

MUSEUM VISITORS' PERSPECTIVES ON AND PREFERRED EXPERIENCES FOR HERITAGE TOURISM

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Abstract

A recent study of Michigan museums that complements the economic impact analyses provides insights into museum visitor travel planning and behavior, experience preferences, and recommendations for improving their experiences. This study supports others that indicate museum visitors are predominantly Caucasian, have higher education and household incomes than the general population. However, results also challenge common tourism planning assumptions about the need to create interesting cost center attractions to entice tourists to choose a community or region as their destination. Based on these data, recommendations for tourism experience planning are provided.

1.0 Introduction

For over a decade now (since the early 1990s) in the United States, attention has been focused on the development and promotion of cultural tourism. A national effort was spotlighted when the National Trust for Historic Preservation implemented its Heritage Tourism Initiative in 1993 (Green 1993) and the 1995 Whitehouse Conference on Tourism presented a report commissioned by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities titled "Exploring America through Its Culture". Museums, performing and visual arts organizations have perceived this intentional partnership between cultural organizations and tourism both as a way to extend their missions by impacting otherwise

unreached audiences (or markets) and as a source of additional revenue generation. Such revenue is critical in an era of declining funding from government and some philanthropic sources. The tourism industry has supported cultural tourism development as a way to meet the needs and desires of a changing tourist market, primarily to capture and increase market share. It is no surprise, then, that major attention has been focused on the economic impacts of cultural tourism. Cultural organizations understand this as a critical element in gaining political, community and financial support for their programs and facilities. The tourism industry deems this an essential criterion for inclusion of an attraction or experience in the tourism system. Consequently, cultural organizations are interested in demonstrating economic benefits to communities, regions and states in addition to acknowledging their more traditional benefits: education, preservation, quality of life enhancement. As a result, museums, historic sites, performing arts organizations, and other cultural institutions have commissioned numerous economic impact studies to demonstrate their value in terms understandable by the tourism industry, state legislators and local politicians, community and economic development authorities, and other entities responsible for allocating increasingly limited resources. (America for the Arts 2002; Clarion Associates 2002; Lane 2001; National Governors Association 2001; Stronge 2000, TIA 2001, 2003).

In Michigan, efforts to build a partnership between the state's cultural institutions and tourism began in earnest in about 1994, shortly after the Whitehouse Conference on Tourism. The first phase, spearheaded by members of the Michigan Museums Association (MMA), was a white paper titled *Tourism in Michigan: Discover the Stories and Faces of Michigan* (Michigan Museums Association 1997). This was followed by an initial study of cultural tourism's status in Michigan (Michigan Museums Association 1998), a partnership between the MMA and the Michigan American Automobile Association (AAA) to publish an annual cultural tourism promotional piece, and a series of conferences/workshops to bring together tourism and

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museum professionals and to provide training in heritage tourism planning and implementation (Vander Stoep and Harmon 1999). More recently, since its creation in 2001, Michigan's Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL) has focused on development of tourism opportunities highlighting the State's maritime heritage. Two programs are: 1) a community-based program to develop maritime heritage tourism in selected coastal communities; and, 2) a partnership with MMA members and communities to develop themed itineraries (History, Arts and Libraries, 2005). Examples of resulting maritime driving tours include the "River Country Heritage Water Trail," "Historic Harbortowns: Exploring Michigan's Beachtowns," and "Echoes of the Edmund Fitzgerald" (Travel Michigan 2005). Examples of other heritage routes include books, "Art and Wine," "Once Upon a Farm," and "Inventors' Alley." Each themed tourism itinerary was developed by community members and is supported/promoted via Travel Michigan's statewide tourism web site (Travel Michigan 2005). Simultaneously, Michigan Museums Association worked in partnership with Travel Michigan/Michigan Economic Development Corporation to commission a study to assess the economic impacts of cultural tourism in Michigan. To make the primary-data-based study feasible within the debated and vague definitional context of "culture" and the constraints of budget and time, visitors to museums were selected as the sampling frame for a study to estimate economic impacts of museum-based cultural tourism. Results of this study are reported in the proceedings of the 2004 Northeast Recreation Research Symposium (Vander Stoep 2005).

