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Museums and their Visitors

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill



London and New York

Who goes to museums?

Museums and galleries have been concerned to know who their visitors are for some years. But why do we need to know who visits museums? And is it enough to know who visitors are? What else is there to know? Why bother anyway? How can we find out?

There are a number of reasons why museum workers need to be aware of the patterns of use of museums and galleries. These include the continued justification of a public service, the demonstration of a professional approach to management, the development of knowledge and expertise and the improvement of performance.

First, museums are a public service, and it is important to be aware of how the service is taken up. A public service will not be maintained if it is not used. How are museums used? Which sections of the public benefit from museums and which do not? Why, and what are the implications? Visiting the displays is an obvious use of museums, but there are others that should also be considered, monitored and documented, and encouraged: the numbers of enquiries about objects received and answered, the numbers of photographs of items from the collection supplied, the range of researchers and scholars that use the collections and the expertise of the staff for information, the extent of corporate hire and so on. All these are also indications of the use and value of museums and galleries as a public service. They are on the whole, much broader and more varied than most of the public, or the governors and funders of museums, would think.

Second, information about the uses of the institution in relation to resources is vital to demonstrate managerial competence. Museum staff will not be perceived as professionals by government, colleagues in other areas of leisure or educational work or other business colleagues, unless detailed knowledge of the operation of the museum can be called upon when required. No business can succeed if its managers do not know who wants its products or services.

Third, in the present climate of accountability, it is sensible for museums and galleries to begin to develop some in-house knowledge and expertise by carrying out research, even if on a small scale, into the perceived use and value of the institution. This experience will be useful as standards for

museums are developed. One example is in relation to the development of standards of visitor satisfaction and customer care, where the existence in museums of an understanding of how to measure the experiences of visitors would aid the development of realistic and useful performance indicators. Ignorance on the part of museum workers of the procedures for discovering what visitors enjoy, how they respond to the museum, why they have come and so on, may lead to the imposition of unrealistic and unhelpful demands.

In addition, in using the concepts of 'visitor satisfaction' and 'customer care' (Museums and Galleries Commission, 1992), the measurement of the use of the museum tends to become limited to the activities and perceptions of visitors, whereas the use of museums is in fact much wider than this. If judgements are to be made about the public effectiveness of the museum following the measurement of 'visitor' satisfaction (and it is possible that levels of funding may be determined by this), then it will become vital to be alert to 'use' as a broad category, rather than 'visit', which although extremely important, is a narrower concept.

Finally, it is important for all staff to know what level of success is being achieved. Both quantitative and qualitative information should be used by managers on a regular basis to monitor successes and failures and to improve targeting of provision.

What do we need to know? We have discussed the idea of the 'use' of the museum as a broad category. It is of great importance to gather information about 'use', which would include details of a whole range of public functions that are generally not very visible, such as the use of the museum for work-experience for school and college students, the use of the museum as a place to volunteer, the museum as a location for film, the provision of archive material for the press and so on. The invisible and behind-the-scenes character of much of this public provision makes it all the more important to monitor and document.

In this chapter, however, we will concentrate on the idea of the 'visit'. Knowledge about patterns of museum and gallery visiting operates both at a general level, in relation to the museum's role in society, and at a specific level, in relation to particular institutions. Both types of information are necessary.

It is important for museum professionals to have a broad understanding of the social functions of museums and galleries. What proportion, and which sections, of the population visit museums? Does this vary in relation to different types of museum? What image do people have of museums, and what expectations do they have when visiting? Why do some people feel that museums are not for them? Knowledge of the general level and structure of patterns of museum and gallery visiting will give a measure against which to assess achievements in individual institutions.

At a specific level, museum workers need to know who comes to their own institution. How does this pattern relate to the broad general pattern of museum visits? Do we attract a more or less élite public; more or fewer school

groups; are visitors more or less pleased with their visits to my institution than to others? Although these kinds of comparisons are extremely difficult to make, as we shall see, the questions deserve to be asked.

The pattern of visitors to any museum or gallery should be compared with the pattern of the population in its catchment area. This geographical area can be identified and elaborated in relation to obvious geographical characteristics; so, for example, with museums in a city with approximately 250,000 inhabitants, we might have a first-level catchment area to include the city, a second-level area to include the immediate region and then a third-level very diffuse area outside this region. The demographic pattern of visitors to the city-centre museums could be usefully compared to the demographic composition of the population of the city and the county. The match with a local population is particularly necessary for a community museum; perhaps of less immediate need for a national museum.

