

From: Ken Hamma
To: gli@getty.edu
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Subject: Metrics of Success in Art Museums

The search for metrics that can be useful and used in non-profits is laudable, and the recent contribution from the GLI and Max Anderson, *Metrics of Success in Art Museums*, is a welcome addition. (Find the downloadable PDF file at: <http://www.getty.edu/leadership/leader.html>) It is full of insights and suggestions that should prompt a good deal of discussion among museum leaders.

While there may be some areas of disagreement with the metrics proposed in this article, I would like to look at two small measures that I think are truly valuable but perhaps not as stated. While they seem completely plausible and useful on introduction, they may only have value in a more nuanced and careful description.

In the scope of Quality of Experience it is suggested "The average length of a museum-Web-site visit and the number of hours that galleries are open to the public are also indicators of success in the quality of the experience offered." Leaving aside the implied parallelism (think: motivation, opportunity, ease) between visiting a Web site and a physical museum, I would like to look more closely at the average length of a museum Web site visit. In reality there are a number of factors that determine average length of visits to Web sites, some of which are likely to be more influential in this metric than the quality of the experience. One of these factors can be observed in good web analysis, namely those visitors who arrive at the Web site by mistake and realize it more or less immediately. Visit time can be less than a few seconds. Some of the reasons for this can be illustrated in the Google search example that Anderson provides a bit further along where the results of searching on "Metropolitan Museum of Art" is proposed as a blunt indicator of the heft and girth of the institution on Fifth Avenue in New York. A casual Web browser, less steeped in the art museum world, might assume the same and, clicking on the fourth search result (as of today, 5 January 2005 at 8:12 am PST), land on the Web site of the Metropolitan Museum of Art of Seoul, or on the seventh search result and land on the Web site of the Fresno Metropolitan Museum. The first fifteen results also contain the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Nelson-Atkins Museum. While users experiment with many keyword combinations to find exactly what they want, the pages they visit along the way receive visits of no duration or very short duration. This has no implication for quality of experience. Instead, it might simply mean that the content wasn't what the user was looking for. Similar name and Web-site confusions, not quickly sorted by geographic indicators that are easily visible when standing at the corner of Fifth Avenue and 81st Street, come with common names like Getty. A Google search, performed a few minutes later than the preceding, on simply "Getty" includes not only the Getty Trust and its programs but also Getty Images, Getty Petroleum, Don Getty, J. Paul Getty (the person), and so on. Another of the factors affecting the length-of-visit metric is much more difficult to detect, but equally egregious in the opposite direction, namely making the average visit appear to be longer than a measure of quality of experience would merit. As art museum Web sites become richer in content and more sprawling with legacy exhibitions and publications, the likelihood grows of visitors getting lost and spending time attempting to navigate their way about to find a specific resource that prompted the visit in the first place. The lost Web site visitor looking at site maps and struggling through unclear navigation is not usually considered to be having a good quality experience, but their number is growing and contributing to the measure of length of visit. Finally we might consider different types of Web sites, one with thin content like a reservation system and another with deep content. Art museum Web sites frequently contain both types. Visit duration at a site with thin content might decline as the navigation and experience improve because users can more quickly accomplish simple and well-directed tasks. But visit duration on a site with rich content might increase with improved navigation and experience because users can now find the content they're interested in and spend more time reading, accessing databases, and so on. With a site as large and varied as that of a major art museum, there is not a simple and direct correlation between length of visit and quality of experience. Are these mistaken landings and lost souls significant in an analysis of length of visits to Web sites? They probably are. Can they be reliably filtered? Some of them perhaps can be. Do most art museums perform or contract reliably good net analysis? Many probably do not. Would the suggestion that the "average length of a museum-Web-site visit" is on its face a good metric of success prompt art museums to raise the quality of their Web analysis? It probably would not. The unadorned quantity measure appears again in the paper's next section, Fulfillment of Educational Mandate, where a metric of success is the "number of artworks from the collection illustrated on the museum's Web site." Obvious educational values are simply missing in this formulation. Here there is a broad spectrum of possible considerations from the basic - but, as we all know, expensive - quality and quantity of cataloguing and description to the much more ambitious goals of providing educational added value in such efforts as curriculum, lesson plans, or simply indexing in ways that are useful for teachers. It seems to me, relying on the number of objects illustrated is not merely an unrefined but perhaps useful metric. As put here it is a misleading metric. It might be argued that providing access on line to the thousands of works of art, accompanied only by 'tombstone' information and indexed only where there is an easy reference term such as artists or title, is not meeting any educational mandate. It is at the very least at the far other end of the spectrum from on-line resources, which we could all point to, that are thoughtfully created by art museums and presented for educational purposes. The Getty's experience in 2004 with a focus group of 32 Los Angeles teachers was unanimous on this point. Asked what they wanted most from an art museum Web site, no one said "more art on line." Instead they said they wanted lesson plans, classroom materials, and help getting the kids to the museum. Does this really matter? It probably does especially if we assume a museum obligation to extend itself to the community in meaningful ways. If one imagines the average classroom teacher to have passing knowledge with the history of art and to have ever visited an art museum it may matter less. If one imagines a school district with a high percentage of emergency-credentialed teachers looking only for an illustration of the cruelty of the battlefield for a one-day lesson on the U.S. Civil War it may matter more. And for that teacher hunting in the network of the Web, finding the illustration - any appropriate illustration - is the goal. For the education-conscious museum, publishing it on a Web site is the easy part; ensuring it can be easily found is usually a bit trickier.

Kenneth Hamma
Exec. Director, Digital Policy and Initiatives
J Paul Getty Trust

1200 Getty Center Drive, 400

Los Angeles, CA 90049-1681+1 310 440 7186

khamma@getty.edu
www.getty.edu

www.getty.museum