Those of us who are museum professionals have frequently been puzzled by the elusive masses who never enter our museum doors—the nonparticipants. With all the treasures we offer, why don't we attract a broader spectrum of the public, a larger audience, a substantial clientele that comes regularly rather than just for blockbusters? Why do programs that are successful in one museum or with one group fail to garner equal response with other audiences?

Over the past half century we have tried numerous research techniques to gain answers to these questions. We have tracked visitors' traffic patterns, timed their stops at exhibits, observed them with time-lapse photography and interviewed them in the museum to find out what was satisfactory about their visit. It is not surprising that none of these in-museum studies has told us why the majority of the public does not visit museums.

From hundreds of such surveys in the United States and Canada, however, we have learned the demo-
graphic characteristics of those who do patronize museums: they are likely to be in the upper education, occupation and income groups, younger than the population in general and active in other community and leisure activities. Nevertheless, these demographic data have not indicated the reasons why some adults choose to frequent museums and why some do not, or why nonparticipants don't love museums.

It is apparent, then, that merely analyzing demographic will not reveal what these groups value in their leisure experiences. Instead we need to focus on how individuals make decisions about the use of their leisure time and energy, to concentrate on the psychographic characteristics of both current and potential visitors—their values, attitudes, perceptions, interests, expectations, satisfactions. Once these factors are identified, we can examine how nonparticipants differ from participants in order to determine whether or not museums are offering or can offer the kinds of experiences that nonparticipants value and expect. Then we can develop ways, within the scope of our organizations and our abilities, to reach these elusive audiences.

In carrying out such a plan, the basic step is recognizing that people make choices about how they will use their leisure time and energy. We often assume that because we regard museums as unique and valuable, the public will similarly cherish them and want to share in them. Individuals do not just naturally gravitate to museums or to any other leisure place, however, no matter how worthwhile or unique it may be. Instead, before making selections, they consider which of several competing alternatives appears to offer them the most rewards, the greatest satisfactions—and they make their choice based on what will satisfy their criteria of a desirable leisure experience.

What are these criteria by which individuals judge leisure experiences, including museum visits? A review of 60 years of literature in museum studies, leisure science, sociology, psychology and consumer behavior identified six major attributes underlying adults’ choices in their use of leisure time. They are, in alphabetical order,

• being with people, or social interaction
• doing something worthwhile
• feeling comfortable and at ease in one’s surroundings
• having a challenge of new experiences
• having an opportunity to learn
• participating actively.

Not every person values all of these attributes, and some are more pertinent to certain activities or places than to others. But all are fundamental criteria by which individuals make decisions about leisure.

To test how these criteria affect museum participation, a carefully designed and tightly controlled research project was undertaken in 1980–81 in cooperation with the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio. The purpose was to obtain quality information that would be useful for long-term decision making by the Toledo Museum and museums in general. To achieve valid and reliable results, several preparatory steps were taken: a 12-page questionnaire was developed,
A special information desk welcomed visitors to the Toledo Museum’s festive opening of its renovated galleries last year, and as part of the celebration (opposite), youngsters were encouraged to create take-home origami figures.

Based on previous research and theory, and was tested and revised, the survey sponsor was identified as the Ohio State University, so respondents would not be biased in their answers to questions about museum going; a computer program generated telephone numbers for a probability sample of Toledo metropolitan area residents to be interviewed by telephone (in a probability sample, each person in the population has an equal chance of being selected, which assures that the sample is representative of the population); and 35 museum volunteers were trained to administer the 20-minute questionnaires.

