

## OUTCOMES AND EXPERIENCE: NEW PRIORITIES FOR MUSEUMS

Outcomes and experience are two words being heard more and more in museums and in the conversations of museum professionals. What do they mean to museums and how should museums respond to the trends that have made these words ubiquitous?

Outcome-based evaluation is one of those trends, and it is the hot trend among funders. Coined by the United Way, it is now embraced by the Institute of Museum and Library Services. Stephen Weil deserves most of the credit for keeping a conversation about this approach alive among museum people.

*The Experience Economy* (Pine and Gilmore 1998) epitomizes the second of those trends. This book, and the general theory that underlies it, was introduced to the American Association of Museums and its members in 1999. The trend of looking at museum practice through the lens of the experience economy was hot enough then, that author Joseph Pine, a management and marketing consultant, was selected to deliver the keynote address at the association's annual conference in Cleveland.

For the most part, these have been disconnected conversations—one on the marketing side of museums, the other among grants people and program developers. In fact, they are complementary trends.

### OUTCOME-BASED EVALUATION

In 1995, the United Way of America changed the emphasis in their program evaluation from focusing on the providers of services to the recipients; from assessing the quality of program design to the

effectiveness of the programs they were funding. Their model has four components: inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes, linked by what they call the "logic model" of the program. An outcome is not a unit of activity (mounting three exhibitions) or an output (publishing a curriculum), but what happens as a result of our activities and outputs, either the outcomes we desire or other outcomes, good and bad.

The United Way defines outcomes as:

*... benefits or changes for individuals or populations during or after participating in program activities. They are influenced by a program's outputs. Outcomes may relate to behavior, skills, knowledge, attitudes, values, condition, or other attributes. They are what participants know, think, or can do; or how they behave; or what their condition is, that is different following the program (United Way of America 1996: 2).*

It is often most useful to think of outcomes in terms of what's different or changed. But outcomes are not merely feel-good, amorphous statements; they should be backed up with evidence, indicators, and measures of success. Museums have to recognize that there are immediate, mid-term, and long-term outcomes from everything they do and that it is often easier to demonstrate immediate effects than it is to show long-term outcomes. Nevertheless, museums often articulate goals in very lofty, long-range terms, such as "improve aesthetic literacy."

This language of accountability for outcomes has begun to permeate the funding community. Because it is so well aligned with the 1993 Government Performance

and Results Act; the public funders, including Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), are adopting this approach as well. More and more museums are finding themselves challenged to demonstrate the results of their programs.

The great challenge for the arts and humanities is articulating the logic model. This is the alchemy that goes on in our head and heart and soul when we come to understand and appreciate art, or start to look carefully at the wonderful architecture we see every day, or wonder about the human narrative suggested by an assemblage of historic or archeological materials. We can see outcomes in our own lives—in what we choose to put on our walls, or the jewelry we wear, or the places we visit on vacation. But let's be realistic, is IMLS going to give a museum more money next year for these nebulous reasons? So how might we think about outcomes?

Answering the question "Why do you do what you do?" the executive director of a preservation agency said:

*People who really believe and practice historic preservation are also more thoughtful stewards of other community values. Stewardship extends beyond the built environment to the natural environment—they recycle more. And the civic—they vote more often. They're better citizens and make better communities.*

If that organization believes that this is their intended outcome, they need to build that transformation into the "logic model"—it won't just happen on its own. Even if people come to them for other reasons—aesthetic, nostalgic, economic—the organization must find ways to introduce them to the values of stewardship. So if they offer a workshop that only

includes information about replacing clapboards, selecting a contractor, or picking historic paint colors, the logic model won't work. The activities won't lead to the desired outcomes. They may get some good outputs—well-preserved houses—but not the intended outcome. The programming has to actually include lessons on the value of preservation and virtues of stewardship.

All too often logic models are based on leaps of faith. A museum offers a children's workshop on mask making in which participants reproduce Native American, African or Japanese masks, and claims that the intended outcome is to "foster cross-cultural understanding." But unless the workshop includes an explanation of those cultures, laced with an effective lesson in understanding and respecting cultures different from our own, that museum hasn't built a strong logic model. Simple exposure to other cultures won't create attitudinal change. The key is articulating a clear intended outcome and explicitly and thoughtfully tying the activities to that outcome. The final challenge lies in knowing what to measure or monitor to see if the intended outcome has been achieved. There is no doubt a realistic and valuable outcome from the workshop as designed (such as the participants understanding that different cultures may create art forms which are similar in form but different in intent, design and fabrication); that's the outcome to work towards and then measure.

