Modern Museums:
A Visitor - Centered Approach to Doing Business

by Andrea Gail Barnett

Book Review:
Oceania at the Tropenmuseum

by Daniel C. Swan

Edited by Michael A. Mares

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Foreword: Museum Studies
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When the Masters in Museum Studies Program in the College of Liberal Studies at the University of Oklahoma was established in 2003, we had no idea whether a completely web-based graduate program in museum studies would be successful. We approached museum studies from a practical, rather than theoretical, point of view in planning the curriculum. What did a student need to know in order to be successful in a museum career? What did we want museum professionals to know to help them understand the overall scope of museums in the world and to do their work more effectively while seeing it within the larger context of a museum’s overall operation?

Our experience in non-web-based education in museum studies from earlier decades when communication was by “snail mail” and students were required to spend time on campus for part of their training led us to expect that most of our students would be employed by museums as full- or part-time staff. Thus, we hoped that their graduate studies would permit them to become more informed and better-trained employees in their own museums if they wished to stay there, or to become more competitive in the museum world if they wished to seek new opportunities. When we first broached the outline of such a program to the dean, he asked how many students we thought the program
would have in three years. We had no idea, but estimated there would be 30 students within the first three years. How wrong we were!

Below is a graph showing the growth of the University of Oklahoma’s College of Liberal Studies Masters in Museum Studies Program since it began 9 years ago (data for academic year 2011 are not yet complete). Fourteen students enrolled the first year, and by the second year 38 students were in the museum masters program, already surpassing my prediction for year 3. Indeed, by year 3 we had 76 students enrolled in the program. The number of students continued to increase each academic year from 2003 to 2008, when it peaked at 140. The slight decline in enrollment in 2009 and 2010 can most likely be ascribed to the general downturn in the economy, with fewer people having money to invest in graduate studies and, indeed, with fewer people having jobs. Museum staff members are often not well paid and thus it might be expected that the economic panorama, loss of savings, housing issues, and other matters might affect lower paid museum staff members very directly. Presently, there are 89 students enrolled in the museum studies program.

Our students select courses in everything from a review of museums at a global scale to classes in museum architecture, management and leadership, the cultural issues affecting museums and their communities, and collection management. In addition, students complete an internship at a museum that is suitable for their career development. Students have been the sole employee at a museum in the Canadian Arctic, have been actively involved in combat in Iraq while taking museum classes, have been the director of a submarine museum, have been stationed in Europe and Asia, and have been employed at large art, history, and natural history museums across the U.S. We have had students intern at museums ranging from the Newseum and Smithsonian in Washington, D.C. to local historic houses and state parks. Their training has been diverse and their work has spanned the field of museum topics, from exhibit development to registration to collection management to outreach to information technology.

Significantly, our graduates have been hired in good positions in museums. I find the students—who are mostly adult learners—to be hard working, passionate about museums, interested in their future development as museum professionals, and committed to becoming more knowledgeable about all kinds of museums. National and state parks and monuments, major art museums, history centers, historic houses, tribal cultural centers, science museums, and even the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown, New York, now employ them. They are clearly competitive, highly skilled museum professionals when they graduate and are well prepared to take on more challenging roles in the museum world. We are very proud of our students.
Andrea Barnett is typical of our younger graduate students. She is a person with a passion for all things museum and her training involved working at a variety of museums in Oklahoma, from the Sam Noble Museum to the Oklahoma History Center, two major museums that were in the greater Oklahoma City area. While Andrea studied museum registration at the Sam Noble Museum, her internship at the Oklahoma History Center involved visitor services, an emerging area of importance to modern museums. I thought that the work she did in this area would be of interest to museums around the world, many of which are only just beginning to consider how best to attract people to their museum, how best to serve them, how to grow their audience, and how best to keep their audiences interested in the museum. Her views are those of a young museum professional and sometimes the staid world of museum management is quite removed from the interests of young people. I think that her research has relevance and I hope that it will interest the readers of this journal.

This issue of the CLS Journal of Museum Studies also includes a review of the book, Oceania at the Tropenmuseum by David van Duuren, editor. The review is by Dan Swan, Curator of Ethnology at the Sam Noble Museum of Natural History.
Modern Museums:  
A Visitor-Centered Approach to Doing Business  

Andrea Gail Barnett  

“The heart of the modern museum is its visitors.” (Falk 2009:185).  