While results of economic impact studies provide the "bottom line" information desired by business and political leaders, and are important for organizational self-assessment and future planning, the economic impacts are simply an indicator of underlying factors. If there are, in fact, positive economic impacts of museum-based (or other cultural organization) tourism, the underlying reasons for why people choose to spend their money engaged in such activities must be understood. How do people choose tourism destinations? What is the role or importance of museums and other cultural sites/events/experiences (hereafter labeled simply as "museums") in those decisions? How do visitors (or

potential visitors) to a community find out about the museum(s)? What are the factors or characteristics of the site or experience that attract them? How much are they willing to pay for admission? What are their favorite parts of a museum experience? What do they not like, or find lacking, in their experience? What are the factors that would encourage tourists to return in the future (repeat visitors)? What are other activities engaged in during the "trip" in which a museum visit is incorporated? On what specifically do tourists spend their money? Answers to these and other questions underlie tourist spending behavior, both in the museum and in the local community.

This paper begins to answer some of these questions for tourists who have included a visit to at least one museum during their trip to a specific Michigan community. For this study, the American Association of Museums definition of "museum" is used (American Association of Museums 1994) and includes many types of sites (sometimes sites that may not be perceived by visitors as a museum, or as a site associated with cultural tourism): general interest museums, history museums, natural history museums, science museums, children's museums, art museums, historic sites and buildings, nature centers, botanical gardens, zoos, aquariums, planetariums, and special interest museums such as maritime museums, lighthouses, historic ships, automobile and railroad museums.

2.0 Methods

As presented more fully in Vander Stoep (2005), it is difficult to provide a universally accepted definition of cultural tourism, partly because the term "culture" is interpreted in many ways, and partly because the experience of tourism is inherently complex, making it difficult to isolate "heritage or cultural" components of a trip from those that are not. To estimate economic impacts, it thus becomes important to operationalize a definition and component of the travel experience. However, this is less important for understanding the factors associated with how and why potential tourists make decisions about travel destinations, and then about decisions for specific experiences and spending within that destination. It is more important to understand the

role of heritage and cultural sites, factors and experiences in making those decisions, and in visitors' assessments of those experiences. For this study, "general admission" museum visitors were targeted. This study does not address experiences associated with special events and community festivals, performing arts, or a host of historical sites and monuments that are not formally associated with a physical "museum" building or site.

2.1 Survey Instruments

The complete study involved multiple survey instruments: a museum administrator survey (sent to a census of all Michigan museums), a visitor survey (using sampling plans at 35 Michigan museums), and a supplemental survey for MotorCities National Heritage Area. This paper focuses on part of the visitor survey.

The survey of museum visitors gathered demographic and travel party information, trip characteristics, spending data, primary trip purpose, information to determine if visitors were local or tourists (traveled more than 50 miles one way) and whether their trip was a day or overnight trip, lodging type for overnight trips, factors related to their museum visit behavior, travel planning, and personal assessments of their museum experiences. The instrument included some questions with response sets provided (for most questions, an "other" option was included to allow visitors the opportunity to provide other responses or explanatory comments) and some questions that were entirely open-ended. Examples of open-ended questions are those that asked visitors to provide information about their best experiences (the things they liked best about a museum) and to give recommendations for improving the site or visitor experience.

Museum visitors initially were contacted at the 35 museums where they completed a short on-site survey, and were invited to complete a more comprehensive post-trip survey. They could choose either a printed mail or web-based format. This survey gathered detailed spending, travel planning and preferences, museum experience assessments and other information after visitors completed their trips. Visitors not returning the initial "long" survey were sent reminders, via mail or email, based on their chosen response mode.

2.2 Visitor Sampling

The museum visitor sample was taken from 35 "large" and "medium" museums² across Michigan, representing a range of geographic locations and museum types (see the AAM list of facilities considered to be museums, in the "introduction"). Based on a planned sampling strategy tailored to each site's special needs, visitors were contacted on dates selected to represent weekend and weekday visitors and different times of day. To serve as a contact site, the museum had to be willing to participate, have staff or volunteers trained to conduct surveys, offer an incentive to visitors for study participation, and serve enough visitors to obtain an on-site sample efficiently. "Small" museums were not included because 1) they are assumed to have minimal economic impact (the primary objective of the funding organization); and 2) it was unlikely that they would have the staff or resources to conduct the onsite surveys.

