



View of The Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, from Yerba Buena Lane, at dusk. Photo by Bruce Damonte

What can museums learn about attracting new audiences from the Contemporary Jewish Museum?

Summary

Converting Family into Fans: How the Contemporary Jewish Museum Expanded its Reach is part of a series of case studies commissioned by The Wallace Foundation to explore arts and cultural organizations' evidence-based efforts to reach new audiences and deepen relationships with their existing audiences. Each aspires to capture broadly applicable lessons about what works and what does not—and why—in building audiences. The American Alliance of Museums developed this overview to highlight the relevance of the case study for museums and promote cross-sector learning.

The study tells the story of how one museum pursued a new audience with research and experimentation. The CJM's approach to learning its new audience in depth, developing programming and community relationships to serve them, and ensuring that they felt welcome as newcomers is applicable to any museum looking to engage new demographic groups.

Challenge

In moving from a small exhibition space inside an office lobby to a much larger one in a dedicated building, the Contemporary Jewish Museum needed to expand its audience beyond its niche of adults with an intellectual interest in the religion and culture of Judaism.

Audience Goal

The museum decided to engage children and families, seeking a sense of intergenerational vibrancy. But getting the attention of this audience and convincing them they would enjoy a visit took commitment and agility. And, importantly, the museum wanted to appeal to families without alienating its traditional and predominately adult audience.

Research

The CJM decided to conduct focus groups to understand how their target audience perceived the museum, and what approaches might persuade them to visit.

The research revealed that parents with young children did not see the museum as relevant to them and felt that there were barriers to visiting in the cost of admission and the expectation that children would be perceived as disruptive. When presented with the new vision of the museum as a lively intergenerational and intercultural space, families were more interested in visiting, but only if the museum could provide the child-friendly programming and welcoming environment they needed.

Strategies

To address the feedback it received in its research, the museum tested a few tactics:

- Staging high-profile, well-promoted exhibitions designed to attract families, with themes interesting to both children and adults.
 - ◆ These were often on legendary children's book illustrators who were Jewish, and featured recognizable characters while exploring the artistic and cultural significance of the work.
- Providing new programs and a welcoming environment for families
 - ◆ Designing programs that helped children and parents engage with exhibitions together
 - Scheduled activities like art workshops and family group tours, to experience the museum alongside other children
 - "Anytime" activities available whenever families showed up, which they could experience on their own
 - ◆ Identifying ways to make families feel welcome and comfortable when they visited
 - Greeting family visitors upon entry with welcoming staff, an inviting lobby atmosphere, and easy-to-find information on what family-friendly exhibitions and activities were available
 - Placing "seating nooks" for families inside exhibitions, so they could pause without leaving the galleries
 - ◆ Reducing financial barriers
 - Free Family Days with special activities at least twice a year
 - Passes providing free or reduced admission, distributed through schools, libraries, and bookstores
 - ◆ Reaching families through community partnerships
 - Collaborating with local schools and public libraries on programming for both children and parents
 - Hosting programs in museums and in partner institutions
 - Developing programs alongside staff from partner institutions, emphasizing opportunities for mutual benefit

Results

- Almost every year since its move, the CJM has seen about ten times as many visitors as it had in its old space.
- Family visitors spiked for four years, beating the goal of eighteen thousand per year for three of those, and then diminished during the next few years when the museum did not produce as many splashy and well-publicized exhibitions.
- Information from visitors beyond attendance has been hard to come by because of a low response rate on audience surveys.
- The museum has since built a dedicated family room in its education center and completed an in-depth family research project with a third-party evaluator for more detailed feedback.

Insights

1. Offering family-oriented programming was essential. Without relevant exhibitions to promote, there would have been little success in attracting the audience to the museum.
2. Free admission alone did not move the needle. As broader research has shown, new audiences are rarely persuaded to visit until they see programming as personally relevant.
3. Reaching parents through familiar institutions proved effective. Partnering with schools and libraries in mutually beneficial programming created influential ambassadors for the museum.
4. Using research and evaluation sharpened tactics and improved results. Starting with market research made for well-reasoned strategies, and following metrics throughout the process helped the museum refine its approach and dedicate resources to programs with the biggest impact.
5. Balancing the needs of different audiences required creativity and compromise. Not every idea to accommodate children could be implemented if it alienated the adult audience or endangered the objects on view. Proactive planning and creative compromises helped meet all those needs at once.
6. Leadership, including board members and senior managers, needed to embrace the audience initiative as a core part of the CJM's long-term success. Without that commitment, the focus and resources required to cultivate an audience would not have been feasible.

Discussion Questions

- Attracting a new audience means learning the audience—what they think of your institution and what they want out of a visit—which takes time and resources. Does the leadership and board at your museum see the new audience as enough of a priority to support a long-term initiative like this?
- Is your museum ready to welcome a new audience? How could you teach the staff to communicate well with the new visitors to meet expectations on both sides?
- What organizations in your community have current relationships with the audience you want to attract? What benefit could you offer them in exchange for collaborating and building interest in the work you present for the new audience?
- Are you prepared to dedicate long-term resources to community partnerships which might take time to show results?

Additional Resources

The Road to Results: Effective Practices for Building Arts Audiences. Bob Harlow. New York: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2014

This report identifies and examines nine practices of arts organizations that successfully expanded their audiences.

Taking Out the Guesswork: A Guide to Using Research to Build Arts Audiences. Bob Harlow. New York: Wallace Studies in Building Arts Audiences, 2015

This practical guide shows arts organizations how to use research to cultivate audiences.

Building Audiences for the Arts Knowledge Center. The Wallace Foundation

This website features reports and other resources for insights into building audiences for the arts.