

# AMPLIFICATION VS OVER-AMPLIFICATION: A METHODOLOGY DATA STORY

It happens to all of us.



We hear a critical comment, and we obsess about it. It doesn't matter if it was one critical comment out of 100. We still focus on that one comment. We **over-amplify** it.

And knowing when to **amplify**, while guarding against our natural tendency to **over-amplify**, is one of the hardest things to do. Not only when working with qualitative research, but also in our everyday lives.

## AMPLIFYING:

occurs when we take a critical minority opinion and amplify it because there is a kernel of truth in the comment that is important for us to understand. We might do this to improve visitor services, or to take into consideration a viewpoint we hadn't considered (but should have) in our interpretation. We may also amplify to identify emerging trends (e.g., "canaries in the coal mine").

## OVER-AMPLIFYING:

occurs when we take a critical minority opinion and amplify it *beyond what is appropriate*. This can be when the complaint is about an issue that has since been resolved, or when it represents a viewpoint that is harmful to others (and often a viewpoint the majority of people would disagree with). Sometimes these comments are threatening, which elevates our emotional response (and our tendency to over-amplify).



We fall victim to over-amplification as well. In fact, it happened in the 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers. But because we know we are human, we watch for these situations, caught it early, and we caught it well before we released any results.

## Here's what happened.



In the 2022 Annual Survey, we asked a battery of questions about health and wellbeing. To be honest, we felt these questions were pretty innocuous and apolitical.

But when we began pulling the reports for the participating museums, we started noticing something in the "other, please specify" comments to these questions. Words like "woke" and "liberal" were showing up, and they were being used disparagingly.

Other, please specify:

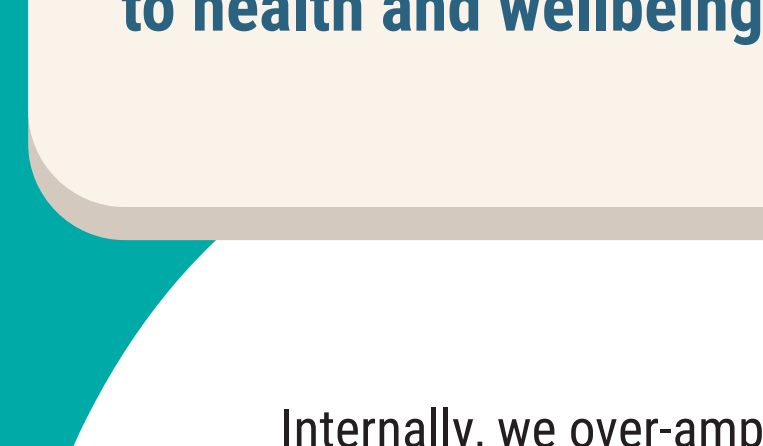


**We were surprised, because we didn't think of health and well-being as being a politicized topic (our own bias coming into play). These comments, however, indicated there were people who were responding as if they were political. Additionally, these respondents were clearly not happy about it.**

We flagged it as an issue. If felt pervasive because we kept seeing it as we made our way through nearly 200 reports. We were concerned! And because participating museums receive their reports before comprehensive coding takes place, we prepared them for the comments and made sure they knew we would be looking into it.

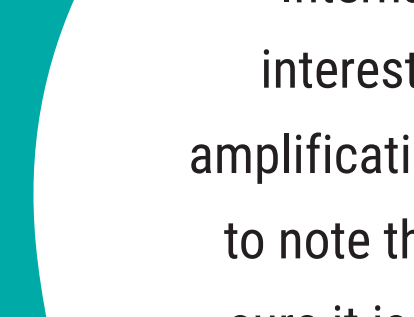


This approach **amplified** the comments to the participating museums. But let me tell you, internally, we were definitely **over-amplifying** it. Our own human natures struggled and agonized over the comments. We knew we needed to find out more.



## So, we coded.

Turns out that less than 0.5% of all respondents made these comments. They *felt* like a lot because only about 1% of respondents wrote in an extra comment to these questions in the first place ... and that meant that of those few comments that appeared, they were a relatively high percentage (so we kept seeing them in the reports!). But in reality, they were outliers among outliers.



1%



100%

<math>< .5\%</math>

Meanwhile, over 97% of respondents overall felt museums positively contributed to health and wellbeing.<sup>1</sup>

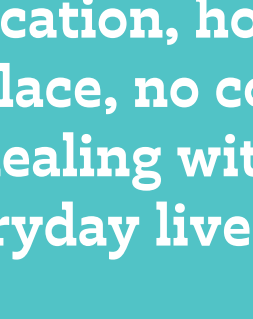
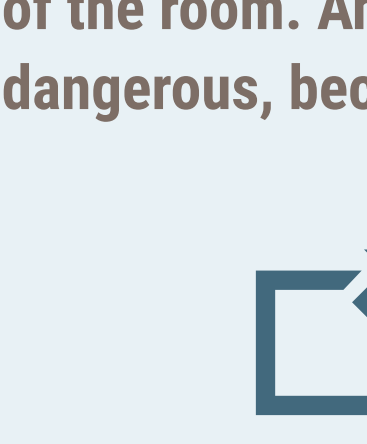


97%

Internally, we over-amplified. In reality, it's still interesting and deserves a very small amount of amplification. We feel the appropriate response here is to note this sentiment and monitor it ... just to make sure it is not a canary in a coalmine. But we are not going to give it any additional attention.