Museums and cultural institutions are still esteemed as places of learning, but they must now adjust to the trends of what people want in order to stay relevant in today’s world. People have dozens of entertainment options from which to choose, and museums have to find a way to stand out from the crowd (Weaver, 2007:9). However, museums can adjust to and work with this visitor-centered mentality to remain attractive leisure time options. It takes some creativity, but museums have the authenticity of artifacts that sets them apart from other entertainment venues. They must develop ways to market this authenticity, while still providing an enjoyable experience (Weaver, 2007:30). Museums should not fear this societal trend but instead collaborate with other institutions and businesses to provide a place of learning and enjoyment.  

The Oklahoma History Center (OHC) is one entity that has had to adjust to these trends. My internship (while enrolled as a graduate student in the University of Oklahoma College of Liberal Studies Masters in Museum Studies Program) at the OHC helped me see the importance of working with, rather than against, consumer trends, and see how the OHC is working to provide a complete educational and enjoyable experience. This paper discusses how museums must function as businesses to remain viable; how the growing topics of visitor services and customer service apply to museums as a business; how volunteers can help museums in today’s society; and discusses my graduate internship experience at the Oklahoma History Center.
Abstract. Societal trends for museums and other cultural institutions have changed in the United States and the world. Consumers have come to expect much more activity than just passively viewing artifacts at museums or similar sites. The cultural institution mentality of “if we build it, they will come” (Chin, 2001:4) no longer holds, because visitors want more; it is not enough to see the real thing. They want to touch and interact and socialize. They want an “experience.” Consumers in today’s society have become accustomed to themed restaurants, mega shopping complexes, bright flashy lights, and catchy slogans to draw them in to these entertainment venues. Unfortunately, this consumer mentality has crossed into the museum realm, because museums are now considered places of cultural entertainment, lumped into tourist packages with neighborhood malls. In the past, museums existed as storehouses for rarities that attracted curious visitors, but “most museums [today] exist in order to attract and serve visitors – as many as possible” (Falk, 2009:20).

Business: Competition, Marketing, Collaboration

“How can we best attract audiences? How can we keep past visitors coming as well as … build new audiences?” (Falk, 2009:185). These are just two of many questions that museums ask to address the visitor-centered trend. To respond to these questions and current trends, museums have increasingly become market-driven and have had to focus on functioning more like a business (Falk, 2009:185). Museums offer consumable products, such as events, exhibitions, and souvenirs, which make them a business but, for some museum professionals, this equates museums with malls (Reeve and Woollard, 2006:6). Nevertheless, museums are in competition with other entertainment venues and must compete for visitors in today’s society. However, marketing departments and partnerships with other institutions and businesses can help museums better compete in the market and still remain as important places of informal learning.

Museums can no longer sit back and wait for visitors. They must develop ways to attract them and keep them as they battle with other nonprofits for the valuable tourist dollar and leisure time. For example, libraries allocate spaces and provide galleries to show small exhibitions; if these exhibitions are separate from the local museum, they have the potential to draw visitors away from museums (Falk and Dierking, 2000:230). Other museums can become competitors too. Large museums sometimes buy up struggling small museums instead of helping them stay open. Large museums have also taken a cue from corporations and established branch museums across the country that can take business away from small, local museums (Falk and Dierking, 2000:231). Saturation in some tourist destinations makes it difficult for museums to stand out from others, but instead of competing against area museums for visitors and money, museums should mutually promote each other to encourage visitation. Collaboration may prove more beneficial than strict competition.

Museums also compete with for-profit entities for visitors and dollars. In some cases, for-profit businesses have begun to model themselves after museums, resulting in even more options from which people can choose. For example, corporations are building art collections to rival museums and showcasing exhibitions in their lobbies (Falk, 2009:183). Theme restaurants like the Rainforest Café and the ESPN Zone immerse customers in a museum-style environment while they dine; customers have a total experience that engages all of their senses (Weaver, 2007:14).
The Hard Rock Café is another prime example of restaurants borrowing from museums. These restaurants build collections of rock ‘n’ roll memorabilia that attract visitors from around the globe. Visitors do not go just for the food; they go because it is entertaining and a destination in itself, like a museum is. The World of Coca-Cola in Atlanta draws more visitors than the High Museum of Art, because Coca-Cola has capitalized on the notion that people want an experience. Coca-Cola found a way to sell their products, while visitors can see “exhibits” of Coca-Cola; it is an entertaining experience that gives visitors what they want (Weaver, 2007:15). Even Disney theme parks have jumped on board the museum model train. They offer seminars and other learning opportunities that are modeled after those of a museum, and the Animal Kingdom is Disney's take on a zoo. Disney knows how to make a total immersion environment that uses museum techniques, but adds the entertaining theme park element that people enjoy (Falk and Dierking, 2000:229).

