

Best Practices
in
CULTIVATING FAMILY AUDIENCES

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CROCKER
art museum

Thank You

This is one of a two-part series sharing lessons learned through the Crocker Art Museum's IMLS-funded project focusing on building capacity to better serve family audiences. This project grew out of our "All About Families" initiative, introduced in 2010 to coincide with the opening of the Crocker's major building expansion. Our focus on building capacity was designed to capitalize on a critical moment of transition in the Museum's history to advance our mission and core strategies by deeply embedding within the organization an understanding of family audiences, developing staff knowledge and skills to better serve those audiences, and striving to create exhibit and program development processes that respected multiple voices and diverse perspectives. Ultimately, we recognized that engaging families with young children is critical to our role in building a more vital community.

In going about this work, we have been fortunate to have guidance and generous sharing of wisdom from many colleagues across the museum field. We're especially grateful for the patient, persistent, and insightful leadership of Daryl Fischer, Principal, Musynergy, who has kept us on course and expanded our universe of possibility. We are also deeply indebted to our peers from the Columbus Museum of Art, Dallas Museum of Art, and Denver Art Museum who have invited us into their "homes" and given us the benefit of their many years of learning. I would like to extend my gratitude to the Co-Trustees and staff of the Crocker Art Museum, especially Deputy Director Randy C. Roberts and Special Projects Manager Rachel M. Tooker, for their leadership in every aspect of this project from conception through implementation. We are excited to share this overview of Best Practices with you.

Lial A. Jones
Mort and Marcy Friedman Director & CEO
Crocker Art Museum
May 2013



Introduction

Our capacity building journey led us across the nation—from California to Colorado, Texas, and Ohio. Along the way we learned so much about serving families and other audiences that we had to share it . . . first with staff and board members at the Crocker, then with colleagues throughout California and now, in this publication, with our museum colleagues across the country.

Site visits were a cornerstone of the project so we began by examining the field to identify three art museums that have raised the bar in creating exemplary experiences for families. It was after we selected the Denver Art Museum, the Dallas Museum of Art, and the Columbus Museum of Art that we realized that the three museums shared an overarching goal: cultivating creativity for all ages. This deeply held value is manifested in different ways at each institution. At the Denver Art Museum, giving visitors opportunities to observe artists in the creative process and experience creativity first hand is an institution-wide endeavor seen and felt throughout the museum. At the Dallas Museum of Art, the Center for Creative Connections is a locus of creativity and experimentation that changes periodically. At the Columbus Museum of Art, the Center for Creativity encompasses seven different spaces that foster imagination and innovation.

Groups of 8-10 staff and board members from the Crocker traveled to Denver, Dallas, and Columbus to learn from their colleagues; but as is often the case in deep learning, the process was a mutual one. We had prepared a list of questions for each site visit but we found that our hosts were just as interested in asking questions of the Crocker delegation as in answering the questions posed to them. In the words of one of our Columbus hosts, "We got to learn from you all as much as you're learning from us." A Denver Art Museum colleague said, "As you go through the process and describe with such clarity the issues you're facing it helps us to articulate our process." A real spirit of mutual inquiry took root during our initial visits and blossomed throughout the following year.

Our three site visits were conducted between November 2011 and January 2012 and in February staff and board members came together at the Crocker to debrief. I presented the first version of "Best Practices in Cultivating Family Audiences" as a PowerPoint report summarizing our learnings. Wanting to include peers who had hosted us at site visits in a larger reflective process, we then planned a Sacramento meeting for staff members from the four museums. A Best-Practice Discussion series, conceived as a day of presentations by "museum luminaries" who would share their views with Crocker staff and board members was also envisioned. These two meetings grew into a single two-day symposium that we called POP-Ex (Pushing Our Practice Exchange). Once each of these pebbles had been cast into the pond the ripples kept getting wider and wider until a panel of four nationally recognized thought leaders, six peers from our site visits, and 120 colleagues from 20 California museums all came together at the Crocker to focus on best practices in serving family audiences.

