

Keeping it Fresh: How Do We Keep Visitors Returning for More?

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The Frist Center for the Visual Arts in Nashville, Tennessee, opened its doors on April 8, 2001. Since then the Martin ArtQuest Gallery, which is the Frist Center's interactive gallery, has seen over a total of 372,919 visitors of all ages. As part of the evaluation and reflection on the Frist Center's activities over the past four years, the staff and Board of Trustees began discussions in February 2005 about how ArtQuest was doing. What are our visitors saying about ArtQuest? Are our visitors aware of the changes occurring in ArtQuest? What do they want to see happen in ArtQuest? And, who *really* are our visitors?

Craig Marketing Services in Nashville was contracted to conduct the research. The articulated objectives for the research included creating a mission statement, identifying the target audience for ArtQuest, determining the balance between "learning" and "fun," identifying the measures of success, and determining what we need to do better.

The following groups received either written or on-line surveys from the research company: Frist Center staff, councils (marketing, education, and development), Board of Trustees, adult and children visitors, teachers, and Frist Center members. The following reflects the number of responses received from the specific groups:

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| 60 | Frist Center staff, councils, and board |
| 246 | Visitors/Adults in ArtQuest |
| 249 | Visitors/Children in ArtQuest |
| 595 | Teachers online |
| 798 | Members online |

The education staff also felt this was a perfect opportunity to survey our peer art institutions across the country that have interactive galleries. From this peer survey, a common database of basic information could be developed. A general call was sent out to art museums on various Internet listservs and a few institutions were specifically invited to respond. The following art institutions responded to the survey:

- Art Institute of Chicago
- Cincinnati Art Museum
- Columbus Museum of Art
- Cummer Museum of Art and Gardens
- Denver Art Museum
- High Museum of Art
- J.B. Speed Museum
- J. Paul Getty Museum
- Jacksonville Museum of Modern Art
- LA County Museum of Art

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- Montgomery Museum of Fine Art
- Tacoma Art Museum

Among the many differences found when comparing the Frist Center to the other institutions surveyed, the most significant was that the Frist Center is the only non-collecting institution. All other respondents have a permanent collection that influences their interactive space and design. Other variations between all of the institutions included the size of interactive space, visitor capacity, and reinstallation of the interactive gallery spaces. These varied from less than a 1,000 square feet to over 14,000 square feet, 25 to 600 visitors, and three times yearly to seldom, respectively.

Not surprisingly, there were many similarities among the institutions surveyed. These included mission statements, evaluation methods, audience, and marketing strategies. Most respondents had mission statements that stressed a high quality, hands-on learning experience in order to enhance the appreciation and understanding of art, particularly with children. There was also a desire to aid the development of life-long learning habits and to help interpret and enhance the exhibitions. The common words found in the different mission statements included: explore, engage, enrichment, enjoyment, interactive, learning experiences, and looking at art.

It was interesting to note what the institutions considered the most successful aspects of their interactive spaces. According to the peer institutions surveyed, the most successful aspects of the spaces were that they were “unique” and offered an “uninstructed art- making” experience. These interactive spaces send the message that a museum is a place for families, and in turn encourage return visits.

The surveyed institutions use a variety of evaluation methods that are both qualitative and quantitative. The Frist Center measures success for ArtQuest in multiple ways: formal and informal assessment of individual stations, direct observation, visitor feedback, and attendance numbers. These tools determine the effectiveness of each individual art station and help to shape specific teaching strategies.

From the survey responses, it is clear that the institutions have very few marketing plans for the interactive spaces that are separate from the overall marketing of the museum. Most of the institutions state that the targeted groups are families or visitors of all ages. Specific to the Frist Center’s interactive gallery, the research validated the fact that the actual users are primarily families (70%-80%) and children ages 6-12. It was determined that the time and day of the week affects the visitor population. During the weekday, there are mainly school groups in the gallery, although they comprise only 20-30% of the total visitors to ArtQuest. The peer surveys are consistent with the findings in ArtQuest.

In addition, the interactive attendance has consistently tracked the overall institutional attendance. At the Frist Center, attendance in ArtQuest has been between 40-50% of the overall attendance. In some ways, ArtQuest functions as a permanent exhibition at the museum. Because ArtQuest is our “constant exhibition,” staff would like the gap in attendance between

the overall attendance and ArtQuest to be smaller and for ArtQuest to be considered as a destination and a driver for attendance.

In reviewing the research, there are some insights into the weak ArtQuest attendance by school groups. The number one reason listed by teachers as to why they did not visit ArtQuest was their lack of familiarity with the space (45%). The next reason given was the difficulty in managing students (11%). Not surprisingly, however, were the responses teachers, members, and adult visitors shared about why they liked ArtQuest. Top on everyone's list were the hands-on aspect, the variety of activities, and the helpful, friendly staff. In addition, visitors found the space fun *and* educational.

Children preferred the hands-on art-making stations – printmaking and painting – are their most popular activities. This was not a unexpected response for staff. Recommendations from our visitors and teachers about ArtQuest included keeping the space and activities fresh with regular changes. They felt the gallery could be more welcoming and colorful. They would also like to see more space at the popular painting and printmaking art-making stations and would like the addition of clay for a hands-on activity.

The Frist Center staff has developed some specific plans in response to the completed research by Craig Marketing. These include improving the internal marketing of the space using signage within the museum. Better cross-promotion of events and activities can be addressed by staff. A kids' club will be developed for Saturday afternoons. Other changes to be implemented within the next 18 months include re-constructing the entrance to be more welcoming and increasing the size of the art-making stations to accommodate additional visitors.

An important outcome of the research was a Board-approved mission statement:

“The mission of the Martin ArtQuest gallery is to create a fun, engaging, learning environment where visitors, especially children, experience hands-on activities that connect to art concepts, society, and Frist Center exhibitions.”

Agreement has been reached among those involved with the development of ArtQuest that learning can be fun and educational. And, while the Frist Center encourages all visitors to ArtQuest, the primary audience will be children.

Perhaps the best evaluations of the space are the comments from children about what they learned:

“You can have fun with art.” Age 5

“Not to get frustrated when things don't turn out right.” Age 6

“That I am a creative soul.” Age 17

“I am great at making holes in paper.” Age 16

“Your mistakes make your art look better.” Age 9

Interactive spaces within art museums are a relatively recent phenomenon. Museum educators are anxious to evaluate what our visitors are learning in the spaces. It is hoped that as our youngest visitors become adults, their positive experiences in our institutions will inspire them to bring their own children to art museums. And, while it may not be possible to evaluate the full impact of our interactive space on our visitors now, the Frist Center feels confident of the positive experience it offers through ArtQuest.

NOTE: Detailed survey results are available upon request. Please contact authors to obtain them.