These are just a few examples of how nonprofits and for-profits are capitalizing on the museum model. Museums are wonderful places of learning and enjoyment, but competitors are finding ways to make the experience even better. Competitors like Disney and Coca-Cola understand what their visitors want and have perfected customer service. If museums are to maintain their popularity as leisure options, they need to become better at “understanding and serving their visitors” (Falk, 2009:21). Museums should begin to, if they do not already, monitor trends and borrow service practices from other nonprofits and the for-profit sector. They need to ask themselves what the competition is doing and why it works or does not work (Weaver 2007, 115; Blackwell and Scaife, 2006:69). Or better yet, learn to work with other institutions and businesses to mutually support one another. People do enjoy the free-choice learning that museums offer, but museums need to develop a way to combine the experience visitors want, while remaining true to their core mission.

To better compete in the entertainment/education industry, museums have turned to marketing and partnerships with other institutions and businesses. Marketing has become increasingly important to market-driven museums, because museums need to know who their competitors are and who their current and potential audiences are. Museum budgets have been cut in these difficult economic times, and museums have turned to admission fees, gift shops, cafés, and special events for revenue. Marketing helps make these events, gift shops, and other products appealing to consumers (Reeve and Woollard, 2006:8). Marketing in any industry is about attracting new audiences while retaining current ones, but museums must increase their focus on retaining current customers. By marketing programs and services that current audiences enjoy, these visitors see that the museum wants them to have a good experience and may make return visits. New visitors are a plus, but retaining customers is more cost-effective in the long run for building museum support. They will continue to return and use highly effective word-of-mouth advertising to encourage others to visit (Falk, 2009:187, 235).

Marketing research can help define who is or is not visiting the museum, get people through the door, and set expectations for the visit (Falk and Dierking, 2000:179; Falk, 2009:189). However, museums need consistency in marketing so that they actually do get people through the door and give them reasonable expectations for the benefits conferred by a visit. Marketing staff should look at the big picture to see if they are consistent with
the institution’s message, or in marketing terms, the brand, because “your brand is your experience” (Weaver, 2007:20). For example, if the museum is marketed as “family-friendly,” then it actually should be family-friendly when visitors experience it. Museum marketers need to make sure that their advertising, marketing, programs, and staff are providing the expected experience when visitors actually come to the museum.

Marketing can be good for museums, but marketing personnel must revise traditional marketing practices to fit museums. Museum marketing needs to change from relying only on demographics to define audiences. People visit museums for a variety of reasons – curiosity, exploring, wanting to be a good parent, recharging emotionally and intellectually, tourism, hobbyists—so it is important that museums send multiple messages to visitor identities and motivations like the ones listed here, rather than to demographic groups. These motivations encompass more people than simple demographics like age, gender, or race, and multiple messages can attract new and diverse audiences (Falk, 2009:206). Museum marketing “requires an understanding of the real needs and interests of the public,” but also means that the museum will commit to delivering a great experience to satisfy those needs and interests once visitors come through the door (Falk, 2009:213).

Finally, museums have turned to collaborative partnerships with other institutions and businesses to compete in the market. Museums that build partnerships can share resources to buffer budget cuts. For-profit corporations partner with cultural organizations to give back to their communities, create support for their brand, and “provide financial support, goods, and services” to these organizations (Weaver, 2007:47). For-profit corporations often have money and resources that museums can use to hire a much needed staff person, fix a leaky roof, or start a community outreach program that will enhance the visitor experience. For example, Regions Bank partnered with the Nashville Zoo to offer a Military Appreciation Day with free admission for military and their families. This was part of their “2010 Regions Free Days” where they offer free admission to cultural institutions (Bartoo, 2010). It was a great way for the bank to show their appreciation and provide a community service. Sometimes corporations cannot donate money, but they can lend their talented staff as volunteers in exchange for the museum offering programs for their employees (Weaver, 2007:122). Whatever the needs, these corporations can provide resources that museums require to continue their mission and to help others.

Museums can also build collaborative relationships with non-corporate businesses. An example from Stephanie Weaver (2007:122-123) is collaboration between a yoga studio and a botanical garden. The garden could allow the studio to offer classes in the garden; this would broaden both customer bases and allow the studio and garden to offer unique products to their members. An aquarium in Texas provides another example of a positive collaboration. A new aquarium in the Dallas area has partnered with a large shopping mall; the mall is setting aside a portion of the mall to be the aquarium. The aquarium will be an interactive, educational venue for families and
tourists that will draw patrons to the mall, expand both customer bases, and provide a source of revenue for the city (Sanderson, 2010). A final example of collaboration is that new museums can have an important architectural presence in a community and can boost city economies. For example, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain was built as a destination to improve Bilbao’s struggling economy and has provided much economic revenue to the city. Some argue the rationale of building museums purely for economic improvement, but nevertheless, the Guggenheim in Bilbao did improve Bilbao’s economy (Witcomb, 2003:27). A large part of tourism today involves going to a museum at a destination point and spending some time (and money) in the area, and cities use this to their advantage. Museums like the Guggenheim Bilbao can become symbols of civic pride and an economic stimulus (Falk and Dierking, 2000:220).