How can we find out?

There is now considerable information available about the patterns of use of museums and galleries by visitors. From this we can assemble a sketchy outline, but it is not easy to build up a reliable composite picture of a national or international pattern of visiting. Some of the work which has been done is contradictory, and much of it addresses specific issues related to the objectives of a particular piece of research. There are several approaches to research which may be used, each of which tends to yield specific types of data, which can make comparison difficult. Sources of information on museum visiting include academic research, government statistics, research from the leisure industry and research generated from within the museum, gallery and arts community.

A great deal of research on visitor patterns has been carried out in the United States. Much of this is most usefully collated and discussed by Falk and Dierking in their book *The Museum Experience* (1992) which discusses museums from the point of view of visitors, and draws on a large reservoir of research studies that have mainly been produced in the last twenty years. The funding arrangements of American museums, which tend to rely heavily on grants for specific projects, have encouraged attention to the evaluation of these projects. The responses of participants in educational programmes, the attention paid to exhibits, perceptions of a range of types of museum and memories of museum visits have been comprehensively analysed. Some of these studies have been published in journals such as *Curator, Journal of Museum Education* (originally called *Roundtable Reports* and renamed in 1985) or the more recent *International Laboratory of Visitor Studies (ILVS) Review: A Journal of Visitor Behaviour*; some of the research has a more tenuous existence as conference papers. *The Art Museum as Educator* (Newsom and Silver, 1978) and *Museum Visitor Evaluation: New Tool for Management* (Loomis, 1987) are key texts with relevance for all museums. The two anthologies drawn from the Journal of Museum Education, *Museum Education*

Anthology, Perspectives on Informal Learning: a Decade of Roundtable Reports, 1973-1983 (Museum Education Roundtable, 1984) and *Patterns in Practice* (Museum Education Roundtable, 1992), are also essential reading. Harris (1990) offers a review of the history of visitor research in America.

In Canada, the development of a national museums policy in 1971 led to a very interesting and comprehensive survey on museum use published as *The Museum and the Canadian Public* (Dixon, Courtney and Bailey, 1974). The exemplary methods used, including questionnaires and focus groups, are discussed in the appendices. Attention to the needs of visitors once in the museum is discussed in the Royal Ontario Museum's *Communicating with the Museum Visitor: Guidelines for Planning* (Royal Ontario Museum, 1976) and in subsequent publications.

There has been considerable research into the patterns of museum and gallery use in some parts of Europe, notably in Holland, and some centres for study, such as Paris, France and Karlsruhe, Germany, can be identified. Little of this work is available in English. The Swedish travelling exhibitions, Rikstutställningar, carried out a fascinating study of visitors to their exhibitions in the 1970s which is still of value (Arnell, Hammer and Nylof, 1980).

In Britain, some interesting pieces of academic research have been carried out in recent years. Two will be introduced here to illustrate the breadth of different approaches that may be adopted when considering the use of museums and galleries. Placed within different theoretical perspectives, both have been published and are easily available. Each yields useful material.

Merriman's approach is drawn from sociological paradigms (Merriman, 1989, 1991): it tackles some first principles relating to the social functions of museums. Merriman's basic contention is that although museums are seen and see themselves as educational institutions, access for all has not been achieved. This idea in itself is not revolutionary, but the value of Merriman's work is that he wishes to go further than mere documentation of this fact. He seeks to explain it by analysing the symbolic power of museums, using the work of Pierre Bourdieu. A large-scale survey was carried out in 1985 to examine attitudes to the past, to archaeology and history and to museums. Attitudes and perceptions were then analysed in relation to status, education and other social variables. Bourdieu's work has been concerned with the reproduction of social relations, and specifically, the reproduction of power and domination. Through the analysis of social phenomena such as education systems and cultural systems (including museums) he demonstrates the interrelationships of economic and symbolic power. Merriman uses Bourdieu's work as a starting point for the construction of an explanation for the patterns of museum visiting, analysed in the context of hierarchical social structures.

