



Engaging Art

How to Conduct Audience Research

Finding out what you really need to know about your audience.

Audience research is about finding out who your existing visitors and program participants are and why they come. You do audience research to understand whether your current offerings are working for your current audiences. Market research is about understanding your existing and potential visitors, in order to attract and retain new audiences.

The following are the key steps in conducting useful audience research:

- Plan
- Design
- Test
- Collect
- Reflect
- Act

Plan

Before you dive into the nitty gritty of designing audience research, first make sure you know why you are doing the research. This will help you to prioritise and focus your research activities. Ask yourself:

- Why are we doing this research? What do we need to know?
- How do we plan to use the research? Some common reasons for doing audience research include:
 - To report to funders about our audience reach and impact
 - To make sure we are reaching the audiences we want to reach, and they are having the experience we want them to have
 - To see if we are retaining audiences and attracting new audiences



Photo by Christina @ wocintechchat.com on Unsplash

- To inform our next cycle of programming activities
- To inform our strategic planning

Each of these reasons leads to different types of audience research questions and methods. Knowing why you are doing the research will allow you to focus your resources on the key questions you need to answer.

Design

You can tailor a research process to meet the needs you identified in the planning phase. The attached table sets out some of the key domains which you may want to investigate.

Test

Test the survey before sending it out so you know it works. Also do a 'sense' check of the survey. It is also very useful to check in with trusted peers or outsiders about the survey. Some questions to ask yourself and others could include:

- Does it make sense?
- Are there words which have more than one meaning?
- Are you asking questions you already know the answers to, or which simply confirm what you already believe?
- What questions could you ask which could challenge your views and open you up to new and surprising understandings about your audience?

Collect

There are numerous ways you can collect data about your audience. We have suggested three main methods of collecting information:

- Survey
- Observation
- Story collection

Surveys

An audience survey should capture information about your audience demographics and their experience.

It is a golden opportunity to go beyond the basics of postcode and satisfaction, and ask deeper questions about whether the visitors are finding their visit to the gallery or museum an ‘intrinsically rewarding’ experience. The idea of ‘intrinsic reward’ originated with Kevin McCarthy’s research into arts experiences in the early 2000s (https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG218.pdf), and has since been developed as a way to understand the dimensions of an arts experience.

Tips for conducting a survey

An online survey is much easier to analyse as you don’t have to enter the data from the survey into a spreadsheet. There are a number of online survey software services such as SurveyMonkey (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/>) and SurveyGizmo (<https://www.surveygizmo.com/>).

Survey structure

We recommend structuring a survey as follows. This is to ease a respondent into the survey and obtain the most honest answers.

- Introduction / landing page
- Individual impact: the experience, personal value of the experience
- Audience behaviour: motivations for visiting, mode of visitation
- Institutional value: intangible value, point of difference
- Reach: access, equity, retention, attraction
- Improvements: feedback

- Thank you page

On the introduction page, provide some general information about the purpose of the survey and what you will use the data for. Keep it brief, and make sure you include statements such as ‘there are no right or wrong answers,’ ‘this survey only takes about 5 to 10 minutes to complete’ (and if it takes longer, you need to cut your survey down!), and ‘your responses will be anonymous’ (only guarantee this if you can be sure they will be).

Also on the introduction page, make sure you note that respondents must be aged 15 years or over to fill in the survey, and that by filling out the survey respondents agree that their responses can be used for research purposes.

On the thank you page, include a contact person if respondents have any further questions. If you are offering an incentive, you should also include a link to the form to fill in to be included in the draw at this point. This allows you to maintain the anonymity of respondents. NB you do not need a permit for incentives as long as certain guidelines are adhered to as outlined here: <https://www.liquorandgaming.nsw.gov.au/Documents/gaming-and-wagering/competitions/fs3094-gratuitous-lotteries.pdf>.

Recruitment

We recommend the following steps to make sure you get a large and representative enough sample:

- Collect email addresses from visitors and send them the survey the same or next day, with an incentive to respond to the survey e.g. chance to receive a museum gift shop voucher. Note if you offer an incentive, you may also need to collect email addresses within the survey. To keep the survey anonymous, remember to set up a link within the survey to a separate email contact details page.
- Try to collect email addresses from a cross-section of the visitor population – young, old, tourists, locals, CALD, people with a disability etc.



