mail addresses. Then ask if you can stay in touch. A lot of people won’t opt out if they have had a half-decent experience, and you promise not to share your data with others. Encouraging visitors to find you on Facebook, or to ‘check in’ and tweet about their experience also gives you a new way of reaching them after their visit. It doesn’t need to be a major, expensive database – but simply a mailing list you can grow.

If an issue arises in customer feedback that you’re uncertain of – you think it’s a one-off, subjective opinion, but you aren’t sure – you need to test it out with others. You could use a focus group. Or you could ask your visitors. Use your database – however small – and send out a simple survey, which you can make for free using Survey Monkey.

Don’t worry too much about the science. It’s very easy to over-analyse, and to fret about whether you are asking the right questions. Market researchers will blind you with science, but that can often paralyse you. Ask open questions, or offer options, and you will soon see a trend.

First things first – do you do what you say on the tin?

The first thing every attraction/museum/shop/public place has to do is to tell its users/customers/visitors

what it is. That way you attract the right customers, and they know what to expect. And you can then meet those expectations.

It starts with the name. There are some brilliant examples of how names help people understand the attraction.

So, if you are a museum saddled with the name of a little known Victorian explorer, or a steam museum that gets fed up with being asked where the trains are, is it worth thinking about how you can tweak your name, or add a strapline, to give people a better idea of what – and where – you are?

If you can't change the name, think about your branding and imagery, whether on your website or on your doorstep. The fabulous Lyme Regis Museum has lots more to offer than just fossils, but being on the site of the shop which Mary Anning established, they've got some pretty amazing specimens. It was very clever to make the paving outside the museum appear to be made of ammonites. Immediately the visitors know what they are likely

to find, before they head inside. The Roald Dahl Museum's website greets visitors with: "Welcome to our great little award-winning and family friendly museum." Brilliant. You know exactly what you are getting.

First impressions count

Okay, so you've got the customers coming to you; they've found you, they like the sound of you. You now have to make them like the experience.

I recently visited a hugely expensive new-build museum – part of a regeneration scheme – and was completely baffled. The outside told a great story, with fantastic branding, really big exhibits. But inside was a different story. The visitor's first impression was that they had walked into a conference centre – perhaps I was going to spend the day learning how to sell cars, or maximise my revenue, or book a Christmas event. But actually I was looking for some exhibits. I found a slot machine (not

There are some brilliant examples of how names help people understand the attraction.

Case Study – A Wizard Name?

The Warner Brothers much-awaited Harry Potter studio experience opened in Leavesden early last year. Early on, the management realised they needed to be really clear what they were offering, particularly as they would be opening after the Orlando 'Wizarding World of Harry Potter' theme park. Their experience was – to all intents and purposes – a museum; showing the artefacts, props and sets developed to make the film, and explaining the many technical marvels which brought the world of Hogwarts to life. It isn't massively interactive, but it is fascinating, as the visitor sees iconic objects, and can gain an insight into the detail involved in achieving authenticity. But the key outcome of a visit is an understanding of exactly how the films were made. Eventually the team decided that the title should be 'Warner Bros Studio Tour London – The Making of Harry Potter.' It isn't catchy, but it does exactly what it says on the tin. And the place delights audiences, with exemplary feedback on Tripadvisor, as audiences get exactly what they were told they will get. Imagine the difference if they had gone for a more whimsical name, like 'The Magic of Harry Potter'.

working) which offered a video game. I found the shop. I eventually found a desk with a person sitting at it, who once prompted, offered a gallery guide. I found the lifts, the café, a picnic area and the education centre – all before I saw a single object.

They'd got a lot right – the place was clean, it looked inviting from outside, it was well signposted – but I was feeling pretty disgruntled by this point.

Key lessons for first impressions:

- Make sure people can find the things they have come to see, easily
- Keep ancillary activities ancillary. Never make the visitor feel like a second class citizen
- Make sure advertising etc is for your museum, not for other things
- Get the welcome right.

People power!

Use your greatest resource – the enthusiasm of your staff and volunteers for their subject, and for their museum. As Bernard Donohue, the dynamic Director of the Association of Leading Visitor Attractions, recently said, increasingly what makes the difference to the visitor experience is “staff, not stuff”. If the welcome isn't warm, your visitors will feel like outsiders, not guests.

The Disney way of thinking is worth considering here, even if your museum couldn't be further from the Magic Kingdom in its subject matter. But the Disney core belief is that a happy team (or cast) member makes a happy guest, which delivers the whole vision. If your volunteers out front are enthusiastic

Visitors enjoying the custodian's informative explanation at Mendips, the childhood home of John Lennon, Woolton, Liverpool (National Trust).
© National Trust Images/Amhel de Serra



and passionate, they will communicate that to the visitor. If they are feeling hard done by, neglected, unwanted and pressurised, guess what? They'll communicate that too. A little TLC goes a long way.