Cities and economies are rapidly changing. Museums cannot survive in today’s visitor-centered environment on the assumption that simply collecting important objects will directly result in an increase in visitors (Falk, 2009:182). Museum visitors are as diverse as the museums they visit, and museums must use ideas of marketing and collaborative partnerships to attract these visitors and compete in a fast-paced society. Museums must meet the needs and wants of these visitors or they will spend their leisure time and money elsewhere.

**Museum Visitor Services and Customer Service**

The visitor-centered trend in modern museums causes a need for enhanced visitor services and customer service in museums. Visitors are used to quality service at other leisure venues, and they have come to expect the same from museums. The increase in museums’ competition necessitates that museums evaluate how they treat and serve their visitors in order to keep them coming back. People visit museums to learn and to be entertained, but poor facilities or unfriendly staff can make an otherwise great museum experience bad and negatively affect learning and leisure time (Hill, 2001:11). Visitors can become dissatisfied if their expectations are not met; for instance, they expect working restrooms, but if they come across an “out of order” sign, they might leave dissatisfied even if that is the only roadblock they encounter (Falk, 2009:10). “Cleanliness, comfort, and security” can enhance an experience, but the opposite can very quickly detract from a good experience (Falk and Dierking, 2000:203). Visitor services and customer service tend to overlap, but for the sake of clarity, visitor services will be addressed as the actual facility requirements that must be met, and customer service will be concerned with customer relations.

The concept of visitor services has gained momentum with the shift in focus to museum visitors and their overall experience. Once a museum gathers information from marketing research for a better understanding of who goes to the museum, the entire staff needs to ensure that the museum’s facilities accommodate the needs of these visitors. “Generally speaking, the goal of Visitor Services… is to make our institutions accessible to all visitors regardless of their background, education, income, age, or gender” (Leonard, 2001:1). There is a need to match expectations with service (Reeve and Woollard, 2006:10). Visitor services is about meeting people’s physical needs: adequate parking and handicapped amenities; good food; clean restrooms; and adequate seating for rest breaks; and the ability to readily
orient themselves within the museum. These may be as important to the visitor experience as outstanding programs that meet their educational needs or producing clear and easily understood exhibit labels. Visitors want to feel comfortable in their surroundings, especially if they are infrequent museum visitors (Weaver, 2007:92).

Judy Rand provided a useful list called the “Visitors’ Bill of Rights” that museums should utilize to discover what visitors need in the area of visitor services. She states that visitors want things like comfort, easy orientation, a welcoming staff, fun, learning, and the ability to socialize (Rand, 2004:158-159). This Bill of Rights can serve as a checklist for museums to determine if they are meeting all of these needs, and if not, how they can adjust to meet them. Another way to discover what visitors need is by asking them. Whether this is through formal interviews, comment cards, or an online survey, people will share what they want in an experience, and audience feedback can reveal strengths and weaknesses (Weaver, 2007:116). Museums can then use the feedback for improvements. There are not always clear cut rules for visitor services since situations vary by museum, but each institution should address this topic as well as it can in order to provide facilities that can be truly used by the visitor (Lang et al., 2006:233).

Customer service has also become increasingly important with the trend of museums to focus on serving visitors. While visitor services provide for customer needs, customer service is about how they are treated—and they should be treated as guests. To receive top quality treatment from the museum and its staff is to have one’s own good self image validated, making the visitor feel that he/she is respected by the institution and leading to a greater sense of comfort. Customer service in a cultural institution setting has not been as intensively studied as visitor services, but museums can take cues from other industries to adapt their customer service skills. Customer service is about consistency, verbal and nonverbal first impressions, staff attitudes and actions, and engaging the visitor. Consistency of experience is crucial in any business, and Starbucks is a great example. They make their money by providing an experience. Yes, the coffee is their product, but people go to Starbucks because of “the names of the drinks, that distinctive whoosh of the steamer, [and] the baristas who write your name on a cup” (Weaver, 2007:13). People love this experience and know that, wherever they go in the world, they will get a consistent experience because Starbucks makes this a priority. Museums need to ask themselves how they can create consistently good experiences. They need to train all staff, paid and volunteer, in customer service because anyone may come in contact with a visitor. All staff members need to know that the museum has customer service standards to ensure consistency.