2.2 Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics (using SPSS) were used for developing visitor profiles, for identifying relevant travel planning factors, trip behavior and preferred activities, describing visitors' general museum interest and involvement, and their willingness to pay for museum visits. Content analysis, using two independent analysts and having discordant results decided by a third analyst, was used to identify general themes for what visitors liked and would recommend for improvements related to their museum-based heritage experience (Silverman 1993).

3.0 Results

3.1 Response Rates and Demographic Characteristics

A total of 6,417 museum visitors were contacted at cooperating museums. Sixty percent of these visitors (n = 3,868) agreed to participate in the post-trip survey and 34 percent of those agreeing actually completed the post-trip survey (n = 1,280). Potential non-response bias in the visitor survey was assessed by comparing the onsite sample with those completing the post-trip survey. No significant differences were observed between the two groups in terms of trip purposes, but there were some

²Large museums have annual operating budgets over \$1 million while medium-sized museums have budgets between \$250,000 and a million.

differences in trip types. Local visitors were somewhat less likely to respond to the post-trip survey while visitors on overnight trips are over-represented in the post-trip sample. Only general admission adult visitors (age 18 or older) were supposed to be contacted for the survey, so these statistics generally exclude a representative sample of visitors who were part of organized school or adult groups and visitors to most special events. However, a small number of “group members” are included in this analysis, as suggested by some of the “group size” data. Museum visitors were similar to the Michigan population as a whole with respect to age, but included fewer minorities. They also had higher levels of education and income. There were no significant differences in demographic profiles across types of trips taken by the respondents (local visitor, day tourist, or overnight tourist).

Ages of museum visitor respondents (adults 18 years and older) were distributed in a fairly normal bell curve, with the two largest age ranges (36-45 years and 46 – 55 years) each accounting for about 23 percent of all respondents, and with higher numbers of visitors in the two oldest age ranges (56-65 years and those more than 65 years old) than the two youngest age groups (those aged 26-35 years and 18 – 25 years. The smallest group (18-25 years old) accounted for only about 5.5 percent of all visitors. About two thirds (67%) of the respondents were women, even though research associates were instructed to alternate male and female respondents to achieve close to a 50:50 male: female ratio. While ratios varied from site to site, women were the most frequent survey respondents overall, with a higher ratio of male respondents at only one site.⁴ It is not possible to determine the reasons for this discrepancy; however, possible reasons include:

- women were more willing to talk with research associates at the museum;

³Descriptive statistics presented in this paper show slightly different results than those presented in Vander Stoep 2005 (NERR 2004) because only general admission visitors were used for the economic analyses, and thus all the other results presented in that paper.

⁴This museum was an automobile heritage museum, which apparently is a topic highly attractive to males.

- women were more willing to agree to complete a post-trip survey when contacted;
- more females than males actually visited the museum (or were the “adult” within a group that talked with the research associate);
- research associates did not or were unable to follow the protocol for some reason; or,
- assuming the initial contacts were evenly split male/female, the person completing the post-trip survey at home was more often a female, despite the instruction that the same person who completed the on-site survey should complete the post-trip survey.

Almost 60 percent had annual household incomes of between \$25,000 and \$75,000, with about 11 percent having incomes of less than \$25,000 and fewer than 10 percent having incomes in each of the two highest income categories (\$100,000 - \$124,999 per year, and \$125,000 or more per year). There were small differences among visitors to different museums, with those visiting sites having the highest ticket prices being more likely to have higher incomes. This is likely due to self-selection based on ability to pay, either for the higher ticket prices and/or for the travel costs associated with visiting distant or island-based museums.

Three-quarters of all respondents had some college education or higher, with 50 percent having at least one college degree. Only 18 percent had no more than a high school education. This educational profile is consistent with results of numerous other studies of cultural or heritage tourist market segments that indicate tourists who participate in cultural tourism are, on average, more highly educated than the general population.

Ninety percent of all respondents were White/Caucasian, with the percent at some museums being as high as 96 percent and the lowest being 84 percent.⁵ Almost one quarter (24%) of museum visitor respondents were retired, and 59 percent were employed either full- or

⁵The individual site results are based on site-specific analysis of only ten of the 35 museums involved in the study. These were the only museums having at least 50 completed surveys returned.

part-time. The largest category (just over 45%) was those working full time in paid jobs. Only 4 percent were students.