Erroneously extend the attitude to a far larger percentage of people than it really represents;



And then we stop doing what is actually the right thing (especially when the right thing is supported by the majority of people).



This happens *all the time*. For example, people who are anti-inclusive complain vocally about inclusive content, and someone in a position of power gets scared and forces the museum to pull back. Even though we know a solid majority of people want museums to be inclusive, and we also know that being inclusive is the right thing to do.<sup>2</sup>

The same thing can happen with climate change, or any other topic that we, as a society, either do not have broad consensus or we *perceive* there is not consensus on. A defensive, minority opinion becomes vocal and public, we lose context of the big picture, and we over-amplify their thoughts.

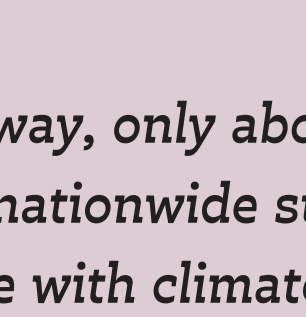


**Our visitors do it as well. They project nay-sayer complaints because they hear them and over-amplify them, such as this example:**

"I would hate for people who are offended by climate change info to stop going to museums, and it seems possible that if they don't believe climate change is real/important, but the museum was pushing that info, they might just stop going."



By the way, only about 10% of people nationwide strongly disagree with climate change content in museums--reinforcing that contextualization is key.<sup>3</sup>



Now, this doesn't mean you can necessarily disregard the negative feedback you receive. Instead, we want to turn your thinking to a more productive path: consider the calibration that is necessary to bring more people along with you (rather than set up their defense mechanisms).

We want to figure out the resistance so we can get around it. But we also want to absorb any vitriol on your behalf, so you can move on to more productive tactics.

**We do have some advice for you when you are reviewing critical comments:**

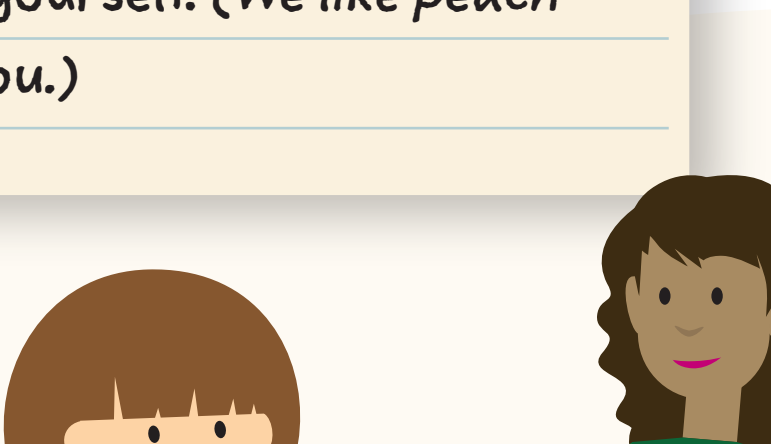
- Label a critical comment as a critical comment. Code for it. This step of identification will help you take your own emotions out of it and read the comment more clinically (and even consider if there is anything of merit).

- Keep track of the numbers. Contextualize. Is this comment an outlier, or a pervasive theme?

- Do this work in the morning, ideally on a satiated stomach. Really. Your brain is more rational when it is fed and earlier in the day. Additionally, your body will thank you at bedtime.

- Reward yourself! If you are slogging through a lot of comments, and some are hard to take, set up reward mechanisms for yourself. (We like peach jellybeans, but you do you.)

**And most important of all: care for your front-line staff.** They deal with these kinds of comments verbally on a regular basis. They don't get to choose when they hear them. And the in-person interaction is far more intense than what we deal with when reviewing comments on a screen. Give them the tools to manage these situations, receive the feedback, contextualize it, and process it.



If you do all of these things, you will be far more effective at sorting the constructive criticism from outlier negativity, taking care of yourself and your colleagues, and enabling your museum to proactively choose the best ways to serve your audience and broader society.



Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:  
• 2022 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 90,747, 186 museums participating  
• 2022 Broader Population Sampling, n = 1,017  
• 2017 - 2021 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers  
<sup>1</sup>See Museums and Wellbeing, Part 1: Audience Perceptions of Museum Impact Data Story, released November 10, 2022  
<sup>2</sup>Stay tuned for the 2022 update on inclusive attitudes  
<sup>3</sup>See Climate Change in Museums, Part 2: The Spectrum of Climate Change Attitudes Data Story, released October 25, 2022  
<sup>4</sup>Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 13, 2022 for more information on methodology.

More Data Stories can be found at [wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories](http://wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories).



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