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Photo by You X Ventures on Unsplash

- Have a few paper surveys to give to visitors who do not have an email address but would still like to participate in the research.
- You can survey people in the gallery as they exit using tablet computers or computers on stands, but make sure the survey is not too long as people don't want to stand and answer questions for more than 2 or 3 minutes.

Representative sample

What constitutes a representative sample depends on the total number of visitors, and their demographic characteristics. Here are a few useful rules of thumb to make sure you have enough data to comment confidently about your visitors' experience:

- Try to collect as many email addresses as you can. Work from the assumption that 20% of people you email will respond to the survey.
- Estimate how many people you think will be likely to visit an exhibition. Using that estimate, calculate how many survey responses you need to achieve a margin of error of, say, +/-10%. The Survey Sample Size Calculator is a very useful tool for working this out <https://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>.
- If you want to understand the experience of visitors across the year, make sure you collect data about visitors at various points during the year. You cannot use the results from one exhibition to describe the experience of visitors across the board.
- If you can, collect information directly from minority groups who tend to be under-represented in surveys e.g. CALD, ATSI. You may want to do this by conducting focus groups or one-on-one interviews with people from these groups. This is especially useful if you are trying to understand barriers to participation by minority groups. But when you do this, make sure you don't end up over-representing

these groups in your survey sample – your overall survey sample should be roughly representative of the overall visitor population.

Privacy

As with all customer information, you must manage survey responses in accordance with privacy laws. More information is available at <http://www.amsro.com.au/amsroresp/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/The-Privacy-Market-and-Social-Research-Code-2014-1.pdf> and <https://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy-law/>

Observations

Observation of visitors is also a very useful technique for collecting data e.g. count of visitors, visitor behavior, duration of visitor interaction with various activities or exhibits. Here are some tips for conducting observations:

- Position an observer in each main exhibition space and give the observer a clipboard with a form to fill out. They can jot down the approx. duration of time each visitor spends with an exhibit and other observable details e.g. the visitor's estimated age.
- You are unlikely to have observers on each station all day, and that's OK. Make sure to use observers at the busiest times in the gallery, and if possible, at a range of other times on different days of the week. The observer should record the time, place and date they did their observations and should be in position for at least 30 minutes and preferably 60 minutes.
- Use a counter at the exits or entrances to obtain a reliable estimate of visitor numbers.

Story collection

Direct quotes and stories from visitors is a great way to obtain a better picture of how visitors interact with your space, why they are there, and what they value the most about the experience. If you can, every so often head out into the space with a clipboard and a voice recorder and collect direct vox pops in response to a few key questions which you keep consistent throughout the year. You will find this a rich way to tell the story of the data you collect from observations and surveys. A few tips:

- Ask people for vox pops upon exit. Don't interrupt an experience!
- Make sure you get their permission to use their comments, either anonymously or attributed. Recording this is fine, but if you are not recording you will need to get them to agree e.g. sign a form or click a 'yes' box on a screen
- Consider taking photos of visitors to go with their stories. Make sure you get written permission that you can use their image.

Reflect

This is the stage in which you analyse the results of your data and reflect on what it tells you about your audience.

If you use online survey software, this step is relatively easy. The software will allow you to create graphs, compare different population segments and tally results. If you are manually entering data, you may want to do so with online survey software so you can take advantage of the automated analysis.

Use the Survey Sample Size Calculator to calculate your confidence interval, which tells you with how much confidence you can speak about the survey results as representative of the overall visitor population. If you need to report on a finding where you didn't get many responses, just say so upfront e.g. 'These findings can only be read as descriptive of the respondents' experiences as there were insufficient responses for representative results.' In general it is a good idea to report on the 'survey respondents' experience, as this is the most accurate description of the information you have gathered.

Revisit the key reasons you conducted the research at this point. Go back to the key questions you wanted to answer which you identified in the planning stage, and see if you can write answers to those questions now, based on the data.

Act

Once you have the data, remember to act on it! The data is part of a planning cycle driven by data, and you should report on data to your executive and board on at least an annual basis and if possible, also for major exhibitions. You can use this valuable information

in your programming cycle, strategic planning cycle, making improvements and reporting to funders. Fundamentally, you can use this data to improve your audience's experience.


You might also like:

 **Survey System**
Sample Size Calculator

<https://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm>

 **BYP Group**
Free resources and links

<http://bypgroup.com>

 **Research in the Arts**
Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG218.pdf

 **Museums & Galleries of NSW**
Guess who's going to the Museum?

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG218.pdf



This resource was written by freelance evaluation, research and writing consultant **Jackie Bailey, Principle at BYP Group** as part of Museums & Galleries of NSW's Engaging Art initiative. To find out more about *Engaging Art* visit: mgsw.org.au/sector/exhibitions/engaging-art/. To find out more about BYP Group visit: <http://bypgroup.com/>.