3.2 Trip Characteristics and Purpose

For all respondents in the study, about 40 percent of the museum visitors came from within 50 miles of the museum (considered local visitors). Fourteen percent were day visitors who traveled more than 50 miles from home to the site. Forty-six percent of the trips involved an overnight stay in the local area.⁶ However, some sites received predominantly local visitors and others received primarily overnight tourists. The average length of stay in the community was 2.4 nights for hotel visitors and 3.4 nights for visitors staying in other types of lodging.

The average party size for museum visitors was about three persons across all regions and segments, but the most common group size was two people (34%). Another third (35%) traveled in groups of three or four. Only about 4 percent visited alone. About 8 percent traveled in groups of 10 or more. Just over half of the respondents (52%) were traveling in a family group including at least one child. About 25 percent were traveling with a spouse or significant other. The third largest group type category was those traveling with a group of friends (12%). Six percent or fewer (for each group type) were traveling either in an organized group, alone, or with a commercial bus tour.

3.3 Museum Visits as Related to Pleasure Travel Planning and Behavior

Over half (52%) of the trips were made primarily to visit the museum where the visitor was sampled and 20 percent of respondents were visiting the community more generally. Ten percent were visiting friends and relatives, and 9 percent were participating in an art show or other type of special event. The rest of the trips were for other reasons, including for business, as part of a tour, for nostalgia, to attend a family event, or to go shopping. Day trips were more likely than overnight trips to be

primarily to visit the museum, with 73 percent of local day trips and 67 percent of non-local day trips made primarily to visit the museum. Comparatively, only 30 percent of overnight trips were made principally to visit the museum. Overnight tourists were most likely to be visiting the community in general (36%), and included a museum visit within their overall experience.

Because only one-third of overnight tourists who included a museum visit in their trip made their trip specifically to visit the museum, it can be assumed that the museum visit is incorporated into either the travel planning or the in-community tourist experience in some other way. Two questions were used to better understand general decision-making related to museum visits during pleasure travel (not specifically the trip during which respondents were contacted for this study). The first question asked about the respondents' general pattern of museum visits when traveling for pleasure. Just over half of those who answered this question indicated they usually or always include a museum visit in their trip (19% said they always include a museum visit). The most frequent response, however, was by the 38 percent who said they sometimes include a visit to a museum during their trip. Fewer than 10 percent indicated they rarely include a museum visit. Two percent indicated a range of other explanations, including: "museums are visited if they are available," "if a museum visit is included in tours planned by others," "don't travel," or "never consider museums." Several also indicated that a museum visit depends on several factors, such as cost, topic of museum exhibits, and the group with whom they are traveling. One person indicated they would take a special trip for a "premium" museum.

The second question asked if and how a museum visit was considered when choosing a destination and during trip planning. The most common response (47% of those responding) was "I do not specifically plan museum visits, but if I see an interesting museum advertised at the destination, I will visit." The next most common response (44%) was "I plan trips to a community for a variety of experiences, and usually include a museum visit." Only 5 percent of respondents said they "plan trips specifically to visit museums." This proportion

⁶The mix of trip types varies considerably across different museums. While the museums sampled cover a range of locations and museum types, we cannot guarantee that the resulting sample of visitors is completely representative of all museum visitors.

is considerably fewer than the 30 percent of overnight tourists who said they planned “this trip” specifically to visit the museum where contacted. However, it should be noted that the results presented for the two questions relate to general pleasure travel planning and behavior (not just for “this trip”) and includes results for all respondents, not just the overnight tourists. It is also possible that some percent of visitors who planned “this trip” specifically to visit the museum where contacted may not make decisions about all pleasure travel based on a museum visit.