Back to that big, new museum. It was free to the public, so there was no ticketing process to engage with. So no obvious focal point for me to find – or to welcome me. The person I found sitting at the desk was chatting to a colleague. She didn't make eye contact. She didn't greet me. I had to ask for what I wanted. She proffered no information. She didn't give a toss.

That just isn't good enough. I want the experience I got at Science Oxford. A young lad in a T-shirt bounced up to my family. "Hi" he said. "Would the kids like to join our bubble workshop? Mum – you pay over there, then have a cup of coffee – girls – go that way, bang that drum, try out that magnet, then the workshop is in five minutes."

We were all immediately swept up – welcomed, our needs met, our afternoon sorted.

The staff costs for the two museums were identical. The outcome for me as



Elegant signage at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire.

a customer could not have been more different.

We know the most important people our visitors will meet in the course of the day are our ticketing staff – as they set the tone for the whole experience. Whilst it helps if your front of house team or volunteers are naturally sunny, happy people, do not forget that **you can teach warmth**.

Case Study – Customer Focus

Titanic Belfast opened last year and has been a resounding success. Their staff recruitment was exemplary, despite a not very promising environment. They invited 'cast members' to audition. From the outset, they understood their role was to engage, entertain and welcome their audience – to be centre stage. They trained the team, before opening to the public, using the World Host scheme used to train volunteers at the Olympics. The day before they opened, one 19-year-old lad participated in the video they made, which they now use to recruit additional team members. He said with absolute passion and sincerity: "I'm just gagging to welcome a visitor." It was enthusiasm you wanted to bottle. They use the film to inspire new cast members and to show to their funders, who can see the pride and self esteem being generated by these new jobs.

A smile at the counter makes all the difference (The Lightbox, Woking).



Our caterers are frequently praised because of their cheerful, friendly young team. How have they found the 20 members of Generation Y who can talk to customers? Of course, they haven't. They've trained them. They have encouraged them to be warm. They've taught them to enthuse. They haven't spent any money. But they've invested time, they treat them well; and their enthusiasm for the whole process, and for the castle, now shines through. They greet every customer individually, they aim to make peoples' day. They try to remember them. And critically, it isn't just the hello – it's also the 'When will I see you again' goodbye that is really, really important. It's an American programme that they have followed, but it translates fantastically well for a young, British crew who are engaging with a massively varied audience. The feedback is great – and we have never had a complaint that our team are too friendly.

Not every institution has the means to put their whole team through a commissioned training programme – though it's not impossibly expensive. You can train an in-house trainer and buy all the material for the World Host programme for under £4,000 which makes it a pretty low cost if you've got 200 staff to engage. It'll probably pay back far more quickly than a new display case. But for smaller organisations, it's worth thinking whether just one customer service champion could be trained, and then asked to tell the rest of you about it. Training one person will cost you £95.

Show you mean business

There's a lot of misunderstanding around brand identity. Getting a really cool logo will not in itself help your organisation. It only works if it underlines everything you are about. But the greatest logo on the planet,

printed on A4 and laminated, then left in the rain and scrunpled up will not communicate the wonders of your museum. Nor will anything chipped, dirty, or corrected. If a sign is wrong, take it away. Build the cost of re-doing the signage into any development or change project. You'd be amazed how many organisations are insistent on their staff wearing name badges, but who don't clean their museum sign outside their front door. Anything with your name or logo on it has to be immaculate.

And signage is important for another reason. Whilst people do not always want to be channelled in one direction, if they are lost, or can't find what they are looking for, or don't know what your opening hours are, it's a frustration which will impact on their enjoyment of the experience. Get your secret shoppers, focus group or your team to walk the visitor route with the signboards covered up. Ask them to note as they go what they wanted to know and when. Check you are covering those points. You will be surprised. You'll find signs that are completely unnecessary. And you'll find some missing. I found out yesterday that our public loos have two doors – one which says nothing, which I assumed to be a store cupboard – and the other which says 'NO EXIT'. Hmmm.

And now, for the substance

Visitors to museums and heritage sites are changing. When traditional museums were conceived, visitors were content to stand a respectful distance behind ropes and view exhibits behind glass. But people are no longer prepared to do exactly what they are told, and experience a place exactly as you want them to. They need a range of choices. They are more demanding – they apply the standards they experience in movies and on TV, or at massively-funded national institutions, to everything they see. They have other ways in which they can find out about things – particularly the internet. They want to engage in different ways. They want experiences, rather than to listen or observe in silence. Generation X wants to press buttons. Generation Y needs to know 'why'. So the bottom line is, whatever you are offering, you have to try and see it through your customers' eyes.