The volunteers secured telephone interviews with 502 residents from across the Toledo metropolitan area [urban, suburban, exurban, rural] over a three-week period in spring 1980, and the data from the questionnaires were thoroughly analyzed by several sophisticated statistical tests, with the assistance of a statistician and a computer. A detailed report, including 67 tables, described the relationships between leisure attitudes and values and between museum going and demographic characteristics, and it outlined how these findings can be applied to museums generally and to other leisure-cultural organizations. *

The Toledo metropolitan area was a suitable locale for a major research project because its population was large enough to include representative socioeconomic, educational and age groups so that a probability sample of telephone respondents would accurately reflect the opinions and values of the community and the study results be applicable to other locations. In addition, it was assumed that the prestigious Toledo Museum of Art was well enough established to be identifiable by all groups within the community. This assumption was substantiated, since all respondents in the sample, regardless of socioeconomic status or length of residence, knew of the museum, even if they had never been there. Also, the types of problems that Toledo Museum faces are applicable to a greater or lesser extent to most museums, regardless of size, and the staff recognizes that it is in competition with other community activities for people’s time, attention and energy.

Two major aims of the study were to determine how important the six leisure attributes were to the respondents and to ascertain their preferences for certain leisure activities and places. The study also assessed respondents’ attitudes toward art museums and gauged their level of socialization toward 22 activities, including museum going. This article briefly discusses the results of the first two aims.

The results clearly show that our traditional assumptions about museum audiences are unfounded. Our long-held belief that there are just two audience segments—participants and nonparticipants—is incorrect.

There are three distinctly different audience segments in the current and potential museum clientele, based on their leisure values, interests and expectations: frequent participants, occasional participants and nonparticipants. Each group seeks different values and experiences through leisure activities, including museum going. Moreover, people decide to be or not to be involved in museums on the basis of how they evaluate the six leisure attributes and on how they were socialized—by family and other childhood influences—toward certain types of activities. Though other museum studies have identified levels of participation, they have not probed the reasons why audience segments develop and are maintained. Now, with these results, we are able to identify attendance patterns by leisure values and to show that leisure choices, although they may be correlated with demographics, are not determined by demographics.

This is strikingly clear when we examine the profiles of the three audience segments. The frequent visitors—those who go to museums at least three times a year (and some as often as 40 times a year) highly value all of the six leisure attributes and perceive all of them to be present in museums. The three

---

The research project helped the Toledo Museum recognize the need for public amenities. As part of the renovation, a new information desk with comfortable seating was located just inside the ground floor entrance.

that they value most are distinct for this group: having an opportunity to learn, having a challenge of new experiences and doing something worthwhile in leisure time.

Though the frequent visitors constitute a minority of the community (14 percent in the Toledo metropolitan area), they account for 45 to 50 percent of museum visitation (the Toledo Museum's annual visitation is 300,000-400,000). These are the people who are usually interviewed in the museum; hence, they fit the typical museum visitor demographic profile.

These loyalists go to museums wherever they are and whatever is showing, because some time ago they chose to place museums on their leisure agenda. Since their experience with museums has developed over time, they identify with museum values and understand the "museum code" of exhibits and objects. Museums are satisfying places for them because they find that the three leisure attributes they value most highly are regularly available in substantial quantities in museums.

For frequent attenders, the benefits offered by museum visits consistently outweigh the costs (time, money, travel, mental saturation, fatigue, inconvenience). Because they come so often, we museum professionals should make sure the museum is not a static place remaining always the same; these visitors want to find the challenge of new experiences on a continuing basis in their leisure activities.

At nearly the opposite pole from the frequent participants—in leisure values, preferences and expectations, as well as most demographic characteristics—are the nonparticipants (who represented the largest segment, 46 percent, of the Toledo metropolitan community). In their leisure experiences they most value the three leisure attributes that were less important to the frequent visitors: being with people (social interaction), participating actively and feeling comfortable and at ease in their surroundings. And, underscoring their differences, they rank low the three attributes the frequent visitors preferred.

Generally, nonparticipants as children were not socialized into museum going; in fact, they are likely to have adopted more cultural activities as adults than they were acquainted with as children. We museum professionals and devotees need to be wary, however, of labeling these persons as apathetic or uninvolved simply because they do not participate in cultural activities. Their interests and commitments lie elsewhere, and they choose leisure experiences that compete with museum going because they find more of what is satisfying to them in activities that emphasize active participation, casual and familiar surroundings and interacting socially with other people.