Respondents also were asked what other factors or travel experience opportunities related specifically to heritage or cultural components of their trip were considered when planning a pleasure trip. The following factors were provided:

- Visiting communities that preserve their historic character (architecture, historic downtowns, etc.)
- Staying at historic hotels or bed & breakfasts (B&Bs)
- Eating at local ethnic restaurants
- Eating at restaurants housed in historic buildings
- Shopping at stores and gift shops located in historic buildings
- Purchasing souvenirs that reflect the local history, arts & crafts, and/or culture
- Attending cultural, historic and ethnic festivals and special events
- Attending local music, dance, and/or theater performances
- Walking along waterfront trails, boardwalks, other community self-guided walks
- Going on historic or cultural tours with a guide
- Traveling via historic transportation (e.g., trolleys, horse-drawn carriages, trains, boats)
- Viewing, reading wall displays, menu mini-histories, historic markers and monuments, and outside exhibits along walking paths that explain local history and culture
- Other: (specify).

Respondents were asked to indicate one of three levels of importance for each (very important = 1; somewhat

important = 2; not at all important = 3) or to provide other factors important to them in choosing a destination or planning a trip. Across all visitors to all museums included in the study, the three factors receiving the highest importance (based on calculating a mean of the three possible ratings) were:

- Visiting communities that preserve their historic character (architecture, historic downtowns, etc.) (mean of 1.52)
- Walking along waterfront trails, boardwalks, other community self-guided walks (mean of 1.52)
- Viewing, reading wall displays, menu mini-histories, historic markers and monuments, (mean of 1.63) and outside exhibits along walking paths that explain local history and culture.

The next most important factors, with mean scores of between 1.75 and 2.0 – thus, being at least “somewhat important” – were:

- Purchasing souvenirs that reflect the local history, arts & crafts, and/or culture, and (mean of 1.89)
- Eating at local ethnic restaurants. (mean of 1.97)

All other factors received average ratings indicating less than “somewhat important.” “ Staying at historic hotels or Bed-and-Breakfast facilities” was the least important factor (mean of 2.51) in planning a trip to a specific destination.

The statewide results above were mirrored fairly consistently at the individual museums. Seventy-nine additional responses were provided by respondents in the “other” category. The two most often cited factors related to 1) choosing attractions and activities that provided opportunities specifically for children (20% of “other” responses), with many of them mentioning education for children as important; and 2) visiting historic sites or museums. The remaining factors, each of which was identified by fewer than 7 percent of the 79 “other” responses, were: nearby camping, friendly atmosphere/ staff, proximity to family/friends, price, art, events and festivals, antiques, architecture, cleanliness, variety, safety, wheelchair access, availability of nature-based recreation

opportunities, parking, proximity to home, and the weather.

3.4 Visitor Assessments of the Museum Experience

Respondents were asked also to assess their experience during the specific museum visit during which they were first contacted for this survey. The first question asked them to identify up to three elements of the experience they considered their most favorite. These could include things such as, but not limited to, a specific exhibit, a tour, a program, a video or other media component, the gift shop, or the quality of historic preservation. However, respondents were not restricted to specific categories. Some mentioned specific elements of the museum facility, exhibits or activities; others identified more general characteristics of the experience or qualities of the place (e.g., ambience, associated walking or recreational opportunities).

Content analysis was used to categorize the comments provided originally as specific to individual museums, but grouped across all museum responses to provide a broad picture of experience characteristics preferred by museum visitors. No attempt was made to weight or prioritize the responses. Rather, the preferred experiences could be described generally as having the following characteristics:

- Interactive, hands-on activities (including simulations) – EXPERIENCES,
- Things for children to do (child-friendly),
- Things that relate to the individual (specifics differ depending on age and experience of visitor); nostalgia; elements related to “local area,”
- Opportunities for personal research (e.g., associated library, genealogy),
- Opportunities for extensions/taking things home (e.g., souvenirs, plants, books, art)
- Aesthetics of a site (e.g., landscape, design, cleanliness), ambience, the view
- Amenities, support functions (e.g., gift shop, trails, picnic areas)
- Interpretation from guides & docents/friendly and knowledgeable staff; costumed and performance interpreters

