People Trust Museums More Than Newspapers. Here Is Why That Matters Right Now (DATA)

Actually, it always matters. But data lend particular insight into an important role that audiences want museums to play right now.

“Are museums perceived as experts – and are they trusted? To what extent?” These are the questions that I hoped to shine a light upon when I requested a topic-specific data cut on cultural organizations from the National Awareness, Attitudes, and Usage Study. The NAAU is an ongoing study regarding market perceptions of visitor-serving organizations and it currently quantifies feedback from over 108,000 respondents. The resulting data reveal important takeaways for museums today – and specifically underscore an important role that the market expects museums to play. As a heads-up, the data below is cut for the United States market and not only high-propensity visitors. In other words, this isn’t simply “what people who believe in climate change” think about museums.

The data and analysis in this article contribute to several debates taking place in the visitor-serving industry
right now from crowd-curated exhibits and the “education vs. entertainment” debate, to implications regarding participation in last week’s March for Science. Knowing how much people trust museums is important information for developing relevant and sustainable organizations. But data reveal that being trusted comes with the responsibility to communicate action and recommend mission-driven behaviors.

Hey museums, you have the superpower of public trust. Like your superpower of being facilitators of shared experiences, you may not even realize the importance of this superpower. Remember: Your organization may declare importance, but the market determines relevance. Here’s what the market thinks about cultural organizations when it comes to credibility, trust, and their duty to the communities they serve.

Museums are highly credible sources of information

Aquariums, art museums, history museums, science centers/museums, natural history museums, and zoos are highly credible sources of information. And, as the data indicate, these values aren’t merely “good,” they’re rather fantastic! With values in the upper-seventies, there is a strong level of agreement with the statement “[Entity type] is a highly credible source of information.”

While the strength of the sentiment may or may not surprise you, what is notable are the perceptions of museums as credible sources when compared to NGOs, federal agencies, and even the daily newspaper. Yes, folks, museums are trusted more than the daily newspaper.
The NGO category includes non-governmental organizations that are not museums. The mean values at 64.2 for NGOs and 61.3 for state agencies indicate a relative level of credibility – with perceptions largely influenced by the degree to which the respective NGO or agency conforms to the respondent’s worldview. For example, no matter what the integrity of the information published by the Natural Resources Defense Council, an avowed climate change denier is unlikely to find the NRDC unassailably credible. Federal agencies (with a mean value of 51.4), represent an even more bifurcated public view – which makes sense in our current partisan condition.

These data tie into the never-ending “education vs. entertainment” priority debate within visitor-serving organizations. It’s a never-ending debate because there isn’t a clear winner. Data suggest that cultural organizations need to be both entertaining and educational in order to succeed, though they play different roles in the visitor experience. It’s also a never-ending debate because – although the two may be unstoppable when they team up – the topic has become stupidly polarizing among some industry professionals. It’s divided within some organizations (e.g. education vs. marketing departments) and outside of them (e.g. topic-experts vs. museum consultants). Again, they play different roles, but we really should write a ‘thank you’ note to whomever invented that silly/awesome word “edu-tainment.” (Anybody know his or her address?)

Entertainment value is critical for an organization’s solvency and success, but organizations that veer too far on the “entertainment” side of things risk losing the reputational equity of credibility. And it’s an area in which museums shine.

Museums are trusted
Not only are museums viewed as highly credible sources of information, they are also trusted entities overall. This type of trust is not to be taken lightly, and it’s a testament to organizations that stand by their missions to educate and inspire audiences.

This is important information for all museums contemplated in these data, and it is especially worthy of an extra look for zoos and aquariums. Zoos and aquariums are trusted by the market at-large…and rather significantly so. I point this out because it lends context to some of the debates taking place in the zoo and aquarium world regarding captive animals. Certainly, IMPACTS data reveal stark trend lines regarding perceptions of exhibits such as dolphin shows, but the market at large still largely trusts zoos and aquariums to evolve and make value-based decisions driven by their missions. This is not an excuse for zoos and aquariums not to listen up and evolve alongside market perceptions of “right” and “wrong” (to the extent that they may/may not be evolving). It’s the opposite. It’s a reminder not to let people down.

It may be argued that museums are trusted because they employ and/or consult topic experts and thus provide expert content. That might be it, friends! Regardless: Trusted, they are.