McManus takes a different approach. In some ways her focus is narrower, limited to the investigation of how people learn in science museums. Her research is based on psychological methods and approaches, with an attention to the way individuals behave within particular environments. McManus

observed and documented the reactions of groups and individuals in the displays of the Natural History Museum, London (previously known as the British Museum (Natural History) or BM(NH)) and in other science museums (Lucas, McManus and Thomas, 1986; McManus, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1991).

In Britain, the work of government departments and bodies is sometimes very useful in tracking down information. Although much of the data is too general to be of use, some is vital, and often forms the basis for reporting in the national media. For example, the *General Household Survey* is produced annually; in the 1979 edition, the subject of Chapter 7 was leisure. Of more use in recent years has been *Cultural Trends*, produced four times per year. In *Cultural Trends*, 8, 1990, the first twenty-four pages were concerned with museums, and gave useful information on funding, costs and other management issues. In *Cultural Trends*, 12, 1991 (Eckstein and Feist, 1992) one section focused on attendance at museums and galleries.

The Office of Public Censuses and Surveys has carried out a number of surveys on behalf of specific national institutions during the last ten years (for example, Heady, 1984; Harvey, 1987). These vary in interest and quality. The Policy Studies Institute, a government think-tank, published *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* in 1989 (Myerscough, 1988). The aim of this report was to demonstrate how the arts, in a changing policy framework, contributed to the economic life of the nation. Research was conducted in three contrasting areas of Britain, and this included the investigation of audiences for the arts, including museums and galleries.

The leisure industry in Britain regularly produces information which is useful, but mainly limited to tourist statistics, such as numbers of visitors to specific sites. Now and then more detailed work is produced, such as the English Tourist Board's *Visitors to Museums Survey 1982* (English Tourist Board, 1982). *Sightseeing in the UK*, 1990 places the statistics for museums and galleries in the context of visits to other places (British Tourist Authority, 1991). The Henley Centre for Leisure Forecasting, a private business supported by subscribers, produces a time-use survey for the leisure industry four times per year. These look at what people do in their leisure time, and generally include a few details about museums and galleries.

Two detailed reports have emerged recently. *Museum Funding and Services – the Visitor's Perspective* (Touche Ross, 1989) reports the results of a national opinion poll of 2,800 museum visitors and their attitudes towards museum funding, including entry fees. Details include information on visiting patterns and visitor perceptions. *New Visions for Independent Museums* (Middleton, 1990), a comprehensive review of the issues faced by independent museums in the UK, is based on the best available information on museum visiting, including references to many of the sources listed above.

A final source of information is the research that is carried out by or on behalf of the museum or arts community. The major arts community bodies in Britain,

including the Arts Council and the Regional Arts Boards, are all to a greater or lesser extent generators of research. Although most of it is concerned with the arts in general, this includes art galleries and sometimes museums.

The Arts Council commissions research for their clients on a regular basis, with recent reports including *Target Group Index 1990/1* (Arts Council, 1991a), *Galleries and Museums Research Digest* (Millward Brown/Arts Council, 1991) and *RSGB Omnibus Arts Survey, Report on a Survey of Arts and Cultural Activities in GB* (Arts Council, 1991b) prepared by Research Surveys of Great Britain (RSGB).

Greater London Arts produced two useful reports in 1990: *Arts in London: a Survey of Attitudes of Users and Non-users* (Greater London Arts, 1990a) and *Arts in London: a Qualitative Research Study* (Greater London Arts, 1990b). Both of these were carried out by Mass Observation, and used market research methods to talk to people to ascertain how they felt and what participation in the arts meant to them.

Museums UK: the Findings of the Museums Data-base Project (Prince and Higgins-McLoughlin, 1987) gathered useful data about museums and their collections, but was less concerned about their use. However, *Museums UK* pointed out that museum visitor surveys have been increasing in frequency since the early 1980s, and were likely to become a basic tool for planning.

Museums in Great Britain began to survey their visitors during the 1960s, rather later than museums in North America (Merriman, 1991: 42). Merriman lists and discusses some of the early British surveys, many of which were published in the *Museums Journal*. Many of the early surveys were limited to one-off studies. An important suite of surveys were those carried out at the Natural History Museum, listed in Miles and Tout (1991).