- Demonstrations and re-enactments
- Seeing “real work in progress” (e.g., site restoration, artifact conservation, archaeological digs)
- Authenticity: real objects/artifacts/buildings/natural areas –if its “real,” be sure the visitor knows!
- Experiences (e.g., rides, alternate transportation tours - trolleys, carriages, boats, trains, old cars, ponies, carousel)
- Immersion experiences (where offered)
- Films and videos (including IMAX)
- Variety (“something for everyone” in the group)
- Well-maintained facilities
- Opportunities for socializing with family, friends
- Unique dining/eating experiences (with quality food),
- Factors related to leisurely experience, comfort, ease of movement (including accommodations for visitors having disabilities), free parking
- Some prefer the self-guided, self-paced experiences
- Educational experiences while having fun

Museum visitors also were asked what their least favorite parts of their museum visit were. They could identify up to three things they thought the museum could do to improve the visitors’ experience in the future. Responses could be related to things such as, but not limited to, type and quality of facilities, access (e.g., transportation, signage, accommodations for impairments or foreign languages), quality of exhibits and interpretive programs, the stories presented, accessibility of and relations with staff, hours of operation, variety of experiences offered, and information. Sometimes visitors identified specific negative experiences encountered during their specific trip; other times they identified more general qualities or characteristics of the museum or the opportunities provided.

Recommendations, often stated in terms of things the visitor did not like, could be described generally as having the following characteristics:

- Things not working or being closed, or “stock” was missing (brochures, maps, hand sanitizer, etc.)

- Physical discomfort (no air conditioning, lack of rest benches, not enough water, too far to restrooms, lack of shaded areas to rest), poor weather/wrong season to visit the site
- Lack of convenience (parking, restrooms, water, food, adequate wayfinding aids [signs, arrows, footprints on ground to complement maps; not enough posted maps], etc.)
- Not enough interactive, hands-on opportunities
- No/not enough “local” stories
- Several comments about facilities being “too small” or “expected a larger place”
- Experience doesn’t match expectations (across a range of factors)
- Restricted hours of operation (entire facility or some parts, especially scheduled shows, demonstrations, animal feedings, etc.),
- For some sites, some visitors – wanted more interpreters/docents (or more knowledgeable interpreters)
- Request for new exhibits/experiences, rotating and temporary exhibits to complement “permanent” exhibits (some complained of loss of “old” exhibits, especially those they remembered from childhood)
- Request for more opportunities for socializing (interacting/bonding with group members)
- Sometimes (at specific sites) complaints about costs (admission, add-on tickets, souvenir prices)
- For some sites, comments about poor quality or selection of food (or too-high costs)
- Lack of interpretive staff/docents to provide information, respond to questions
- Lack of accommodations for visitors having various disabilities (physical, vision impairments, hearing impairments); not enough strollers and other accommodations for people with young children

Table 1.—Plans to visit the museum again within 12 months

		LOCAL	TOURIST	TOTAL
Will you visit again within 12 months?	YES	293	135	428
	NO	148	219	367
	MAYBE	39	358	397
	TOTAL	480	712	1,192

Many tourist destination communities and attractions, including museums, often state that they would like to increase repeat visitation. This is in part because it costs less to attract repeat visitors than new visitors. Therefore, visitors were asked if they intended to visit the museum again within the next 12 months and, if not, why. Overall, for all respondents, responses were fairly evenly distributed across those who said they would visit again within 12 months, those who said they would not, and those who were not sure. However, when responses were analyzed by whether the respondent was a local visitor or a tourist, the proportions were considerably different. Local residents were much more likely than tourists to indicate they would visit again, and a much smaller percent were “unsure.” Tourists were much less likely to have made a clear decision about a potential future visit within 12 months (see Table 1).

Across visitors to all museums, the following categories of responses were given as reasons for not visiting the site again within the next 12 months. Of the 397 respondents who provided a reason, the most common was that they simply had made no plans at all for pleasure travel in the next year (n = 134). The next most common reason was that the site was too far from home (n = 113). The next two categories, both probably having the same underlying rationale, could be categorized as “been there, done that” (n = 61) or that, when traveling, visitors simply prefer to visit new and different places on each trip rather than returning to the same places (n = 58). Only a few (n = 18) cited reasons related to a specific “bad experience,” being overcharged, or the museum not meeting their expectations.

