

Strategies for Audience Development

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Introduction

This paper presents strategies for audience development, using a research project of the Toronto Historical Board as an illustration (Rubenstein & Associates, 1991). The project was comprehensive, and this paper focuses on *some* of the strategies used for development of the research design, the methodology and applications of the results. These strategies can be used by others facing the challenges of audience development.

The paper is organized into four parts:

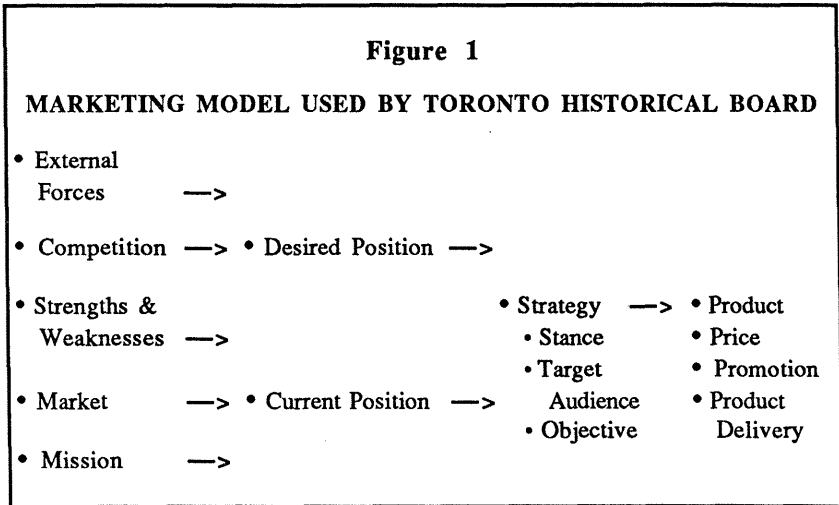
1. Definition of the audience development problem;
2. Strategic decisions for developing the research design for audience development;
3. Outcomes and impacts of audience research: results, recommendations and applications;
4. Conclusion.

Part 1: Definition

The Toronto Historical Board (THB) is a community-based agency of the City of Toronto. The THB has as its mission "to improve the quality of life in Toronto by providing leadership in the preservation of the City's heritage" (Toronto Historical Board, 1989). As part of its mandate, the THB operates five museums which attract 135,000 visitors per year, including both casual visitors and organized groups. The five museums are Colborne Lodge, Fort York, Mackenzie House, Marine Museum, and Spadina.

It is the intention of the Toronto Historical Board to better serve the needs of an increased audience to its five museums. The greatest potential for growth was identified as the casual visitor program. However, when it came time to develop a marketing plan to achieve these goals, there was insufficient information available on casual visitors. At the same time, casual visitation was declining across the THB.

It is apparent from a review of the marketing model used by the THB (Figure 1) that audience research can provide information in every part of the process of developing a marketing plan.



This audience research project was therefore developed to provide the THB with valid and reliable information to:

- assist in the development of a marketing strategy to attract more casual visitors to the Toronto Historical Board’s five museums;
- assist in the refinement of the casual visitor program to balance the interpretive goals of each museum with visitor interests and needs.

Specifically the audience research project was designed to answer the following questions:

- who are the visitors to THB, and what are their characteristics?;
- what are the patterns and relationships of visit, if any, among casual visitors to the five different museum sites?;
- what other choices do visitors and potential visitors have for spending their leisure time?;
- what is unique to THB, and what do others offer that THB does not?;

- what do visitors want?;
- how can THB provide better programs for visitors?;
- what do visitors value about the THB experience?

Both management and staff of the five museums were involved in the generation of questions, in addition to the communications and marketing staff.