These data also provide aid for thinking about crowd-curated exhibits. The market views museums as expert sources of information. While crowd-curated exhibits certainly can be an effective way to engage the public depending on how they are administrated and actualized, they also risk perceptually undermining a museum’s own hard-earned trust and credibility. Engagement is super great! Engagement that results in a greater loss of equity than the payoff (especially when there are other avenues for engagement) is not super great.
Museums are not seen as having political agendas

Here’s how these data fit in with the rest: They underscore that museums are seen as factual and impartial – more so than government agencies and the daily newspaper.

Are museums trusted because they are not seen as having political agendas? Maybe, but you can only stick the landing there if you jump to some conclusions. While I am sharing this alongside trust and credibility metrics, I’m not yet certain of the exact nature of the relationship between being political and being trustworthy as it relates to visitor-serving organizations – and neither are you. (If you don’t have data, then you have an opinion. That’s cool, but it doesn’t count here. Mine doesn’t, either.) There’s more to these values – and they are interesting and worth putting on our thinking caps to explore.

“Political” may understandably correlate with having connection to or trying to influence policy. This may be the reason why aquariums and zoos indicate a higher level of agreement with the statement, despite having lower levels of government funding and more earned revenue imperative than other visitor-serving entities. Some zoos and aquariums encourage audiences to vote in a certain direction (e.g. in favor of plastic bag bans). It makes sense that NGOs may have the strongest perception of having a political agenda – they openly do things like encourage people to fight global warming and feed the homeless. Federal and state agencies being perceived as having a political agenda seems to make good sense, too, from where I stand.

Confidence in cultural organizations took a plunge after the presidential election, and it remains low. The New York Times reports that we are divided in terms of consumer optimism: Some of us have great confidence in the economy, and some of us don’t. Unfortunately, those who profile as high-propensity visitors
to cultural organizations largely fall in the “don’t” category. The reason for this dip seems to be concern that organizations are not standing by their missions (e.g. science museums remaining oddly quiet when confronted with “alternative facts” concerning climate change, or concern about board members that don’t support an organization’s mission running the show). In sum, this may not be a matter of “being political,” but rather one of integrity.

Indeed, taking a political stand for the sake of taking a political stand seems like it may be mission drift for most organizations. However, recent happenings suggest that when your mission is pinned against a “politicized” topic, standing up for your mission wins. This is illustrated by the data-informed success seen at MoMA when they highlighted artwork by artists from countries impacted by the original Muslim-majority nation travel ban.

Museums are viewed as impartial entities, and this may be because they are trusted to present the facts with expertise. Where things get messy is when an organization’s very mission becomes politicized. Or perhaps more simply: when facts become politicized.

People believe that museums should recommend action

This data set is probably the most important. People believe that museums should suggest or recommend certain behaviors or ways for the general public to support their causes and missions. Got that? People think that it’s the job of museums to recommend behaviors. That’s huge, and it’s likely tied to the combined force of
the high levels of trust and credibility that these organizations possess.

Consider that recommending action is not the same as “being political.” Recommending things like cutting down on single use plastics (as a zoo or aquarium may advise) or contributing funding for art programs that an organization carries out (as an art museum may recommend), may not be seen as necessarily “political” to the market, but rather seen as an organization walking its talk in terms of supporting its mission. The data doesn’t specifically support museums recommending protesting (for instance). The data support organizations leveraging the trust that the market has in them to suggest behaviors that underscore their missions – which the market perceives not to be innately political.

Museums are becoming forums for community engagement on important issues related to their missions, and that may be a terrific thing. Museums are heroes for their missions, and there’s incredible potential to lead the charge in helping to actualize these missions. That’s an important superpower – and it’s an enormously humbling responsibility.

Museums, zoos, and aquariums are highly trusted to produce and output content and information. They are viewed as expert, factual, and impartial – more so than government agencies and even daily newspapers. The market – which generally doesn’t like to be told what to do in today’s connected world – is even willing to accept prescriptive recommendations from museums.

Museums are experts. Museums can make expert recommendations, and people believe that they should do just that. To shirk this market-determined capability for influence may be the greatest blow to an organization’s mission of all. Data suggest that museums may play a role in leading us all toward a more educated, connected, and inspired world…if they are willing to take up the calling.

(Credit: The header photo on this article comes from the Field Museum’s totally watch-worthy #DayOfFacts video.)

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