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Research domain		Research question	Data to collect	Method of collection	Example questions
Individual Impact	Intrinsically rewarding experience	Do people have an intrinsically rewarding experience?	Personal experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engagement and concentration • Fun and enjoyment • Emotional response • Personal resonance • Intellectual stimulation • Spiritual experience • Aesthetic growth • Shared atmosphere and social bonding 	Survey Story collection	What are the three words you would use to describe how your visit made you feel? Please tell us if you agree or disagree with the following statements: I had fun I got bored sometimes It got me thinking I had an emotional response I learned new things I felt like the experience changed me in some way There was a good atmosphere There was a good energy It was nice to share the experience with others (Responses: Yes/No/Don't know/N/A OR a Likert scale e.g. Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree N/A)
	Personal value	What do people value the most about their visit?	Perception of value	Survey Story collection	What did you appreciate the most about your visit? Peace and quiet Amenity Exposure to touring exhibitions Local artists Café / social outing Gift shop

Research domain		Research question	Data to collect	Method of collection	Example questions
Audience Behaviours	Motivations	Why do people visit?	Reasons for attending	Survey	Tourist Something for the kids to do Visiting with friends See the new exhibition Other (please specify)
	Mode of visitation	Do people come alone or with others? How long do people tend to stay? What do people tend to do at the museum/gallery? How does their visit fit into their day/week/month/year?	Visiting alone or with others	Survey	Alone With friends With family With friends and family Tour group With community club or group Other (please specify)
			Duration of visit	Observation/Survey	About how long did you spend with the following: • Exhibition a • etc
			Behaviours while visiting	Observation/Survey	What did you like most about your visit today?
			Role and position of the visit in overall life	Story collection	N/A

Research domain		Research question	Data to collect	Method of collection	Example questions
Institutional Value	Intangible value	What do people most value about the museum/gallery? What would their view be of the town if it did not have the museum/gallery?	Attitudes	Survey Story collection	How important or unimportant do you think it is to have this museum/ gallery in [location]? (Responses: Very important Important Neutral Not important Not important at all N/A) Open text (optional): Tell us more here
	Sense of welcome	Do people feel welcome at the museum/gallery?	Attitudes	Survey	Please tell us if you agree or disagree: I felt welcome at the gallery/museum The gallery/museum is a place for me The gallery/museum feels welcoming to people from all walks of life I feel comfortable visiting the gallery/ museum (If no to any of these, probably ask an open text question - Tell us why here)
	Point of difference	What is special about this museum/gallery experience?	Perceptions	Survey	In your view, what, if anything, is unique about this gallery/museum?
	Overall evaluation	How do we differ or compare to other similar places experiences?	Overall evaluation compared to other similar experiences or places	Survey	On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), please rate your experience: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall • In comparison to visits to similar galleries/museums • In comparison with previous visits to this gallery/museum

Research domain		Research question	Data to collect	Method of collection	Example questions
Audience Reach	Count	How many people do we reach?	Count of visitors	Observation	N/A
	Access and equity	Who do we reach? Are we reaching segments of the population who face barriers to participating in arts and culture? Do we provide access to experiences which people would not have otherwise?	Demographics of visitors: age, postcode, gender, income, CALD, disability, ATSI, typical level of arts participation	Survey	Tip: put these questions towards the end of the survey. People prefer not to disclose information about themselves right up front. Please tell us about yourself. Do you identify as: A person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin? A person with a disability? Were you born overseas? Was one or more of your parents born overseas? Do you speak a language other than English at home? How old are you? (offer range ranges) Are you: Male Female Other Prefer not to answer What is your postcode? In a typical year, about how often would you participate in arts or cultural activities such as visiting galleries, painting classes, making music, going to book group? None 1-2 times 3-4 times 5+ times In a typical year, about how often would you visit museums or galleries? (Same responses as above)
	Retention and attraction	What is special about this museum/gallery experience?	Perceptions	Survey	Is this your first time here? In a typical year, about how many times do you visit this gallery/ museum?
Improvements		What else would people like to see at the gallery/museum?	Comments and suggestions	Survey	Please use this space for any additional comments and suggestions.