To say that this project has grown beyond our wildest expectations would be an understatement! This booklet is evidence of the generosity that prevails among colleagues in the museum profession and the appetite for shared inquiry into issues of common concern. Serving family audiences is, without a doubt, one of the critical issues facing the museum profession today. Families come in all sizes, ages, and relationships—aunts, uncles and cousins, adult children and their parents, long lost relatives, elderly couples and newlyweds. By serving families well we can serve all of our audiences well.

Daryl Fischer
Principal, Musynergy

"This starts with the assumption that we don't know everything."

—Crocker Art Museum staff member—

"There's an understanding that we're trying new things. They don't always work out but we learn for the next time. Our ideas aren't so precious."

—Columbus Museum of Art staff member—

"It is increasingly difficult for any one individual to define family. Thus I have chosen to use a fairly simple but broad definition: two or more people in a multi-generational group that has an on-going relationship; they may be biologically related but not necessarily. In fact, the general rule is that if a group defines itself as a family they are one!"

—Lynn Dierking—

"We've been to these bead tables, Grandpa, my four-year-old son and me. Those two will sit right next to each other and do their own thing or help each other. I love that it transcends age levels."

—Denver Art Museum Visitor Panelist—

"Because of our audience evaluation we're more focused on the visitor part of the equation (visitor + art = engagement.)"

—Dallas Museum of Art staff member—

"How can you make this piece of art accessible to me and my children? I'm looking for things that will help me to engage my children as well as myself."

—Denver Art Museum Visitor Panelist—



Member Morning, Crocker Art Museum

To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will:

1

Expand our definition of family

In terms of museum programming, it is useful to think of “family” as a multi-generational unit with an ongoing relationship, rather than as a group of children and their adults.

2

Provide engaging experiences for all ages

We must dispel the perception that art museums are inappropriate for families with young children or that family activities are inappropriate for adults without young children.

3

Inspire multigenerational collaboration

Activities that encourage participation across age levels contribute to positive experiences for families of all types.

4

Serve parent needs and desires

Parents are eager to participate in activities that are meaningful to them as well as to their children.

5

Provide value through family betterment and transformation

Families are often seeking experiences that contribute to strengthening each member individually and all of them collectively.

6

Make connections between art and daily life

Art can be a catalyst for connecting the individual and shared experiences of family members.

7

Create a culture of intentional experimentation

Innovation relies on experimentation, which thrives in a culture that sees trying new things as a key to success.

8

Incorporate audience evaluation in our decision-making process

Asking, listening to, and learning from visitors is of paramount importance.

Each of these eight goals is expanded upon in the following pages.

1

To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will: **expand our definition of family.**

- Family learning occurs over one's whole lifetime.
- Children and adults seek and appreciate opportunities to act as teachers and learners.
- Knowledge and understanding is constructed by the family and incorporated in a family narrative, a set of shared meanings.
- Conversation is the "currency of family learning."
— Lynn Dierking
- The adults accompanying children may be grandparents, extended family members, neighbors or caregivers as well as parents.
- Families are an integral part of the museum audience; not a segregated group.
- In serving families, museums open up to many audiences with diverse socio-economic backgrounds and celebrate cultural differences.



Four generations at the Crocker Art Museum

Family Visitor Panel, Denver Art Museum





Wonder Room, Columbus Museum of Art

Presidents' Day Art Making, Crocker Art Museum



To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will:
provide engaging experiences for all ages.

- Spaces don't need to be "kidified" to be family friendly.
- Parents value spaces and activities that anticipate the needs and interests of *all* ages.
- In designing programs the style, tone, and feel of experiences can be more important than the age of visitors.
- By serving families well museums also serve other audiences well.
- Language should be used thoughtfully. Choosing names that have broad appeal, such as "Big Idea Gallery" rather than "Family Gallery," helps to invite broader participation.
- It is important to send the message that people are welcome to participate whether or not they have kids.
- Encouraging multiple ways of engaging with works of art and interpretive devices creates broader opportunities for participation.
- Each museum is at its own point on the trajectory of serving family audiences so success will look different at each institution.