This is your bread and butter. You do need to refresh it. You do need to make sure your customers like it.

You don't necessarily have to spend a fortune. But whatever you do, make sure you are using focus groups to 'road test' not only your current offer, but new innovations, concepts and designs. The cleverest designers and

People are no longer prepared to do exactly what they are told, and experience a place exactly as you want them to.



Interactives aimed at families – but they must all be working (The Lightbox, Woking).

Judiciously-placed seating always goes down well (The Lightbox, Woking).



curators working with the biggest budgets can get this wrong; you only have to look at Tripadvisor customer feedback to see that some really big-ticket projects take a pasting.

There is not space or time here to go into every element of what you can or should do with content and display to enhance the visitor experience. The best book I've read recently on this is Graham Black's *The Engaging Museum – Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. But the key is to understand your audience, and listen to their feedback. Unless you are

aiming at an entirely new audience, chances are, if your existing audience likes what you have done when you make a change, new customers will like it too. But do think about how you can tailor elements of your activity to different demographics. Back at my nemesis museum, I was impressed to see on the gallery guide that there was a daily programme of activity on offer. But I was less thrilled when I read it – everything was aimed at a semi-expert level, with nothing for older children or the interested amateur.

Key points:

- Match your offer to your audiences
- Give options and layer your interpretation
- Technology breaks down. Be careful not to make broken kit the overwhelming impression of your museum. Design in a way that enables you to remove (or at least cover) things if they are not operating
- Don't assume that money and design will automatically create a great result. Check before you spend that this is hitting the right notes with the people it is aimed at.

Catering needs to feel part of the whole experience (Leeds Castle, Kent).



Get the creature comforts right

Back in my nightmare visitor experience, by the time I got to the galleries, I needed the loos. But then, inevitably, I couldn't find them. Actually, they were back with the corporate conferencing, down two flights of stairs or via the lift.

Your visitors will not enjoy their experience, however excellent your displays, if they are too hot or cold; if their feet hurt and there is nowhere to sit down occasionally; or if they can't find the loo – or if the loos are tired and messy when they get there. Or there's no baby change facility, or high chairs in the café, or room to manoeuvre with a buggy if there is no buggy park.

This stuff sounds so obvious it is astonishing we get it wrong. But it is **so** damaging when people are not comfortable.

Remember:

- On a wet day you will need to check your loos twice as often, and ensure the floor is cleaned. Get managers to check, not just cleaners

- If it is cold outside, and you do not offer a cloakroom for coats, turn your heating down so that visitors don't roast. Better you provide your staff with fleeces than your customers either have to schlep around a pile of coats and scarves, or boil away. It'll also save you money
- Check that wherever you are in the museum or the attraction, you can find some signage to the loos, or to the way out
- If loos are dismal, hang some pictures in them, or even display something relevant. You would at home, so why not here?
- If you want family audiences, get some young mums to tell you what they need. And have some spare nappies behind the front desk
- If it's hot, and you have an outdoor attraction, offer shade
- Provide lots of bins so people don't have to litter. And empty them!

Do it well, or find others to do it for you.

Retail and catering are difficult, and can make or break an experience. If in doubt, don't do it.



A clear tea-room sign at Tintinhull Garden, Somerset (National Trust).
© National Trust Images/John Millar

Retail and catering are difficult, and can make or break an experience. If in doubt, don't do it.

Case Study – To Thine Own Self Be True

You don't have to look like a Michelin-starred restaurant to offer a world class catering experience. There's a brilliant example of this in Lambeth, South London, at the tiny Garden Museum. Their restaurant has been named the 6th best museum restaurant in the world. Yet it works out of a space less than 12 square metres; it offers a vegetarian, garden-themed menu; it has only three staff. But it has absolute authenticity and sense of place; it is true to the museum's values and it generates a 'pull' in its own right. They didn't set out with massive ambitions, but with clear values and a very strong sense of what they were, they've become world class.

At the castle, we are fortunate to have a lot of visitors, all spending a long time on site – so they need feeding, and like to go shopping while they are here, whether to buy souvenirs or to associate themselves with our brand. Or just to buy stuff, or to have a good meal, which are (after all) the most popular ways of spending leisure time.

This won't be the case for every museum. If you are in a town centre, with lots of places for people to eat and drink, there is no need to provide catering as a public service; a cup of tea can just as easily be found elsewhere. If the dwell time is under a couple of hours, people also don't need to eat.

