

Scope of 2019 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers and Broader Population Comparison Sampling

The 2019 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers is designed to accomplish three primary things:

1. provide museums with benchmark data about their core audiences and how they are perceived, and how those perceptions shift over time;
2. address field-wide issues that research can inform; and
3. provide a comparison broader population sample of casual and non-visitors to museums.

This document provides the rationale for the survey design, as well as how the custom questions individual museums might choose for their surveys might fit in.

Individual Museum Results

The survey begins with four key questions that measure visitation rates, motivations, and perceptions of individual museums by their core audiences. This includes assessments of exhibits, programming, staff friendliness, and community outreach. The last section of the survey comprises basic demographic questions so that each museum can identify who their museum is serving well, and what segments of the population show room for growth.

These questions are designed to be used year after year, so that we can compare an individual museum's results with those from 2017 and/or 2018 (if that museum participated in those surveys), and so going forward we can track change over time via future annual surveys.

Each participating museum receives a spreadsheet with their results, as well as a detailed slide deck comparing them with the topline results and against their peer group.

Field-wide issues

A polarized society. Globalization and the need for cultural competency. A changing climate that will disproportionately affect some more than others. A need for all of us to exhibit basic human kindness.

Museums are dealing with all of these issues, whether through the presentation of a more inclusive (and accurate) history, exposing our visitors to new ideas and different cultures, or through the ramifications of climate change and its effects on people and animals. And that's just to start.

The 2017 and 2018 Annual Surveys provided evidence of the role museums play in cultivating curiosity, gaining knowledge, opening minds, and caring about others. Now, to increase our effectiveness and spread our work more broadly, we need to know more about the hows and whys of curiosity, knowledge, and broadening minds/increasing empathy for others.

But if we are to increase our effectiveness, we do need to continue to understand the barriers to museum visitation as well as how we fit in with other organizations that have similar goals. Thus, those will continue to be vital lines of inquiry.

This research has led to the following lines of inquiry. These questions are designed not so much for what the overall results indicate but for how they work together to inform us about the perspectives of different segments of museum-goers. Additionally, the fielding of a comparison sample from the broader population of casual and non-visitors to museums provides even deeper insights.

1. *The work of visiting museums.* In 2018, we found that parents of young children found visiting museums to be equal parts hard work and pure pleasure. This “pain/pleasure” index for museum visits yielded a great deal of discussion, and I was asked to repeat the question for all museum-goers for greater context. This time, I’ll follow it up with an open-ended question to ask for details about their answer ... to explain the “why” behind the hassle.
2. *Curiosity.* What values and outcomes do individuals place on curiosity? What sparks their curiosity? What do they deliberately do to cultivate it in themselves, their children?
3. *Other curiosity-inducing activities.* What are the other ways that people pursue lifelong learning? In some ways this will help us identify our competition, but it also will highlight new opportunities for partnerships.
4. *Empathy.* How does knowledge affect people’s ability to connect with others? Do they feel that having more knowledge has made them more understanding of viewpoints different than their own? Does this affect their work? Their community? How they raise their children? Do they care about this? Do they think museums have helped with this? And can we use empathy to promote more civic discourse in these polarized times?
5. *Outcomes of informal knowledge.* After the series of questions about curiosity, informal learning, and empathy, respondents will be ready to articulate why these things matter to them personally. I’ll ask them directly what outcomes they give for pursuing a life of informal knowledge building, as well as how museums have contributed to them.

Thus, some of the questions are obviously directly relevant to the day-to-day work museums do (such as how much work it can be to simply visit a museum). Other questions will help museums develop the kinds of engaging exhibitions and programs that will cultivate both curiosity and caring ... in ways we know matter to our audiences.

Finally, as museums are increasingly being asked to measure impact, this survey, along with other research I’m fielding, will continue to inform us what to measure, why it matters, and who it matters to. In this shifting climate of values, politics, and philanthropy, that will be another invaluable step forward.

All museums enrolled in the survey will receive a copy of the final survey draft prior to deciding what custom questions they wish to use for their core audience. If you would like to see a copy of the survey before enrolling, or if you have any other questions, please be in touch.

To enroll in the 2019 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, go to www.wilkeningconsulting.com

Susie Wilkening
susie@wilkeningconsulting.com
206 283 0098 (direct) 518 281 0887 (cell)