Ten years ago, the Getty Center for Education in the Arts and The J. Paul Getty Museum (1991) sponsored focus groups in major art museums. People who weren't familiar with the museum were interviewed about their attitudes and expectations before and after a well-struct-

tured visit. One woman in the videotape of a follow-up focus group talked about seeing a painting, walking straight to the museum shop, buying a print, and hanging it where she could see it all day. Now that's a demonstrable outcome!

Funders are telling us we can't leave accountability to chance anymore. We need to define success and then monitor it. The hard part is committing to success measures that folks can agree are accomplishing things that are important to more than the museum's self-interest. IMLS uses a slogan to express this necessity: "*strengthening libraries and museums to benefit the public.*" Too often, we cite repeat visitation and increased membership as proof we're doing well. These are great outcomes for the museum, but they are not enough. "*Outcomes are what participants know, think, or can do; or how they behave . . . that is different following the program (emphasis added)*" (United Way of America 1996: 2). It's not about the museum; it's about the participants.

A state historical society had as a goal in its last plan: "*have a presence in every school in the state.*" That's a laudable, demonstrable goal, but it's not really an outcome. They could meet that goal by sending every school library a copy of the state history magazine. But who knows if the magazine is useful to teachers or students? Or if they even know it's in the library? Shift the goal to the participants, rather than the historical society, to the teachers or students and what the historical society wants them to accomplish. If the goal was "*teachers use [State] History Magazine to develop curriculum to meet new state education mandates,*" they'd have something to monitor and guidance for the logic model. The historical society would adjust the logic model and change

the activities and inputs. They might include advice on how to use articles in the classroom or where to find information relevant to the mandated curriculum. Teachers could share curriculum ideas with the society's education department, which could in turn post teacher-developed curricula on their Web site. This, in turn, could be linked to a discussion page where teachers shared ideas and reactions. These are measurable ways to observe if the society was being successful. They could even work with the state department of education to include questions about material in the magazine's articles in the standardized tests and see if students do better on those questions.

A state humanities council has an active library reading program and for every series, there are books and authors which cannot be included, but which relate to the themes of the program. What if they articulated that a desired outcome would be "readers would continue to explore these issues on their own?" They could expand the activities in the logic model and create a list of those books for further reading. They could help the libraries purchase the books. A few months after the series ended, the librarians could be asked to tabulate the circulation of those optional books, compared to similar titles not on the list. Like the museum visitor who continued to take pleasure in her art print from the museum shop, readers might be demonstrably continuing their educational experience.

#### EXPERIENCE ECONOMY

Before widespread industrialization, we were in a commodity economy; everything we grew or raised or made was pretty much the same. There were no brands

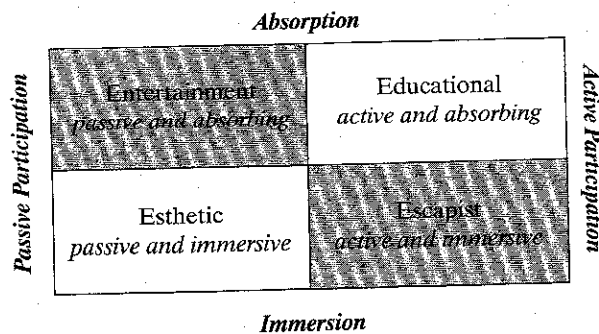
or differentiation—no Big Boy tomatoes or Polar Fleece jackets. With industrialization and the growth of a market economy, we had more choices and could focus on features. Was this well-made fabric? Did we like the pattern? Even so, it took many generations for Americans to really focus on product features that differentiated one from another. Then we moved into the service economy, where we are now. Services are intangible and can be customized far more easily than manufactured goods. We can choose from several insurance plans, for example, depending on our family size, age, overall health and tolerance for risk. Pine and Gilmore argue that over time, each of these sectors has become more commoditized, that is, less and less distinct. Even the service sector is now largely commoditized. Once Sprint seemed like a great alternative to AT&T; now it's hard to see any difference.

Pine and Gilmore observe that to distinguish yourself from the competition today, you need to offer experience—using services as the stage and goods as props, you engage customers in a way that creates a memorable event. But while many offer experiences, few have sold the experience as a separate product—you don't pay to enter Nike Town or Rainforest Café. The new economic frontier is creating and charging for experiences.

They analyze experience along two axes—how active are the participants and how connected are they? We can be active or passive participants in an experience. We can either be merely absorbed or truly immersed. That creates four types of experience, on the grid at right.