Interesting recent approaches include large-scale detailed surveys of the use of museums by the population of a defined area, such as *The Findings of the 1991–1992 Study of the Perception and Use of Leicestershire Museums, Arts and Records Service*, recently carried out by Prince Research Consultants Limited (Prince and Higgins, 1992), and fairly small-scale reports on the visitors to a specific site such as *The Wordsworth Museum Visitor Survey 1991*, a report prepared for Dove Cottage, the museum of the Wordsworth Trust, by the Tourism Research Group of the Department of Geography at the University of Exeter, UK (University of Exeter, 1992). Many museums are using surveys such as these as management tools to aid in monitoring change or in forward planning. The Dove Cottage survey, for example, showed that the pattern of visitors had remained relatively constant comparing 1990 to 1991, although visitors from the London area had fallen slightly. The report also pointed out that 80.2 per cent of the museum's visitors came by car and used the Dove Cottage car park. There are implications in both of these bits of information for forward planning. It is not always easy to use museum visitor surveys for research purposes as they are generally regarded as internal management tools and are not therefore published, but many museums will release details if asked.

Recently, museum visitor research has followed a new direction. With an increasing professional concern for democracy and access, it has become clear that talking to visitors does not help in discovering what it is about museums that keeps some people away. The only way to discover this is to go and ask them. Some research has therefore focused on the attitudes and perceptions of people who fall into one of the many groups that are unlikely to visit museums. This generates qualitative as opposed to quantitative data.

Bringing History and the Arts to a New Audience: Qualitative Research for the London Borough of Croydon (Susie Fisher Group, 1990) is an example of this new approach. Carried out by a market research company, the report discusses how focus group interviews were held with people who agreed that they 'wouldn't be seen dead in a museum'. The research objectives are concerned with discovering attitudes and perceptions, digging down to people's personal meanings and interpretations of experience. The findings of the research are reported using (some of) the words of participants rather than tables full of figures. This research is being used to inform the development of a new museum in Croydon. A second example is *'Dingy Places with Different Kinds of Bits': an Attitudes Survey of London Museums amongst Non-visitors* (Trevelyan, 1991). The London Museums Consultative Committee, a London-wide body representing the interests of all museums in London, having seen the work done by Mass Observation for Greater London Arts, and the market research methods used by the Susie Fisher Group in Croydon, commissioned Mass Observation to carry out rather similar research with a London-wide museum application.

The range of material for research into the use of museums is wide and is seldom gathered in one place. It is often difficult to use as different parameters for the research are used, which makes comparison problematic. For many people it is very trying to make sense out of figures as relatively raw data. However, for all the reasons discussed above, it is important to try to develop some kind of a picture of museum and gallery visits.

What do we know?

In Britain, museums and galleries attract a mass audience. Estimations of numbers of visits include 72.8 million in 1984-5, between 75-8 million in 1989 (Middleton, 1991: 153; Myerscough, 1991: 16) and 74 million in 1990 (Eckstein and Feist, 1992: 70). It is likely that the museum and gallery market is Britain's largest sightseeing draw: of the visits in 1989 it is probable that visits from overseas tourists accounted for some 20 per cent, approximately 15 million visits. School party visits are estimated at 5 million, with visits made by British adults accounting for the remaining 55-7 million visits (Middleton, 1991: 153). The number of visits to museums and galleries made by overseas tourists appears relatively constant for 1990 (Eckstein and Feist, 1992: 70).

Seven museums (British Museum, National Gallery, Tate Gallery London, Natural History Museum, Royal Academy, Science Museum, Glasgow Museum and Art Gallery) were among the thirty-nine tourist attractions with more than one million visits in 1990 (Eckstein and Feist, 1992: 70). The British Museum attracted 5,410,000 visits in 1991, the National Gallery 4,300,000 and the Science Museum 2,525,000. Very large attendances are the exception for museums, with *Sightseeing in the UK* pointing out that 83 per cent of museums attracted annual attendances of 50,000 or less in 1990, 15 per cent recorded between 50,000 and 500,000, and only 2 per cent achieved more than 500,000 (British Tourist Authority, 1991). Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery attracted 559,000 visits in 1990, and the Castle Museum Nottingham 632,000. The average attendance at the 1,547 museums surveyed by the British Tourist Authority was 48,000, the same as in 1988 (Eckstein and Feist, 1992: 70).