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![Fig. 1. Oklahoma History Center entrance, with bronze titled, Unconquered, by Allan Houser. Photo courtesy of Oklahoma History Center.](image-url)
Customer service is also about verbal and nonverbal first impressions. The impression of the facility is as important as the impression of the staff. Museums should make sure that paint is fresh, windows are intact, and landscaping is tidy (Weaver, 2007:72-73). Front-line staff members are also vital to this first impression because they are the public face of the museum for most visitors. Managers need to make sure staff members have clean uniforms, good personal hygiene, make eye contact and smile, promptly greet visitors, practice simple courtesy, and remain accessible to visitors if they have questions (Ham, 2001:43, Leonard, 2001:2, Hendrie, 2008). All of these things add up to the first impression visitors get when they walk through the door; and a good first impression sets the tone for a good experience.

Staff attitudes and actions are as important as first impressions in customer service. A good staff member—paid or volunteer—should be approachable, friendly, polite, and helpful. Management should remember to treat paid and unpaid employees well, hire workers with a positive attitude, and provide a good work environment. If the front-line staff has a positive attitude, it will be transferred to visitors (Hill, 2001:12). For example, a visitor is having a good time at a museum and stops in the gift shop on the way out. The sales clerk is rude to the customer, and that is the impression with which the customer leaves; the visitor will forget anything good that happened during the visit and remember the surly staff member (Weaver, 2007:9, 52). Staff should also watch their actions with visitors present. Swearing or talking on cell phones does not give a good impression of the museum. Issues like this should be addressed in training and reinforced frequently (Weaver, 2007:100-101). Museums must remember that visitors might overlook confusing signage or broken exhibits, “but even the gentlest visitor may not excuse a rude employee” (Hill, 2001:49). Poor customer service can send visitors out the door, never to return, so good customer service is vital to the success of a museum.

Finally, good customer service involves engaging the visitor. This may mean being available to handle a complaint or engaging them in fun activities. No one enjoys handling complaints, but it is part of museum work. Staff needs to engage visitors who have a complaint by listening to them, trying to solve the problem if they are able, or providing an alternative solution, and thanking the visitor for bringing the problem to the museum’s attention (Leonard, 2001:2). Dealing with angry visitors is not fun, and staff cannot control the attitudes that visitors might bring to the museum. However, they can choose to have a positive attitude themselves and provide good customer service to the visitor (Lundin et al., 2000:57-58). Such engagement shows that the museum cares about improving the experience. Staff can engage visitors by being present to answer questions, show them how an exhibit works, or share in a fun activity. The idea of physical presence is important for staff to remember, because this makes them pay attention to visitors who may look confused or lost. Staff members who are alert and quickly engage visitors can help the visitor have a quality museum experience.

Good visitor experiences in museums can help institutions financially by increasing revenue through repeat visitors and sales, and good experiences also allow the museum to fulfill its mission to educate because the business provides income for programming (Weaver, 2007:10). Good service sets a good museum apart from others, which is valuable in the competitive market. Good customer and visitor services also produce satisfied
customers who will support the museum and positively promote the museum (Falk, 2009:246). Museums have usually viewed the customer’s experience from their perspective. However, if they put themselves in the visitors’ shoes, they might gain a greater understanding of how to improve service and treatment through quality visitor services and customer service (Weaver, 2007:63). In turn, visitors will continue to recognize museums as essential institutions in society and continue to return (Falk, 2009:244).

Volunteers are vital to museums and cultural institutions, because they help carry out the visitor-centered missions that are important in modern society (Kuyper, 1993:1). They play a role in visitor and customer services to help museums compete in the market and provide quality experiences for visitors, so it is important that museums inform volunteers of their impact on the visitor experience. Volunteers, especially those on the frontline, help with visitor services by welcoming visitors and helping them use the facilities (Kuyper, 1993:5). They are the friendly face that visitors see when they walk through the door and set the tone for the visit. They are fresh eyes that may not see the museum on a daily basis; they can help staff step back and evaluate the visitors’ experience to see what needs improvement (Davis, 2010). For example, broken exhibits or torn labels can cause unpleasant experiences for visitors, but volunteers can report these to maintenance before the visitor does or can act quickly to get the problem resolved once the visitor points it out. A volunteer can also inform visitors of broken exhibits as they approach them and point them to other areas of interest, which might help avoid dissatisfied customers (Korn, 2001:65-66).