Nonparticipants perceive that these three leisure attributes—the ones they value most highly—are not present at all in museums, or are present in such small amounts that investing themselves in a museum experience brings minimal benefits. They perceive museums to be formal, formidable places, inaccessible to them because they usually have had little preparation to read the "museum code"—places that invoke restrictions on group social behavior and on active participation. Sports, picnicking, visiting and browsing in shopping malls better meet their criteria of desirable leisure activities.

The most notable finding from this research involves the occasional participants—those who visit museums once or twice a year (40 percent of the Toledo metropolitan community). We have long assumed that museum visitors, regardless of frequency of attendance, share many common values, interests and characteristics. The research results emphasize, however, that the occasional visitors are distinctly different from the frequent visitors in their socialization patterns and leisure values. In fact, they more closely resemble the nonparticipants.

The occasional visitors were socialized as children into activities that emphasized active participation, entertainment and social interaction. As adults, they maintain high levels of participation in these types of activities—outdoor experiences such as camping, hiking, swimming, skiing, ice skating, playing a mu-
sical instrument or engaging in arts and crafts, going to amusement parks and movies, sightseeing and attending sports events.

Family-centered activities are much more important to the occasional participants and nonparticipants than they are to the frequent participants, who are more likely to visit the museum alone. Places like parks, zoos and picnic areas that are natural centers for family outings and for extended-family visiting attract the occasional participants because they offer all three of their most highly valued leisure attributes.

Going to outdoor art and music festivals and participating as a family in a craft or discovery workshop also meet their criteria of desirable leisure experiences.

Occasional participants, who value comfortable surroundings in their leisure places, feel that museums offer little in the way of comfort—not simply physical comfort but a feeling of “this is where my friends and I belong, a place where I feel at ease and am able to cope with the message.” For this group, leisure is equated with relaxation, which is more akin to interacting socially with a family or friendship group than it is to the intense involvement in a special interest that is evidenced by museum enthusiasts. Because these persons do not feel entirely at home in a museum setting, the presence of a support group—family, club, co-workers, friends—provides social approval and validation on a visit.

Occasional participants perceive that some of the attributes they value in leisure experiences are available in museums, but not in sufficient quantity to warrant regular visits—especially when compared with the benefits afforded by competing interests. Consequently, they come for the special occasions, the major events, the family days, which seem to promise them greater fulfillment of their expecta-

Extensive labels at the El Greco exhibit provided background information for each painting.
tions and wants. Since museum values and intentions more closely resemble those of the frequent visitors, museums generally offer or emphasize the very qualities that are least appealing to the occasional participants and nonparticipants, who are looking for significantly different leisure satisfactions.

The findings from this study provide a new perspective by which to assess current and potential museum audiences and the programs that museums can develop to appeal to and satisfy various sizable groups. If we are to reach those who are not coming frequently or at all, it is essential to program for more than one type of audience. Each attendance group is looking for different types of benefits in leisure experiences. Frequent visitors—the smallest group—are, for the most part, finding what they want in museums. But for the occasionalists and the nonparticipants, who seek an opportunity to interact with people and to relax, the prospect of going to a museum for a learning experience, for a challenge, for doing something worthwhile in leisure time, is not enticing. Particularly if these people have had negative experiences with formal education, the idea of going to a museum for a learning activity connotes an exacting, ponderous undertaking rather than an enjoyable, casual experience.

If we museum professionals are concerned about reaching new audiences—the occasionalists and the nonparticipants—we must appeal to them on the basis of what satisfies their criteria of a desirable leisure experience. Endeavoring to reach these elusive audiences by providing more of the same type of programs now offered, regardless of their quality, will not pay dividends for either audiences or museums; a different emphasis and presentation are necessary.