Middleton (1990: 23) estimates that around 29 per cent of British adults (13 million people out of a population of 45 million) visited a museum at least once in 1989. If this is the case, they visited a museum on an average of four visits each. However, opinions differ as to what proportion of the British public visits museums. Merriman (1991: 48) suggests that between 47 per cent and 58 per cent of British adults visit museums at least once a year, and he reminds us that this figure is close to the figures of some other researchers. Time Use Surveys from the Henley Centre Leisure Futures suggests a figure of 47 per cent for Britain, and this figure remains more or less constant over their regular quarterly surveys.

The Canadian museum survey (Dixon, Courtney and Bailey, 1974) suggests that more than half the Canadian public (55-60 per cent) visited Canadian museums; and an American survey carried out by the National Research Centre for the Arts estimates 56 per cent of the public visit a history museum at least once a year, with slightly fewer people visiting art galleries and science museums.

The English Tourist Board survey of 1982 proposed that 24 per cent of the adult public visited a museum at least once during the preceding year, while the Touche Ross report (1989) suggests that 44 per cent of the adult population have visited a museum in the last two years, considerably more than the 25 per cent which have visited an art gallery. The *RSGB Omnibus Arts Survey* (Arts Council, 1991b) suggests that 32 per cent of British adults were museum visitors and 18 per cent were gallery visitors (see Table 3), with 10 per cent visiting photography galleries or exhibitions. This survey also points out that once all types of exhibitions and museums are considered together, 48 per cent of the population visit 'nowadays'. 'Nowadays' is a market research term which is taken to mean 'at the present time'. It is likely that had people been asked if they had visited a museum, gallery or exhibition within the last two years, this percentage would have been considerably higher.

Many researchers do not include visitors under 16 in their surveys, but where they have been included, they very often make up the largest group of visitors, for example making up half of the museum audience in Ipswich and a quarter in Glasgow (Myerscough, 1988).

The figures overall are very confusing, and it is difficult to form a complete picture of what proportion of the population visits museums on a regular basis. The discrepancies may be due to a number of factors, such as whether the definition of a museum includes art galleries, how the public perceive this distinction, how the surveys are carried out, what system of weighting is used to adjust the figures and what period of time is covered by the questions asked. However, in terms of numbers, the RSGB findings are interesting and encouraging (Arts Council, 1991b).

Reviews of a range of surveys enable the identification of the general characteristics of museum visitors (Merriman, 1991: 42-56). Students and higher-status socio-economic groups tend to be over-represented in proportion to their numbers in the population in general, while lower-status groups, the retired, the unemployed and people with disabilities tend to be under-represented. Museum visitors tend to be educated beyond the minimum school-leaving age, or are still in full-time education. Museum and gallery visiting is less likely among older people. Middleton's research (1990) shows the pattern of visiting museums, compared with demographic patterns in general (see Table 1), while the 1991 *Target Group Index* research (Arts Council, 1991a) shows how art galleries attract an even more exclusive audience than museums (see Table 2). The Research Surveys of Great Britain survey makes a direct comparison between museums and art galleries (see Table 3).

Table 1 Museum visiting by British adults in 1989

All adults	G B population (millions)	% visiting museums
All	45.1	29
Male	21.7	30
Female	23.4	27
Age		
15-24	8.7	29
25-34	8.1	31
35-44	7.7	36
45-54	6.1	30
55-64	5.8	28
65+	8.7	20
Class		
A/B	8.3	43
C1	10.3	34
C2	12.7	24
D	7.8	21
E	6.0	18

Source: Middleton (1991) and published in Eckstein and Feist (1992).

Table 2 Attendances at art galleries or art exhibitions in Britain

	% currently attending art galleries	% going more than once per year
All adults	21.4	9.2
Men	21.0	9.1
Women	21.8	9.4
Age		
15-19	25.2	9.5
20-24	22.4	9.8
25-34	23.3	10.1
35-44	25.9	9.9
45-54	22.5	9.2
55-64	20.7	10.7
65+	13.3	6.7
Social grade		
AB	41.4	20.4
C1	26.9	11.8
C2	15.0	5.3
DE	11.3	4.3
Terminal education age		
14 or under	8.4	4.1
15	12.7	4.6
16	16.6	5.7
17/18	27.7	11.8
19 or over	49.4	25.4
Still studying	38.1	16.5

Source: *Target Group Index, 1990/1* and published in Eckstein and Feist (1992).