3

To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will: **inspire multi-generational collaboration.**

- Activities designed to encourage more than one person to participate provide the kind of collaborative experiences that families value.
- Families are drawn to activities that encourage open-ended creativity where there is no "right" solution.
- Family members have varied interests and aptitudes so museum activities should offer multiple pathways of engagement.
- Studio activities that can be completed by a 5-year-old and engaging for a parent will increase family participation.
- Environment is important: families are looking for environments that are rich in diversity, type, and quality of experiences.



Center for Creative Connections,
Dallas Museum of Art

Family Free Day, Crocker Art Museum





Create Playdates, Denver Art Museum

Family Festival, Crocker Art Museum



To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will: **address parents' needs and desires.**

- Like their children, parents value opportunities to learn.
- Since the museum is an unfamiliar space to many families, it is helpful to provide a comfortable and friendly orientation.
- Parents appreciate guidance on how to introduce their kids to art.
- Parents need help seeing the connections between family activities and works of art.
- In our virtual culture museums have something special to offer in the uniqueness of original works of art.
- All types of family structures and dynamics will be respected by "serving with choice."
- Meet parents where you find them. Offering various approaches from smart phone apps to printed handouts can accommodate a range of needs and preferences.
- It is best not to overwhelm with information; there's a fine line between support and overkill.
- Some parents want to get down and dirty; others prefer to watch. Provide opportunities for both.

5

To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will:
provide value through family betterment and transformation.

- Skills learned in the museum can be carried outside to home and community.
- Art museum experiences can fuel dinner table conversations and create lasting family memories.
- Going to the museum is a unique family experience—different from going to the zoo, the playground, or a movie.
- Parents value distinctive experiences they can't provide at home.
- Great family experiences should aim for “flow,” the sweet spot between too easy and too hard.
- Family visitors appreciate high caliber, high quality materials, whether for free or paid programs.
- By choosing materials and techniques that are unique and readily available, museums can open doors to new possibilities.



Family Festival, Crocker Art Museum

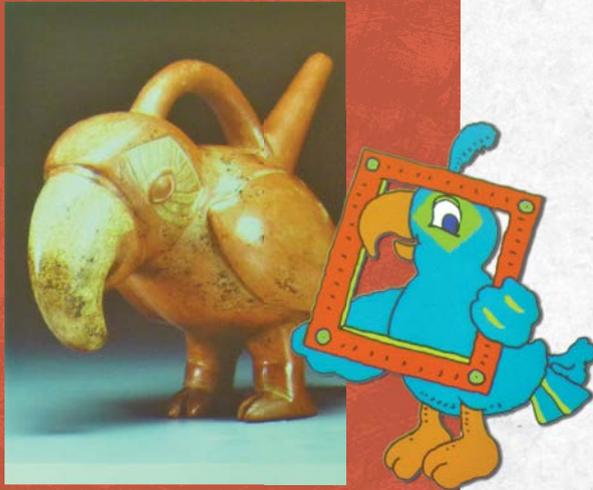
Painting Studio, Denver Art Museum





Arturo's Nest, Dallas Museum of Art

Arturo, Dallas Museum of Art



To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will:
make connections between art and daily life.

- Families construct personal meaning through personal connections.
- It's easier for children and their families to connect with environments and activities that have an element of the familiar.
- Especially in what may be an unfamiliar museum environment, it is important to emphasize familiarity.
- Providing a familiar format and a friendly face adds to visitor comfort.
- Well-designed family experiences can help visitors relate art to their own lives and see that art is all around them.
- Families learn best when there is a balance between familiar and new experiences.

To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will:
create a culture of intentional experimentation.