Part 2: Strategic Decisions

In developing a research design to address the questions posed by THB, a series of strategic decisions had to be made (Rubenstein, 1989), ranging from overall guiding principles to the details of data analysis (Hood, 1986; Loomis, 1987). These included:

1. The decision to collect information about the casual visitor *and* information about visitor response to the interpretive program. These must be considered together in the pursuit of increased visitation.
2. The decision to collect information from THB *non-users as well as users* (Hood, 1983), but with an emphasis on developing current user groups.
3. Collecting both demographic and psychographic information about audience groups.
4. Placing the focus primarily on the THB audience as a whole, while also respecting the individual differences and unique features of each of the five museums. This decision also ensured that clarity was maintained in other decisions. These included questionnaire development, the selection of the dates for fieldwork and even choices for data analysis.
5. Collecting qualitative and quantitative information.
6. Using complementary methods: questionnaires and focus groups.
7. The questionnaire field strategy included two main components which were selected based on potential for audience development of both tourist and local markets:
 - a Main Field Session conducted simultaneously at all five THB museums during the summer high season;
 - questionnaires conducted at pre-selected special programming days and events (such as walking tours and a Strawberry Tea).

This strategy resulted in an overall understanding of the THB audience including information about the relationship of the five museums to each other during both regular days and special programming days and events. The strategy also allowed the collection of visitor response to a range of interpretive programs.

Prior to selecting this particular strategy for THB, various models for sampling visitors were considered. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Some Models for Sampling Visitors

Calendar Seasons

- Winter, spring, summer, fall (Hood, 1988).
- The best-known model.

One Single Large-Scale Session

- Takes place in one season, but can collect detailed information concerning previous visitation throughout the year.

Programming Interpretive Sessions

- Useful for marketing study/interpretive study audience research projects.

High and Low Season

- One high-attendance season (e.g. height of summer tourist season) and one low-attendance season (e.g. winter).

Combinations and Merged Data for the Year

- Takes into account the need for analysis of the individual sessions plus the merged data for an overall picture.

Combinations of the Above

- The THB strategy.

8. The decision to use a standardized questionnaire. In total, data were collected from 550 visitors using a standardized questionnaire at each of the five museum sites. This questionnaire was exactly the same for each museum, with some variations specific to each.
9. The questionnaire was developed to ensure that data collected was also comparable to other key data sets, such as the Census of Canada and the Audience Research Consortium visitor studies project (a group of four other major Toronto museums) (Art Gallery of Ontario, Royal Ontario Museum, Ontario Science Centre, Metropolitan Toronto Zoo, & Woods Gordon Consultants, 1989).

10. Finally, four focus groups were used to flesh-out the profile of THB audience groups including lifestyle, leisure activities and values. The composition of the groups was defined in advance based on a review of data derived from the THB questionnaires, including frequent visitors, occasional visitors and non-visitors (Rubenstein, 1990).

Part 3: Outcomes and Impacts

Making these strategic decisions early in the audience research project ensured the results required for developing the marketing plan. These results included:

1. Demographic and psychographic information on visitor and non-visitor groups, including comparative information (see Table 2);

Table 2
Summary of Local Adult Audience Groups

Visitors:

Frequent Visitors

- THB crossover and repeat visitors.
- Visit other museums and historic sites.
- Value being Torontonians.
- Interested in history.
- Visit for personal reasons—for themselves, rather than for others.
- Perceive THB to offer good value.
- Older adults.

Occasional Visitors

- Visit THB sites but less often than frequent visitors.
- Visit other museums and historic sites.
- Value being Torontonians.
- Interested in history.
- Visit for personal reasons—for themselves, rather than for others.
- Perceive THB to offer good value.
- Older adults.

Non-Visitors (who are likely to become visitors)

- Visit other museums and historic sites.
- Visit for themselves and for others.
- Younger adults.
- Less aware of THB sites.
- Currently perceive THB sites to be poor value.

2. Group composition, including children;
3. Patterns of visit, including prior visits to the other museum sites. This established the relationships of site visitation, and which museum site was the "Entry Site" to the five THB museums;
4. Reason for visits;
5. Communications, with 51% having heard of THB from at least two sources;
6. Arrival conditions, highlighting the need for good parking facilities;
7. Sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction such as the authenticity of the five sites;
8. Comparative information on special event visitors (see Table 3);

Table 3
THB Visitors

THB Visitors

- 51% female, 49% male; mean age of 41; post-secondary education; 60% professionals.
- Are museum visitors—80% visited an historical site or museum within the past 12 months.
- 33% locals and 66% tourists.
- 86% come in groups and 14% come alone; 75% are with family members and 27% come with children.
- 87% are first-time visitors to site and 13% are repeat.
- 42% cross-over visit THB sites (38% within the last 12 months).
- 48% visited other Toronto attractions the same day as visit.
- Visit to see the site and for personal reasons; interested in history.
- Hear about THB museums primarily from word of mouth and tourist guidebooks; 38% aware of THB as operating authority.
- Car is the preferred means of arrival to sites (62%).
- 95% have visit expectations met; satisfaction ratings are high; visitors like the interpretation and information at the sites.