All the tables confirm that museum visiting decreases with age. As people grow older, their interests tend to be more home-centred, but this tends not to happen until some years after retirement, whereas the tables show this process beginning in museums at a much earlier stage. More thought for the needs of this group, and more directly targeted provision would increase visits. This is particularly important as the elderly as a percentage of the population is expanding and it is likely that British society is moving away from a culture dominated by youth to a culture dominated by the over-fifties. The growth will be in the group aged 45-59. An extra 1.5 million people will be entering this age-group during the next decade, while there will be no change in the group aged 60-79 (Middleton 1991: 140-1). People aged 45-59 are active, energetic, have generally completed or nearly completed their child-focused years, and have more time and often more money to spend on themselves. Those reaching this age-group during the next few

years are those who were born after the Second World War, and who were young during the 1960s. Their expectations are far higher than those who were born and grew up during harsher and more austere times. They are a prime target for museums and galleries during the next few years.

Table 3 Attendances at museums and art exhibitions and galleries

	% visiting museums	% visiting art exhibitions/galleries
All adults	32	18
Men	34	17
Women	30	19
Age		
16-19	31	18
20-24	33	18
25-34	35	15
35-44	40	20
45-54	36	21
55-64	29	20
65+	22	14
Social grade		
AB	51	35
C1	39	23
C2	29	11
D	24	9
E	17	11

Source: RSGB Omnibus Arts Survey and published in Eckstein and Feist (1992).

The largest group visiting museums is in the 25-44 age-range (with a bulge in the 35-44 age-group) and by implication this is likely to consist of people with children. This is not the case with art galleries and art exhibitions, where visits are more evenly spread throughout adulthood, with a possible increase after the family has grown up. This is interesting as it suggests that where museums are seen as suitable for young children, art galleries are not. Art galleries are not generally targeting the family audience in the design of their displays, and as long as this continues it is unlikely that art galleries will attract a much larger proportion of leisure or tourist visits. The RSGB Omnibus Arts Survey (Arts Council, 1991b) suggests that while 32 per cent of all adults visit museums, only 18 per cent visit art galleries. The Touche Ross survey indicated that 44 per cent of the population had visited a museum during the last two years, while 25 per cent had visited an art gallery (and 35 per cent had visited a National Trust property or stately home) (Touche Ross, 1989: 14). However, the growth of the over-fifties age-group presents opportunities for art galleries.

The group of adults of young family age is also expanding as a percentage

of the population, with an extra 1.1 million entering the age-group 30-44 during the next decade. The family visitor has already become one of the more important targets for museums and this will become increasingly important during the next decade.

Although most museum visitor surveys do not include young people under the age of 16 (presumably because they are not expected to know what they think or do!), this group represents a further point of growth. While the group currently aged 15-29 years is expected to decrease by about two million in the next decade, those currently in the age-group 5-14 will expand by about one million (Middleton, 1991: 140). Targeting children in families directly, and targeting schools will become important marketing strategies. The combination of the growth in numbers of family-formers and the growth in numbers of young children means that the small group consisting of adults and children visiting together will become perhaps the most important group to plan for in considering displays, events, comfort facilities and literature.

The level of education is a very important variable in indicating whether an individual is likely to become a museum visitor. The more highly educated someone is, the more a museum or gallery visit becomes likely. This has been confirmed by research in many other countries (Dixon, Courtney and Bailey, 1974: 30; Arnell, Hammer and Nylof, 1980). It is clear from the tables that museums appeal more to the higher social classes (social classes ABC1). It is also the case that visiting museums is less popular among Asian and Afro-Caribbean ethnic groups. As *Cultural Trends*, 1991 states baldly: 'museum visiting in the UK remains primarily a white upper/middle class pastime' (Eckstein and Feist, 1992: 77).

