

# The Visitor Rainbow

Terry Cheney  
T.J. Cheney Research, Inc.  
Ottawa, Ontario Canada

*“... guessing might not fare so well in attempting to discover how many types of visitors there are.”*

- Edward E. Robinson, “Exit the Typical Visitor”  
(cited in Loomis’ [1987] *Museum Visitor Evaluation*)

One of the characteristics of social research in institutional settings is the sense of impotence and vulnerability that a researcher can feel. Resources are not forthcoming in terms either of time or of money to design and implement first-class studies. There may be no one waiting for, listening to or acting on results. And often the research tradition and tools have not been developed to allow even an intellectual sense of having really answered a question or gained an insight.

This research malaise seems to be heightened in contexts where social sciences such as economics and sociology are seen as inappropriate, and the cultural field is certainly one of these. Working in cultural institutions where graduate training abounds, there is a further tendency for other types of expertise to be seen as unnecessary.

In this context, one of the key problems in carrying out fulfilling research is being able to see research utilized. For research to be used there has to be a ready audience — management willing to listen and act upon new intelligence. And, for the research to be used, the research output has to be useful. It has to produce results which are seen by their audience to be credible, and applicable. It has to have asked the right questions, carried out the right analysis, and provided the right form of output. It has to be seen to be addressing tangible problems in a recognizable terminology and suggesting physically practical solutions.

Part of the reason that research is not used is that the clientele must be cultivated to be responsive to the research point of view. But an equally important part of the reason that research is not used is that its tools and products are not themselves powerful enough and relevant enough to the practical world. Surveys are too long and ambiguous, questions have been formulated in an abstract environment, analyses are written for academic journals, and distilled statistical results are often abstract indices bearing little relationship to a program manager’s reality.

In the area of audience research — studying visitors, visits, and visiting — one of the fundamental elements for achieving useful research output is considering the unit of observation, the visitor (or the visit), and how this is studied, analyzed and reported upon. To design questionnaires and samples and to analyze and report on data meaningfully, a practical schema of visitors rather than the singular “the visitor” is required.

As an example, recent research on visitors to Canada’s capital was directed to learning about the specific characteristics of first-time (pleasure) visitors. Despite having several potential sources of information, little data had been captured which could be used to profile this distinct and important segment. The data which did exist clearly allowed for crucial revisions of the perception of what this first-time visitor was like, and reflected they were not like the “average visitor” (they were, for example, not Canadians!)

A study of an audience which reports average characteristics may show “the visitor” to be a bit like the average tourist, and a bit like local residents. Very likely this is because the attraction’s audience is split between locals and tourists. There is a substantial difference between their demographic, behavioral, attitudinal, or whatever, characteristics. To report on the average or blended results, chapter after chapter, is to report results which likely are not recognized as real, and are results which, if advertisers or designers were to act upon them, could in fact completely miss every segment of the audience.

In considering visitor data, then, much analysis has been of a uni-dimensional character, looking at the information from the wrong side of the prism, considering audiences as homogeneous white light, rather than a spectrum, a rainbow of potential visitors. The “typical” museum visitor, as many studies note, in physical reality does not exist. One of the crucial and often recognized, but still ignored, problems in the study of visitors is determining sub-populations which are meaningful in terms of visiting theory, homogeneous enough to allow for concrete characterization, and useful for decision making by museum professionals.

Past studies have made attempts to disaggregate the museum audience, most notably Marilyn Hood’s application of the distinction of heavy-users, occasional users and non-users (Hood, 1983). Loomis’ authoritative *Museum Visitor Evaluation* alludes to a number of examples of visitor disaggregation which he came across. He quotes Edward Robinson from 1931 as stating:

“While guessing, mixed with a small portion of common sense, would tell us that there is more than one kind of museum visitor, the same type of guessing might not fare so well in attempting to discover how many types of visitors there are.” (p. 65)

Robinson was concerned with the temptation to stereotype a typical museum visitor, and saw visitors as a continuum. This continuum was

seen as having no easy, evident divisions. Loomis recommends more concerted and standardized audience surveys to collect empirical information on the differences among audiences to help make distinctions along the continuum.

Loomis' text itself provides theoretical and past examples of different ways of breaking up the visitor population. These include basic dichotomies, such as winter versus summer visitors, and first-time visitors versus repeat visitors, local visitors or those from out of town, "lay visitors" or "scholar-visitors." He also cites distinctions based on time, conjecturing differences for the seasons, day of the week and time of day. Students are naturally an important distinct category both at the elementary level taking conducted tours, and college students visiting regularly on weekends. The presence of strong homogeneous segments such as college students are as important for the fact that they will distort average age and education values, as for their presence in itself. Other distinct groups cited for consideration include housewives, the elderly, and people from rural areas. Visitors have also been broken down in terms of the composition of the group attending (families, couples, tour groups).

But few discussions highlight the *critical significance* of keeping a vision of distinct audience segments in mind at each stage of the research process, from initial conception and design (and consultation with the various stakeholders) through data collection, analysis, and reporting. As O'Hare (1974) has noted "the 'typical visitor' described by . . . median values of different variables is in fact a very rare type" (p. 130). Yet most research reports spend much time reporting descriptive *average* values on the total respondent population. Significant proportions of museum visitors, such as first-time visitors, tourists, members, arts students, children, seniors, politicians, patrons, businessmen or babies, have distinct needs and characteristics which become invisible in the reporting of average results.

Decisions made to serve an average visitor will clearly not address specific needs segments, and may in fact address *no segment* except a fictitious statistical creation. Clarification of visitor strata will result in more effective analysis, more acceptable interpretations of visitor data, and more actionable research results.