For example, seeing the Grand Canyon can span all four types of experiences. You get out of your car or the shuttle bus and walk to the edge and you are immersed in an amazing sight. You don't have to do anything but look and you have a wonderful *esthetic* experience. Then you start walking, down below the rim, and become an active participant in the experience, moving to the *escapist* role. You come back to the rim and, captivated by the walk, find a visitor center where there is an informative interactive exhibition: an *educational* experience. Back home, months later, you decide to see the Omnimax film on the Canyon, for its *entertainment* value (and to remind you of the other experiences)—you are a passive viewer, yet totally absorbed. None of these is the “right” way to experience the Grand Canyon. Each complements the other and adds to your perception, understanding, and enjoyment. Even the film, an artificial, second-hand, passive experience, adds to your sense of the Canyon.

Pine and Gilmore go on to explain how to turn products and services into carefully themed events which have their own economic value. They emphasize the theatricality required to engage customers at several levels. The cues must be controlled carefully to support the theme of the experience—the design of the envi-



ronment; the way staff treat customers; the signage, the music, the smell—because these are multi-sensory experiences. And, you sell memorabilia to help customers continue to savor their wonderful experience. Buy a Starbucks CD along with the coffee and the mug and the coffee maker and you can recapture the experience at home. Of course, you can't recreate it perfectly, which is why you keep coming back. And when you do, there's a new CD or a new special coffee or a new piece of coffee-making paraphernalia to make it a new experience.

Not only are people willing to pay for experience, but they have come to expect an immersive, full-service consistent experience. Years ago, before the new café and restaurant were added to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, visitors ate in the basement, in a cafeteria reminiscent of an elementary school. As Pine and Gilmore would say—definitely, a negative cue! Now we expect more.

At some level, it all starts to feel like we're emulating Disney, the master of experience, complete with an emphasis on perfect customer service. When museums and arts organizations look at this, they often just think, "Oh, we need to add food, shopping and Wal-Mart-style greeters." But it's really much more than that—or could be. While there's a large element of entertainment in most experiences, they're not incompatible with education. The key is *engagement*—and we all know that the more engaged our visitors, the more they learn. And the more they enjoy themselves.

We've all had wonderful museum experiences that engaged our minds and our hearts, our imaginations or our memories. As teachers we know that those experiences can be encouraged and helped along

by good teaching strategies, including those that use multiple senses and allow for diverse learning styles. Engaging experiences are more likely to have happened at a museum that was visually exciting, well maintained, comfortable, friendly and responsive to visitors. The challenge is to create engaging personal experiences for all visitors without creating shallow, mass-market, generic experiences.

Neil Kotler, from the Smithsonian Institution, argues that in a single day (or a single tour, for that matter), visitors can and do run through a range of experiences (Kotler 1999). Kotler articulates four kinds of experiences: excitement, playfulness, contemplation, and learning, moving from the visceral through the emotional and on to the cognitive. We need to look at our museum's assets and distinctiveness and create visit possibilities—either in the core of the visit or around the edges—that touch on more than one type of experience. The best museums and programs mix types of experiences. For example:

- Norlands, a living history farm in Maine, offers the option of staying overnight and participating in farm activities.
- Colonial Williamsburg presents the emotional experience of a slave auction, the staid recreation of the House of Burgesses and lighthearted concerts in the taverns.
- The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum confronts visitors with the documentary reality of the Holocaust but offers the opportunity to retreat in quiet contemplation.

Kotler asserts that museums have the potential for great experiences if we just looked for them. Pine and Gilmore say

people are seeking experiences and will pay for them. But John Dewey, the great advocate of experiential education, admonished that not every experience is educational. Our challenge is to take what we have and produce memorable, engaging, educational and enjoyable experiences.

#### CONCLUSION

Where does this leave us? Our grants officers are saying, "how can we demonstrate outcomes for what we do?" And the marketing people are saying "to compete, we need more compelling experiences." At one level, these seem incompatible, emphasizing content and results on the one hand and ephemeral pandering on the other. But both start with the visitor experience and the challenge to improve it. If we detach the commercialism from the conversation about experience, as Kotler did, we are left with strong educational theory that is absolutely consistent with an emphasis on effectiveness. Both of these trends shift the focus from the professional staff to the visitors.

Neither of these trends is bad for museums. We should prefer that museums be at the center of current discourse about how people spend their time and money, rather than on the periphery. We need to be able to demonstrate that people get something useful from museum exhibitions and programs. And they are more likely to learn or discover something if they are engaged.

Good intentions and a wonderful collection are not enough. We have work to do if we are to deliver on the promise of

our resources. We have to tap those resources and our creative energies, stay fresh and exciting, pay attention to the results of what we do, keep track of our successes and failures, listen to our visitors, and be attentive to their needs and expectations. We cannot be smug—funders won't stand for it; or aloof—visitors won't appreciate it. We have to accept that evaluation and marketing improve what we do, not threaten it. We must not only embrace change but also find new tools for effecting change. These trends may stay or they may pass quickly—it doesn't really matter. Their lessons will remain regardless.

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#### NOTE

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