It is easy to under-emphasise the appeal of museums to a wide public. Even if the rather pessimistic figure of 29 per cent of the adult population is taken as a guide to the proportion of the public visiting museums in Britain, and this is agreed by both Middleton (1991) and Myerscough (1991), museums and galleries would appear to reach a broader cross-section of the population than many other cultural institutions. In Glasgow, for example, 30 per cent of the museum audience is made up of people from social classes C2D and E, and in Merseyside the proportion of lower status groups is 47 per cent. These figures are considerably higher than those for theatre and concert audiences (see Tables 4 and 5) (Myerscough, 1991: 20). Middleton (1990: 23) suggests that one in five of museum visitors is on average from social classes D and E. The market for museums and galleries is also younger than for theatres and concerts.

Table 4 Social class of visitors to museums in the three regions of study

	Glasgow	Merseyside	Ipswich
ABC1	70%	53%	67%
C2DE	30%	47%	33%

Source: Myerscough (1988).

Table 5 Social class of visitors to theatres and concerts in the three regions of study

	Glasgow	Merseyside	Ipswich
ABC1	80%	73%	67%
C2DE	20%	26%	33%

Source: Myerscough (1988).

The market for museums and galleries varies with different types of museums. Art galleries tend to attract more female than male visitors, and more highly educated visitors; science and transport museums attract more men than women, and visitors tend to be less highly educated.

In Canada, there is evidence that open-air museums attract a broader cross-section of the public than other types of museums, and that art galleries attract the least democratic audience (Dixon, Courtney and Bailey, 1974).

It is likely that, of visitors to museums in general, approximately one-third are very infrequent, while of the others, possibly a further third are regular users, going perhaps three or four times per year or more (Middleton, 1990: 23). The Touche Ross survey stated that of the museum visitors interviewed, just under half had been to a museum three or more times in the past year, and one-third had made their previous museum visit in the past month (Touche Ross, 1989: 15).

In relation to repeat visits, surveys of the patterns of visiting for individual museums reveal very individual patterns. At the National Portrait Gallery in Trafalgar Square, for example, an area popular with overseas and home tourists, but also with a large and consistent day-time population, the following pattern was found in 1985: of the UK visitors, 43 per cent were first-time visitors, and 57 per cent were returning visitors; of the overseas visitors, 71 per cent were first-time visitors and 29 per cent were returning visitors (Harvey, 1987: 8). In contrast, frequent visitors (those who had been three times or more) to Dove Cottage and the Wordsworth Museum in the Lake District during 1991, for example, consisted of only 0.5 per cent of the visitors. People who were visiting the museum for the first time during the same year formed 86 per cent of visitors (University of Exeter, 1992).

The Leicestershire survey found that there was a core of relatively frequent visitors, with rather different characteristics from those who visited less frequently (Prince and Higgins, 1992: 98). Those who described themselves as frequent visitors tended to belong to a group described by the researchers as IPT-A (Index of Population Type - A). This group in general consists of professionals, managers and white-collar workers who occupy secure and high-salaried jobs, and have been educated to a high level. Frequent museum visitors from this group were aged between 35 and 54, and were likely to have also joined a group concerned with conservation or heritage. Self-defining infrequent visitors came from IPT-C, a group that as a whole consisted of manual workers in industrial jobs, where take-home pay might well be high,

but where job security was low. The education level of this group was typically low and, interestingly, those visiting the museums were in the age-group 16-34. They tended not to have joined any related society.

Why do people visit museums? From the tables above it is clear that social class and educational background are important determinants. Socialisation, family habits and attitudes, interests related to collections and exhibitions, all play their part in disposing people to make visits. When asked why, many people give rather general answers, but themes do emerge. The Touche Ross survey found that an overwhelming majority of their interviewees in a national poll considered that museums should be both educational and entertaining. The main reason for visiting was interest in the displays or the collections, cited by one-third of the respondents. The second most popular reason for making a visit was as an entertainment or as part of a holiday (Touche Ross, 1989: 16). Very few of those interviewed as part of the national poll visited museums in connection with their studies. Average visit length seems to be about one hour, although it tends to be longer when paid for through entry charges. Interactive exhibits were regarded as being the most popular type of exhibit, especially among younger respondents, while older people tended to prefer what they knew, static exhibits (Touche Ross, 1989: 2). More than three-quarters of museum visitors thought that more should be done to promote exhibitions and events. Facilities such as seating, toilets, cloakrooms, signage and floor-plans received some criticism (Touche Ross, 1989).