- There needs to be a champion at the top to support learning from experiments that work as planned *and* those that offer unexpected lessons.
- The entire team must be committed to experimentation.
- Experimentation can prove or disprove assumptions that museum staff members sometimes make about our audiences.
- Process matters: good process leads to better results.
- Words are important: be explicit in setting goals and articulating visitor-centered outcomes.
- Projects are most apt to be successful when they are handled by teams that know and embrace the goals from Day 1.
- Developing simple, low-cost prototypes for testing and improvements helps teams to realize the goals that are embedded from the beginning.
- When there is an overarching spirit of experimentation, the question is not whose idea is used but whether it meets the outcomes.



Center for Creative Connections,
Dallas Museum of Art

Center for Creativity, Columbus Museum of Art





Family Friday Audience Evaluation,
Crocker Art Museum

Family Friday Audience Evaluation,
Crocker Art Museum



To keep pace with emerging trends and better serve family audiences we will: **incorporate audience evaluation in our decision-making process.**

- Audience evaluation is the feedback loop that museums have with families.
- Designing effective family experiences starts with the assumption that museum staff don't know everything.
- At the beginning of any planning process it is important to question the assumptions made about audiences. What do we really know? Do we need more information?
- Visitors should be part of the equation as well as staff members.
- Visitors like knowing that their feedback will be used to enhance future programs.
- Investing in audience evaluation pays off. Time, energy, and professional development should routinely be devoted to it.
- Evaluation must be approached with a spirit of inquiry. What exactly is happening? How do we know if we're successful?
- We can't make good decisions unless we know what we're aiming for.

Thanks to Crocker Art Museum staff and our site visit hosts for their contributions to these guidelines:



**Amanda Blake,
Dallas Museum of Art**

"Part of the process involves the visitors and being very transparent with them. In the Center for Creative Connections we tell visitors that they're trying things out to see if they work for future exhibits. I think they feel that it's really cool to be a part of that and then to come back and see what that experiment has culminated in."



**Cindy Foley
Columbus Museum of Art**

"What we target towards families actually serves most visitors. We worried a little bit that the name 'family gallery' could discourage gay men, couples, two seniors, a group of college students visiting together. Even though they want to engage, it can make them feel like 'I'm not legitimate in this.' When we serve families, aren't we serving all of our audiences in some ways?"



**Lindsey Housel
Denver Art Museum**

"I think really being explicit about what you're trying to do and what kinds of experiences you want families to have and having those written down as goals is incredibly important. What exactly is happening? How are you being successful?"



**Dayna Jalkanen
Columbus Museum of Art**

"You need buy-in at the top but also from the people who are going to be working within that process and that philosophy. For us it's important that we all feel strongly about the overarching philosophy. That makes us really comfortable with the process."



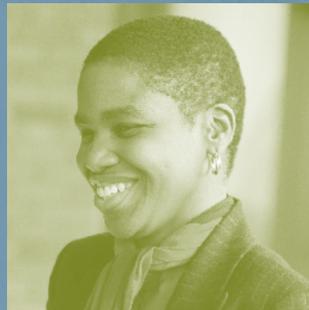
Heather Nielsen
Denver Art Museum

"All of us got to where we are because we value audience research and the feedback loop we have with our families. When it comes to best practices, I think about the number of resources we've put into evaluating our programs and developing our staff ... and that we'll continue to do."



Randy Roberts
Crocker Art Museum

"If change is really going to stick it has to come from the middle as well as from the top. Our institutions need to provide resources and support for leaders across all levels. Change in museums is difficult, but with well-defined goals and passion for our visitors and our mission, it will happen."



Stacey Shelnut-Hendrick
Crocker Art Museum

"When families become comfortable in the museum, they may start to see it as part of their routine. Children who are familiar with museum experiences at an early age tend to return to the museum throughout their lifetime."



Nicole Stutzman
Dallas Museum of Art

"Something inherent in everything this project is about is the importance of evaluation. It's about going to see things and doing research but it's also about really connecting, whether it's a focus group or listening well to the audiences you're working with. All of those kinds of evaluation are key to the process."



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