Volunteers help with facility upkeep in visitor services, and they also help with the visitors’ needs. The marketing staff can provide audience information to volunteers so that they can better understand visitor perspectives and backgrounds and better serve visitors by anticipating their needs (Hirzy, 2007:49). Knowledge of visitors’ needs can help volunteers address visitors’ physical needs for comfortable seating, clear maps and signs, or finding the restroom and address the cognitive needs of visitors by becoming tour guides or living history interpreters to provide exciting, quality programs for all ages (Chin, 2001:4, Weaver, 2007:19, 81). Volunteers can help the museum staff know what visitors want and need. They are on the frontline interacting with visitors and overhear conversations, handle complaints, and collect comment cards; they can provide insight on the museum’s current visitor experience as it perceived the by visitor. Museum staff can then use this frontline knowledge to improve the visitor experience (Weaver, 2007:114).
Volunteers play a large role in museum customer services. They need to treat visitors as guests, which will indicate to visitors the museum’s commitment to providing a satisfying experience “from start to finish” (Hirzy, 2007:48). Volunteers properly trained in customer service can ensure a consistent visitor experience and verbal and nonverbal first impressions are part of this consistency. Volunteer greeters at the front desk signal the museum’s desire to be welcoming, and a smile and courtesy can go a long way toward making a visitor feel wanted (Weaver, 2007:75).

Attitudes are another piece of the customer service puzzle. Volunteers should be friendly, polite, and willing to go the extra mile for visitors (Hirzy, 2007:118). A visitor might walk in the front door frustrated from traffic, but volunteers should show the visitor that they want them to have a pleasant visit by being friendly and helpful. Volunteers with a positive attitude can show the frustrated visitor that the museum is a great place to be, and that good attitude might be just what that person needed to change their own attitude (Lundin et al., 2000:36).

Finally, volunteers have the opportunity to engage visitors. They can include them in an exhibit demonstration or a game they might be playing with a group (Falk, 2009:234). Volunteers can engage visitors in conversation about a specific artifact and offer knowledge that might not be on the exhibit label. They can also engage visitors by being present for questions or complaints (Falk and Dierking, 2000:107; Lundin et al., 2000:66, 68). Since volunteers are in regular contact with visitors, they will be the first to deal with complaints. Museum staff members need to empower volunteers to solve problems that they have the ability and authority to solve and giving that extra effort to make sure the complaint does not ruin the visit (Chin, 2001:5, Leonard, 2001:2).

Museums know the value of their volunteers. Volunteers help the museum at no charge and really want to be there. They can help with visitor services and customer service in a variety of ways, and museums should capitalize on this to boost the visitor experience. They are the human contact that most visitors have when they go to museums, whether that is in the galleries, gift shop, or at the

Fig. 3. Rock and Roll exhibit featuring pop group Hanson from Tulsa, OK. Photo courtesy of Oklahoma History Center.

Fig. 4. OHC volunteers at the Rock and Roll Exhibit Opening (l-r: Deborah Martindale, Barbara Byrd, Katie Runion, Janet Wheeler). Photo courtesy of Oklahoma History Center.
Because they are the visitor contact much of the time, museums should invest in their volunteers. Show them appreciation and provide special perks or rewards for their time, and they will bring smiles and a positive attitude to their shift (Weaver, 2007:58). Their enthusiasm will transfer to visitors and enhance the visitor experience at the museum.

**The Internship Experience**

The Master of Arts in Museum Studies program at the University of Oklahoma allows students to choose an internship, thesis, research project, or additional coursework to complete the degree. I chose the internship option because I wanted the valuable hands-on experience that comes with an internship. The internship option requires a student to find his/her own internship and to complete at least 450 hours of service interning for a cultural organization. The Oklahoma Museum of History (OMH) housed in the Oklahoma History Center (OHC) fit these requirements and allowed me to be a part of the staff while completing my degree. The OMH is part of the Oklahoma Historical Society (OHS) in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. It is located next to the state capitol and is a outstanding museum that tells the story of Oklahoma’s people, resources, and culture and the contributions the state and its people have made to the world. The OHC just celebrated its fifth anniversary in its current building, but the OHS has been serving Oklahoma since 1893.

I wanted to intern at the OHC because I love history, it fit with my business educational and professional background, and I wanted a front-of-the-house museum experience.

My internship at the OMH—divided between the Volunteer Services/Marketing office and Events office—showed me the importance of good visitor services and customer service that are required to market the OHC and keep it competitive with other area attractions. The Marketing Manager informed me that her office has identified families, history buffs, and school age children as target audiences, and the Events office includes the bridal and events market as target audiences too. The OHC marketing office advertises in family, ethnic, and tourist publications to help make the gift shop, special event facilities, and museum attractive to their current and potential audiences. It has redesigned some of its branding to reflect the actual event experience. This year, the Marketing Manager redesigned the rack cards that are distributed to area hotels and businesses, because visitors were not picking up the previous ones. The redesign is more attractive and better reflects what the OHC offers.