For instance, instead of portraying itself as an educational institution, where the family learns together, the museum seeking to reach occasional participants and nonparticipants might stress that it is a place for exploring and discovering, for enjoying a relaxed family outing and for having a good time with other people.

Discovery workshops that offer the family the opportunity to participate as a unit—to identify insects, fungi or fossils in a natural history museum, to work with clay or on a mural in an art museum, to try on or make facsimile costumes in a history museum—are examples of current museum programs that occasional visitors prize. These activities, though, should not be just ends in themselves but utilized as entrees, transitions, into the collections. If skillfully handled they can prepare the occasional visitors to cope with the "museum code" as well as enhance their positive perceptions of museums as places that meet their criteria of satisfying leisure locales. If they find their preferred attributes are present, they will choose to return. Other museums are providing tours and talks geared to the interests of specific groups—construction workers, sports fans, hobbyists of all hues—to demonstrate the relevance of museum collections to persons who do not perceive any connection between museums and their lives.

None of these approaches implies that the museum will abandon its current purposes or programs. They do require that museum staff and trustees view exhibits and programs from a different perspective, presenting them in as many appealing manners as possible.

Before we solicit the nonparticipants' attendance, therefore, we will have to consider what the uninitiated expect in the way of assistance with the "museum code." Are adequate helps provided so that those who make the initial venture onto untrod turf will receive enough benefits to want to return? This does not mean diluting the message, but it does mean communicating the message in the nonparticipants' terms, on several levels of detail and comprehension, in order for them to perceive it as meaningful to their lives.

In addition, it is essential to remember that occasional participants weigh each museum visit against other leisure options. They may choose to attend on a particular occasion instead of watching television, browsing at a shopping mall, participating in a sport or working in the garden. A museum outing for them is likely to be a vehicle for having an enjoyable time.
with other people rather than for concentrating on the content of the exhibits. While participating, they hope to find comfortable surroundings in which they can feel at ease, both physically and psychologically.

Applying these findings and doing follow-up studies can benefit all museum professionals by helping to build a fund of reliable information about audiences. Although a major study of similar scope cannot be accomplished without expertise in audience development and scientific research techniques, each museum can utilize systematic procedures to obtain psychographic information on its audiences, on their perceptions of the museum and on ways to deal with practical situations such as communicating more effectively with a variety of publics. Gathering quality information for long-term decision making is worth effort, time and money, for the value received is in direct proportion to the care invested in designing and carrying out a carefully controlled study.

The Toledo Museum of Art has benefited itself and its audiences by incorporating the findings of this study into its planning and programming. Most important has been a heightened awareness by the staff of the diversity of visitors' expectations, leisure values and needs.

The primary influence of the research results on the museum's major structural renovation was in recognizing the need for public amenities. People need a sense of where they are in relation to the whole museum and to other areas in it. They need to feel comfortable. New graphics greatly improved visitor orientation, and comfortable seating was added to the new entrance lobby. An information office to welcome visitors was located just inside the entrance.

For the recent El Greco exhibit, the museum targeted the area's Hispanic and Greek communities for special attention. Both groups attended in greater numbers than might have been otherwise expected, especially the Greek residents, who constitute a small, closely knit community. Still under way are efforts to improve labeling and explanatory handouts to assist the less-prepared visitors in understanding why certain art works are grouped together.

Most of all, the study results prompted the staff to think beyond only internal concerns and "to consider the public we're doing this for," explains Gregory Alligere Smith, assistant director for administration. "We now realize we should plan more on their terms, not just on our own terms."

We, too, can solve many of our audience development problems if we recognize that occasional participants and nonparticipants are looking for experiences and rewards different from those they now find in museums. If we want them to love museums, we must offer them some of the values that are important to them, in programs that meet some of their needs, while we continue to provide what the frequent visitors already find satisfying and rewarding.

Bibliography