Special Event Visitors

- Attract more local visitors (52% to 88% compared to 33%) and more repeat visitors (21% to 47% compared to 13%) than the regular field session.
- Visitors rated events highly and 76% to 89% indicated that they would visit again.

9. Some differences among visitors to the five museums (see Table 4).

Table 4
Some Differences and Unique Features of the Sites

Fort York

- The site with the most children in groups (47%).
- The entry site to THB museums.
- The site with the lowest rating of any element—Souvenir and Food Shop.
- 94% enter by west gate.

Colborne Lodge

- More females, more seniors, and fewer are employed.
- Only site with primarily local visitors (73%).
- Site with the highest percentage of repeat visitors (26%).

Spadina

- Strongest positive response in the focus groups.
- The garden!

Mackenzie

- Only site where pedestrians and transit users outnumber visitors who arrive by car.
- Highest proportion of visitors who come alone (63%) rather than in groups.

Marine Museum

- More males, younger, less education, more students and skilled technicals.
- Site with highest percentage of first-time visitors (97%).
- 94% visited the new exhibit, *Ships and Boats of Toronto Harbour*. The specific feature rated highest at the site—the tugboat the 'Ned Hanlan'—was visited by only 45%.
- In focus groups, disappointment expressed because of lack of upkeep and need for refurbishing.

Recommendations, both short and long-term, derived from the results cover:

- *audience development*, including recommended priorities for developing specific visitor groups;
- *marketing*, including suggestions for target-marketing for specific sites;
- *advertising and promotion*, such as radio stations, joint promotions, etc.;
- *interpretation*, including increasing the diversity of programs and events;
- *membership and sponsorship*, including recommended candidates for membership;
- *continued audience research and evaluation*.

The audience development project generated a great deal of new information for the Toronto Historical Board. Staff in many positions at all levels of the THB are using the results and will continue to use them over the years. A training workshop on the topic of visitor studies and the results of this audience development project was organized with participation from the Communications Division, the Museums Division, and senior managers and Board members of THB. (Integrating a staff training workshop into the process was also a strategic decision which affected the ultimate success of the project.)

Now that THB has the results of the audience development project, what has been done with them? A number of results were applied even before the project was completed. For example, radio time was purchased based on the preliminary results from the visitor survey. However, their applicability reaches much further than this. Additional uses included the following:

1. Study results made THB take a different look at how the museums are perceived in the leisure market.
2. The THB is now equipped to enhance the competitive analysis for its marketing model.
3. THB has now developed position maps to visualize its current position in relation to similar attractions.
4. Suspected weaknesses have been confirmed, and beliefs in the strengths of THB have been supported by the research.
5. There is now hard quantifiable information and qualitative information on the casual visitors who come to THB. *THB knows its market for the first time!*
6. THB now has the information to develop the required components of a marketing strategy: stance, target audience, and objectives.

These are the components of the Board's long-term marketing plan. However, in the short-term, a number of specific activities have been initiated by THB including:

1. A Christmas passport to all three houses (Spadina, Mackenzie House and Colborne Lodge);
2. A joint promotion with two other Toronto heritage attractions;
3. Promotional activities focused on Fort York—the "Entry Site" to THB.

In summary, this research project has created a resource which informs audience development activities throughout THB—from the development of a marketing strategy to the refinement of interpretive goals in the casual visitor program.

Part 4: Conclusions

The strategic decisions taken early-on shaped the project and made it possible, made it *certain*, that the goals of this project were achieved. The decisions made were based on previous museological research (Abbey & Cameron, 1959; 1961; Cameron & Abbey, 1960; Dixon, Courtney & Bailey, 1974), and careful consideration of THB and its goals. This success can be repeated in other institutions concerned with the challenges of audience and institutional development.

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