OHC has also developed collaborative partnerships. The gallery names reflect donors and corporations, such as the ONEOK Gallery. Event spaces like the Devon Great Hall and Chesapeake Events Center also advertise their donors. The OHC has partnered with these
large corporations to improve their facilities and exhibits. The OHC also partners with the Governor’s Office to provide the Oklahoma City community with a free family day called SeptemberFest. This partnership shows the goodwill of both entities by providing a free admission day for everyone. The OHC is concerned with visitor services and strives to meet visitor needs. There is seating in the galleries and most of the common areas. OHC has 24-hour security with cameras throughout the building, and partners with Goodwill Janitorial Services to ensure the building’s cleanliness. The janitorial staff works all day cleaning and emptying trash receptacles to ensure that the building looks nice for visitors.

The OHC also meets the physical needs of patrons through its café. The Winnie Mae Café stays open through most of the business hours and offers a variety of soups, salads, and sandwiches for customers. It encourages visitors to stay a little longer in the museum to have lunch, and it provides a place to recharge (Weaver, 2007:89). The OHC provides good visitor services through a welcoming staff and an environment that encourages fun, learning, and socializing.

For the most part, customer service at the OHC is comparable to the suggested best practices in the literature. The exhibits and front-line staff match the good experience promised in the advertising and marketing. The OHC greatly appreciates its volunteer corps and tries to provide opportunities for service throughout the museum. Volunteers are reminded to be those smiling faces that greet the visitors and help them find their way around the building, whether in the galleries or pointing out the restrooms (Kuyper, 1993:5). They help with comment cards and provide ideas to the paid staff of how the OHC can improve its visitor experience (Chin, 2001:5). Volunteers are selected for, among other things, their passion and enthusiasm to serve and they are rewarded with fun outings, special speakers, and behind-the-scenes tours that are not available to the public (Hirzy, 2007:54-55).

The literature on museum customer service is limited, and during my internship, customer service training was finally added to volunteer training. I helped compile customer service information that complements the volunteer manual, and this was used in one of the training sessions. I think the enhanced customer service training information for volunteers will help them be more aware of their impact on visitors’ experiences. As all the literature suggests, paid and volunteer staff should have customer service training. It will help all employees provide consistent service to visitors and promote a positive front for the OHC.
Conclusion

This paper describes how museums need to function as a business in today’s competitive market; how visitor services and customer service are needed in museums; and how volunteers can help museums function as a business. Today’s market is saturated with entertainment activities competing for people’s time and money. Unfortunately, museums are lumped in the same category as movie theaters and malls, so today’s museum must find ways to compete for visitors while remaining true to its mission. Museums can use marketing and collaborative partnerships to boost revenue and reach potential audiences, and cultural institutions can work with each other to promote one another and share audiences.

Besides marketing and partnerships, museums must utilize visitor services and customer service. Twenty-first century museums must meet the needs of their visitors and provide good customer service if they want to survive and succeed. People expect quality from museums, and this includes meeting their needs. Museums can use volunteers to help meet these visitor services and customer service needs to provide good experiences for their visitors; if they do not provide a good experience, visitors will spend their leisure time elsewhere. My time at the OHC helped me see the value of good visitor services and customer service, and this institution works hard to meet their current visitors’ needs while attracting new ones. The visitor is at the heart of today’s museums, and institutions that recognize this will be poised for success in the future.

References


Museums by definition build collections of significant objects and specimens to support their research and education missions. Through exhibitions and their associated publications, as well as public programs, museums promote general knowledge and greater understanding by presenting stories that address a broad range of themes and topics. While museums have become immensely effective in conveying important stories to scholarly and popular audiences, they seldom reveal the stories behind their development as civil institutions—stories that frame the histories of organizations and individuals, stories of adventure and discovery, stories of colonization and appropriation, stories retold amidst changing social and political contexts.

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Oceania at the Tropenmuseum provides comprehensive treatment and reflexive assessment of the historical development of the Tropenmuseum and its ethnographic collections from the Oceanic culture region. Oceanic arts at the Tropenmuseum are quite extraordinary in scope and depth, and include over 180,000 objects, 270,000 photographs, extensive scientific field notes, expedition journals, and other supporting documentation. The editor for the volume is senior scholar David van Duuren, who served the Tropenmuseum in a variety of capacities between 1970-2010. Duuren is joined by Daan van Dartel, Collection Researcher, Steven Vink, Senior Researcher for Visual Collections, Hanneke Hollander, and Denise Franks as chapter authors. Accompanied by a preface and introduction the volume is comprised of twelve chapters that are well researched, clearly written, and impeccably referenced. Each chapter addresses an aspect or element of the history of the museum and in particular the development of its vast ethnographic collections. The volume is handsome in its design and is well illustrated with a mix of quality photographs of objects from the collection and historic photographs from the museum archives. This is volume two in a projected ten volume series that will highlight specific areas of the ethnographic collections of the Tropenmuseum organized by the geographic and cultural regions in which they were originally made and used.