Different audiences, found at different types of exhibits or institutions, or at different times of day, or in different seasons, may in fact be found to be explicable as *different mixes of the same known strata* (but the "averages" will all be different). This could have major implications for trying to study visiting from a global or public policy perspective as well as for day-to-day management of institutions.

What are the characteristics of a schema of visitors which would be useful for analysis and for the development of institutional programs and services? Can we develop a question which will categorize survey respondents in a way they can accurately report, and which will be powerful in interpreting data and yield results recognizable by programming

departments, marketing departments, and even the finance department tracking admissions, sales and private sector support?

A number of features can be considered in trying to develop a framework or schema of visitors. The features include socio-economic characteristics, psychographic characteristics, physical characteristics, visit context, visit characteristics, and usage. The remainder of this paper will outline one such spectrum of visitors to attractions based on use, modifying Loomis' "series of expanding circles" which he describes as:

"... staff, volunteers, major financial support patrons, and high frequency users at the center . . . with medium-use visitors next, and occasional users further from the center. At the outer circle are nonusers, with those who have no interest in the content of the museum being furthest from the center." (p. 143)

A spectrum of users can be seen as ranging from supportive non-goers, through first-time visitors, infrequent visitors, regular visitors, to researchers, and so on, to help derive a meaningful visitor classification. Such a classification can be simplified as required, and called upon for application in the design and analysis of visitor surveys, and for use in the conception and development of institution programs, promotions and services. This spectrum has six major groups:

### **1. Ultraviolet Visitors: Those the Institutions Do Not See.**

Amongst the spectrum of "users" would be several classes of non-users, people not actually physically attending attractions. These include those who have never gone, and will never go, for whatever reason. They are unaware of and disinterested in these activities. As well, there are those who do not go but might go given different circumstances or better marketing, and those who do not go but are in fact part of a supportive public who endorse the institutional activity in society as a whole (especially such things as archives, museums and libraries) but themselves do not physically go to such institutions. Finally there are those who may go vicariously, through the purchase or observation of media, including books, journals, television and radio shows, and videos. These would be difficult elements of the spectrum to measure and serve, but the potential for public opinion support they represent cannot be overlooked.

### **2. Spectral Visitors: First and Last Time Visitors.**

Next, in the range of physical presence are those who once in their lives "have been" (Kelly, 1987). They go once, because a museum is there, because people go, to try it out or just to "have gone," perhaps for a special exhibition, or in a special circumstance (a trip to Paris, New York, Ottawa).

The visit may have meant little to them, and there is a stillborn disinterest in ever returning. As the years go by, and as the baby boom ages, the number of such people going for the first, and last, time will be decreasing. But for any individual institution it is important to know the percentage of visits accounted for by such first and last time visitors, and a question to address is how much effort is to be expended in attracting and serving such a clientele.

### **3. Grey Attenders: Why Not Go to a Museum?**

There are those, presumably, who from time to time go to a museum with a friend, with the kids, with someone visiting from out of town. They may perhaps go because it is better than nothing to do, or because they customarily go, from time to time, with recollections of past amusement. Their visit is likely neither regular nor planned. Yet they are potentially a mainstay of political support, and an important casual visitor to address through programming to engender increased visiting.

### **4. Seeing the Light: Regular Visitors.**

The next group, as the rainbow becomes more visible, are those who in fact consciously recognize the existence of museums, specifically plan for and choose to see exhibitions, are comfortable with the museum setting, and will be present on a regular and ongoing basis. They would have developed tastes for the "educational" experience, expect the "academic" tone, and likely call upon special programming, pay attention to ads, and so on. They could be a group which is increasing, and are likely a group which would respond to expanded programming.

### **5. Fluorescent Visitors: Committed Goers.**

The museum audience will be filled with a smaller number of individuals who account for a disproportionately large number of visits. For whatever reason these people will keep themselves informed, will come many times a year, and will in a sense be the professional audience — interested, articulate, comfortable. In visit surveys, their characteristics would predominate; in community surveys they would hardly be found. In terms of future evolution of the institution, they may be a group disinclined towards change, and a group for whom a decision for change involves a potential decline in visiting.

## 6. Let the Sun Shine In: Visitors Who Are Part of the Institution.

Every institution will have a cadre of individuals for whom the institution is part of day-to-day life. These are likely to be such groups as volunteers, perhaps trustees or patrons, or serious students making ongoing and concerted use of collections. This group might even be taken to include staff, as Loomis suggested for his inner circle. Such groups are more involved with institutional activities than responsive to institutional initiatives.

This specification of a visitor rainbow is intended to be suggestive. Its purpose is to emphasize that such groups are clearly different and should be studied and addressed differently. Other groupings are both possible and relevant for assessing and developing programs and services. The important point is that such schemas should be seen as necessary in thinking about visitor research and institutional development.

A consideration of a visitor rainbow should be a requirement in the development of any visitor research project. The first step in the design, analysis and reporting on visitor research is a segmentation of the population. Any study which reports on visitors in a generalized or average form is limited and will likely be misleading, and not have the impact it should.

## References

- Hood, M. (1983). Staying away. Why people choose not to visit museums. *Museum News*, 61(4), 50-57.
- Kelly, R. (1987). Museums as status symbols II: Attaining a state of having been. In R. Belk, *Advances in Non-profit Marketing*. J.A.I. Press.
- Loomis, R. (1987). *Museum visitor evaluation*. Nashville, TN: American Association for State and Local History.
- O'Hare, M. (1974). The audience of the museum of fine arts. *Curator*, 17(2). Reprinted in R. Korn and L. Sowd, *Visitor Surveys*. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.