I was rather stunned recently when the director of a local museum told me that his museum shop wasn't really there to make money, and couldn't possibly compete with the (hundreds of) local shops – all selling pretty much the same stuff. He seemed to feel it was there because 'there had always been a shop'. You will find it difficult to shift bought-in stock which looks like the things you can find anywhere on the high street, or which have your logo all over it – unless people feel very positively about you. So don't do it just because you think you should; use the space for something you really want.

The point of shops and catering is to make money for you. If you can get them to do that, they also provide an opportunity to underline your key messages. But don't do it unless it really does make money. Far better to buddy up with the local café and point people in that direction, or ask a local bookshop if they'd like you to sell their stock.

We are extremely good at managing castles. We know our stonework, our history, and if you need a jousting display, we're your best bet. But actually, those skills don't much help us work out how many sandwiches we might need on a bank holiday when the weather is looking iffy. Catering is a difficult thing to get right. 50% of all restaurant businesses fail. For 20 years we struggled on, generating plenty of turnover – so selling lots of things. But to do so, we had to keep a very high number of staff on board. Our catering didn't actually make a profit.

So we found someone else to run it. People competed for it. If you have a viable number of visitors, you will almost certainly find someone who is prepared to manage the café on your behalf, and carry the risk – and pay you some kind of rent. It might be as simple as the lady from the bakery down the road who wants to be her own boss. Or

it could be any one of the many commercial catering companies. Leave it to the experts, and just gratefully take the money they bring in (though you'll still have to police the quality).

Key lessons:

- Do it for the right reasons – profit!
- Be true to your mission and values
- Make sure it all positively reinforces what you are doing.

Check your assumptions

You may be absolutely right that your visitor experience is excellent. Let me know, I'd love to visit. But equally, please, test it out. If you can't afford professional secret shoppers, or to join a scheme like VAQAS (Visitor Attraction Quality Assurance Scheme) or Visit Scotland's Quality Assurance Scheme, or in Wales the VAQAS Cymru, make

sure you ask friends and family to walk the customer journey, from car park or bus stop, right the way through your museum. Or ask colleagues from other AIM members, who will look at it with both professional and personal eyes.

Best yet, ask people who wouldn't normally visit you to try it out and let you know what they think. You may find yourself surprised by what they find. Recognise that every view – however subjective, negative or positive – is valid, and think about how you can tackle issues they raise. Ask them about the concrete stuff (i.e. the loos, the pricing) but also some opinion stuff. Ask them about how it feels to be there – an 'ambience audit'. Ask them what messages they are picking up. This costs you nothing, yet can be the best consultancy support you will ever have.

Summary – My Top Ten Tips

- Make sure people can find you, and know where and what you are – and get a good impression of you online before they come
- Provide a warm welcome and build a rapport with your visitors
- Invest in training and making your team happy
- Meet the expectations you have raised and managed – and make sure everything works (or can be removed if it breaks down)
- Make sure creature comforts are managed – directional signage, loos, heating, seating
- If you offer catering and retail, make sure they make money, and reinforce your brand and values
- Encourage visitors to join you on Facebook, tweet about their visit, and to write reviews on Tripadvisor. Then learn from what they write
- Walk the customer journey from kerb to kerb, and challenge everything you see asking 'Is this the best we can be?'
- Use professionals, or create a focus group or engage secret shoppers to test out the experience and give you an independent review
- Money is not the only investment you need. Don't let a shortage of funds be an excuse for not making the most of what you have. It's more about attitude and action than about how much you spend.

A costumed interpreter enhances visitors' experiences at the Coalbrookdale Festival, Ironbridge Gorge for the London 2012 Open Weekend.



Victoria Wallace has been Chief Executive of Leeds Castle in Kent since 2004, after a career in the diplomatic service. The castle welcomes over 550,000 visitors each year, with 40% repeat visits. The charity has no permanent endowment and depends entirely on generated income to maintain and preserve the castle.

Further support

Useful tips on marketing heritage – <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/conservation-bulletin-64/cb-64-pp1-9.pdf>

General information, particularly on retail – <http://www.acenterprises.org.uk/>

For a good online presence – <http://www.roalddahlmuseum.org/>

More on the visitor experience – www.alva.org.uk

For staff training – <http://www.worldhost.uk.com/programmes>

Free survey resources – www.surveymonkey.com

For visitor attraction quality assurance schemes, in England – www.visitengland.org/busdev/accreditation/attractions/

or in Wales – <http://wales.gov.uk/topics/cultureandsport/museumsarchives/libraries/cymal/museums/vaqasformuseums/?lang=en>

or in Scotland – <http://www.visitscotland.org/pdf/J10-0274%20VS%20Criteria%20Visitor%20Attraction.pdf>



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