Table 2.—Reasons for not planning to visit the museum again within 12 months

Reason	Number Giving Response	
No plan in 12 months	134	
Too far (distance)	113	
Been there, done that	61	} 119
Prefer to visit new/other places on future trip	58	
Didn't have good experience/ meet expectations	15	
Combination of factors	7	
Visit irregularly	5	
Too expensive	3	
Personal health issues	1	

4.0 Discussion and Recommendations

Results of demographic profiles of museum visitors are consistent with those of numerous other studies focused on cultural or heritage tourism. Museum visitors were predominantly white/Caucasian, more highly educated, and having higher annual household incomes than the general population or the “average” tourist (despite the improbability of there actually being an “average tourist”). However, different visitor profiles exist for specific museums that target and attract different market segments (e.g., visitors to the automotive heritage museum).

Nevertheless, there were some results that seem to contradict the common assumptions about why visitors choose a museum attraction (or associated community), and about their propensity to become repeat visitors if they have a good experience. First, the factors that are the most important in the decisions to visit a specific community (where museums may be part of the tourism experience) are those that are not direct revenue generators (preservation of a community's historic architecture, downtowns, landscaping and viewsheds; opportunities to walk along waterfront trails, boardwalks, or other community self-guided walks; and viewing/reading interpretive information about the local history/culture provided in historic markers, wayside exhibits,

on menus, and on wall displays in restaurants and other buildings). These are not the things that visitors actually pay for via admission or other participation fees, lodging and food costs, or purchase of souvenirs. Rather, they are the elements that create the ambience, the character, and the unique quality of a place. Once a tourist decides to visit a place, based on the factors identified above, they will then pay for the varied experiences, activities, services and amenities available within the community. Therefore, it is recommended that communities invest in preserving the unique character and resources of their community, enhancing them through a variety of interpretive and passive recreational opportunities, and promoting a quality experience within the community. Cost centers (attractions, lodging establishments, restaurants, shopping outlets, and other businesses catering

to the tourist) should recognize, support and contribute to these investments. Tourists can't spend their money in their businesses unless they are first attracted to the community. An additional incentive would be to create a program whereby part of a tourist's fees are contributed to the community's non-cost-center development efforts such as historic preservation, trail creation, and interpretive signs/programs. Tourists should be informed of this program, as they are more likely to accept fees and provide additional donations if they know that their dollars are contributing to what they perceive as a “good cause.”⁷

Second, while some tourists do choose a destination based on a single attraction or experience (sometimes even a museum), many more choose a community having a variety of things to do rather than a single activity or attraction (such as a museum). Therefore, community businesses and organizations should work in partnership, rather than competition, to develop a cluster of sites, activities and experiences for tourists. Likewise, these should be jointly promoted so that potential visitors understand the diversity of experiences available.

⁷An example of this is the fee demonstration program in use by federal agencies, which post signs on visitor structures, program signs, and other amenities that are funded by entrance fees.

Additional “linkages” between tourist attractions, sites and experiences can include pedestrian and other transportation links between sites, cross-promotion from site to site, discounted joint admission tickets, and a unified story that links the heritage components of the community so that visitors understand the unique character and stories of the community.

Third, although striving to provide quality experiences and develop client/guest loyalty in visitors is a laudable goal, results of this study indicate that many visitors are unlikely to return to the same attraction or community again, at least in the near future. Thus, efforts should be focused less on attracting repeat visitation and more on encouraging “word of mouth” promotion of the attraction or community by visitors to their friends and colleagues. Results in this study, as in numerous others, clearly shows that the most common information source about a potential tourist site is word of mouth. Therefore, providing a quality experience is still important. Museums and other attractions, as well as their host communities, might focus more attention on referral programs, perhaps by offering discounted fees at attractions, lodging, restaurants or shopping facilities to new visitors referred by previous visitors.

Finally, both individual museums and tourism host communities should review the list of “favorite” and “least favorite” elements of the visitors’ experiences to guide planning and development of visitor experiences. The lists will not be recreated here, but some summary recommendations are made. Generally, a focus on creating hands-on, authentic, immersion experiences using a variety of media and experiential delivery channels, in a clean, attractive and safe environment should be considered. Amenities and support functions, interpretive/educational opportunities, and opportunities for experience extensions (souvenirs, books, home activity sheets, photo opportunities) should be incorporated into the overall experience. Also, communities and museums should provide a range of experiences – something for everyone – to meet the needs of family and other group members, who often have diverse experience preferences.

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