Those people who did not visit museums were cited by Touche Ross (1989: 15) as giving not enough time as one of the main reasons, and this reason also appears in more qualitative accounts (Trevelyan, 1991: 24; Susie Fisher Group, 1990: 44). However, the qualitative accounts also reveal other attitudes, including a feeling that museums are for people with education and specific interests, and people who want to learn. One of the major reasons why some people don't visit museums and galleries is because of bad experiences in the past. Many people still see museums as they were at that time, and think that museums are austere, forbidding, dusty, empty, church-like and remote (Trevelyan, 1991: 34-6). The research for Croydon revealed deep-seated psychological barriers relating to participation in the arts: 'Arty people are hypocrites, do-gooders'; 'Black artists? Our country's culture shouldn't be changed for them'; 'They should fund hospitals, not the Arts'. Many people revealed fears of being shown to be ignorant, of feeling self-indulgent, of neglecting more important basic chores, of looking ridiculous, of being treated as in need of charity (Susie Fisher Group, 1990: 44-6). These barriers are very real, and not always easy to break down, although many of the recommendations in the report are very sensible. The suggestions made for the museum and arts centre at Croydon recommended a complex of small related experiences, rather like a small shopping centre. Opportunities for eating, drinking, sitting and watching offer a non-threatening and welcoming first-level experience of the centre, with arts and crafts workshops, video and object-based displays, exhibitions on the past and the future easily accessible for a more in-depth exploration.

It is very clear that museums are competing for customers in a relatively static market. The average number of visitors per museum reporting has steadily declined during the last decade from 72,000 in 1978, falling to 61,000 in 1982, 51,000 in 1986 and 48,000 in 1988. The average number of visitors per museum remained at 48,000 in 1990. During the period from 1978, museums reporting data to the English Tourist Board rose from 716 to 1,222. Museums surveyed by *Sightseeing in the UK* in 1990 numbered 1,547 (British Tourist Authority, 1991). In part, the fall in the average number of visitors per museum is accounted for by the growth in number of museums. In part too, the average figure is distorted by the accommodation of huge visitor losses at those national museums that have introduced charges – for example, admissions at the Natural History Museum were 47 per cent lower in 1991 than in 1981, and at the Science Museum were 53 per cent lower (Eckstein and Feist, 1992: 73). However, it would appear that it is not going to be easy to sustain visitor numbers, particularly in a period of recession.

Visitor research is an essential management information tool. It should include both qualitative and quantitative research, and be carried out as part of a systematic and planned programme. In the past, museums and galleries have seen this as expensive and time-consuming, but as museums strive to get closer to their audiences, the need to know first who they are, and second, what they think, will become more and more imperative.

Research and evaluation

Research and evaluation are often confused. When is a piece of research an 'evaluation' and when it is something else? Evaluation as a concept has been used in museums as a blanket expression to refer to investigation and analysis carried out before, during and after a process, which has until recently often tended to be the exhibition process. Thus 'evaluation' might refer to work that is exploratory in nature and open-ended in its focus, such as for example general attitudes to themes for exhibitions, but might equally refer to work carried out to test detailed specific ideas, such as words and images for text panels.

Korn has suggested that 'evaluation' is the systematic collection of data and information about the characteristics, activities and outcomes of an exhibition or public programme (educational or leisure session, event) that is useful in making decisions about the programme's continuation or improvement. 'Research', on the other hand, involves the generation of new knowledge and the exploration of hypotheses, which, while not necessarily providing immediately useful information, does offer material for the development of theories (Korn, 1989: 221). Both processes use the same methodologies: questionnaires, interviews, focus groups and observations, and, although Korn's definitions are useful, in practice it is sometimes difficult to separate the two concepts. The major difference is in the objective of the work, in that evaluation is driven by the need for information for specific action in the short term, while research is stimulated by the need to know more for professional or personal awareness and for the development of conceptual frameworks (Munley, 1992).

Munley (1986) has identified five purposes for what she calls 'museum audience studies'. These are: *justification* of the value of the institution itself, or of its exhibitions or public programmes; *information-gathering* to aid in long-term planning; assistance in the *formulation* of new exhibitions or programmes; *assessment* of the effectiveness of existing exhibitions and programmes; and increased general understanding of how people use museums through the process of research and the *construction of theories*. The first two reasons, justification and information-gathering, require marketing and demographic studies; the next two, formulation and assessment of programmes, require