The story of the Tropenmuseum is one of great interest and importance. The museum traces its origins back to a series of 19th century colonial collections that coalesced in 1871 in Haarlem with the establishment of the first museum dedicated to the colonial pursuits of a world power. In 1910 these collections were transferred to the Colonial Institute Association in a new building in Amsterdam that came to be called the Colonial Museum. The main objective of the Colonial Museum was to educate the Dutch populace on the territorial holdings of their nation. In 1950, the museum became part of the Royal Tropical Institute and was renamed the Tropenmuseum. A particular objective of the newly transformed museum was to highlight the resources and agricultural potential of the Dutch tropics. It was under this rubric that continued ethnographic collecting focused on objects that demonstrated indigenous material culture.

The chapter “Expeditions: Collecting and Photographing” provides a comprehensive review of the efforts of the Dutch government to complete the mapping and investigation of the interior of New Guinea in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The importance of this topic to the history of the Tropenmuseum and its collections is
made apparent by the length of this chapter, comprising one quarter of the volume’s content. Following an introductory essay the chapter is comprised of a series of vignettes that provide engaging details of the major scientific and military investigations undertaken between 1858 and 1959 to document the interior of Dutch New Guinea. The chapter is richly illustrated with excellent black and white photographs from the museum’s archives of expedition scenes and personnel, and color photographs of the objects derived from their fieldwork.

Subsequent chapters by Duuren and Hollander provide interesting and engaging treatments of additional activities that were central in the growth of the Oceanic collections at the Tropenmuseum. These include the stories of an expedition chartered by King Louis XIV, the acquisition of a forgotten collection of ethnographic drawings by Father Petrus Vertenten, the professional contract collecting of Carel Groenevelt, and exchanges and trades with the leading ethnological museums of Europe.

In the chapter “Oceania in View,” Denise Frank tackles the core issues of authority, voice, and representation in her assessment of the history of exhibitions at the Tropenmuseum. The chapter is illustrated with excellent quality photographs of past exhibitions and is particularly strong in its treatment of the transition in exhibition policies as the political climate shifted from a joyous celebration of colonial empire to more apolitical approaches in the 1950’s, a period of increased calls for independence and decolonization. A shift toward a global focus on trade and development set the course for the museum for the next twenty years. Frank provides excellent longitudinal treatment of the motivations and expectations for the temporary exhibitions at the Tropenmuseum, placing these initiatives squarely within the socio-political contexts in which they were developed and deployed. The chapter concludes with an exceptional discussion of exhibitions in the twenty-first century in which the staff of the Tropenmuseum reflect upon the museum’s colonial past. This willingness to continuously re-invent itself has led the Tropenmuseum into intriguing domains as it continually works to balance its colonial collections with contemporary works in both fine and folk art traditions.

The volume concludes with “Photography During Expeditions” a brief chapter that addresses the photographic collections of the Tropenmuseum. The advent of photography in the nineteenth century quickly brought the position of the photographer to prominence among the members of scientific expeditions. Beginning with the use of daguerreotypes in the 1840’s, photography quickly became an indispensable component of scientific expeditions worldwide. The availability of commercially prepared glass plate negatives in 1875, and further advances in developing and printing technology in the early decades of the twentieth century, provided the opportunity for every member of an expedition to contribute to the photo documentation of the natural and cultural worlds they encountered. The audience for Oceania at the Tropenmuseum is the benefactor of this legacy with the entire volume richly illustrated with an amazing array of expedition and collection photographs from the museum archives.

My only serious criticism of the volume is the complete lack of voice for the indigenous people of New Guinea. Ample opportunities, either through the published literature or direct fieldwork, are available for the incorporation of critical perspectives from the communities that created and used the objects.
in the collection. In this post-modernist era of anthropological scholarship this is a glaring omission. This is particularly apparent in the chapter that addresses the changing orientation of the museum in response to social, political, and scholarly dynamics. The Tropenmuseum is to be congratulated for undertaking the production of an ambitious, ten volume set that will detail the evolution of ethnographic collections at the Tropenmuseum. David van Duuren is due particular credit for editing a wonderful volume that will serve as an important reference work for scholars from a diverse set of academic disciplines, including anthropology, art history, and indigenous studies. This work will also serve as a valuable case study for museum professionals and academics, as well as students in museum studies and material culture programs.