

Service to People: Challenges and Rewards

How museums can become more visitor-centered



Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund

Front Cover

At the Heard Museum in Phoenix, where education about native cultures and art is an integral part of the mission, Native American student guides provide insight into the museum's exhibits.

(Photo courtesy of the Heard Museum)

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How Museums Can Become More Visitor-Centered

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Introduction

Fine arts museums that want to attract large numbers of visitors face an ongoing challenge: How to be welcoming and inviting places to a wider variety of people, while simultaneously upholding the highest standards of presentation and scholarship. There's no doubt that such a balance can be found. But achieving it requires museums to think about the needs and interests of the people they want to serve with the same level of intensity they bring to bear for the creation and stewardship of their collections.

Through our work with 29 fine arts museums over the past 10 years, the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund has seen many outstanding examples of how this work can be done well, yielding benefits for institutions, their audiences and communities. In the best cases, the desire to elevate service to people has changed the way museums do business, sometimes dramatically. As one museum official said, years ago "the reaction of the audience was secondary." Today, in a major change of attitude, that same museum is so visitor-focused it actively solicits audience feedback on everything from what people think of the art on display to whether the restrooms are adequate.

Quite simply, more and more museums are putting themselves in their "customers' shoes." They are adopting both the mind-set and infra-

structure to do what it takes to make visitors want to come, to feel welcome when they arrive, cared for and engaged during their stay. And by the time they leave, they're eager to return.


This report, part of an ongoing series from the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, explores how museums, large and small, are making service to visitors a central part of their institutions. There are stories and examples of how museums have

reorganized operations or created new departments, upgraded ticket and admission services and improved training and compensation for the staff who perform these duties. Other articles focus on the way museums use audience research to monitor and improve visitor services and how the emphasis on meeting people's needs is affecting capital improvement projects.

As in any report of this kind, the examples we have collected are only a handful

of the many exciting ways the arts and cultural landscape is being transformed. We offer these stories, anecdotes and insights to encourage more of the same from those doing it well and to spur others to learn from, adopt and apply those practices that will benefit them and their institutions and result in a better experience for people they serve.

M. Christine DeVita, President
Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund
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More and more museums are doing what it takes to make visitors want to come and feel welcome when they arrive, engage them during their stay, and make sure they're eager to return.

I. Museums Sharpen Their Focus on Visitors



The Cleveland Museum of Art, like many museums participating in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative, makes being "visitor-centered" one of its primary objectives. Here, visitors are greeted at the museum's admissions desk by an employee who provides information about the museum's collection and exhibitions. (Photo courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art)

Until 1994, the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego had only part-time museum educators on staff and did little outreach to schools. Because its budget was small, the museum tried to allocate most of its resources to exhibitions and programs, according to Charles Castle, the museum's associate director.

"We were so focused on programs," said Castle, "that the reaction of the audience was secondary." Today the museum's approach to fulfilling its mission and serving people is more balanced. It still works to create the best possible laboratory for contemporary artists to execute their work. But it also spends more time and money inviting visitors and offering them an engaging experience. "We've rethought the package," said Castle. And the result? Attendance, membership and donations are all up and artistic programs are flourishing.

Other participants in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative are also devoting more attention and resources to the visitor experience while upholding the hard-earned reputations of their collections and programs. Most probably have not had to make such a radical shift in focus as did the Museum of Contemporary Art, San

Diego. But they are all taking a closer look at their communities and actively reaching out to people who've never visited before—newcomers to the community or long-time residents who previously didn't feel welcome—and inviting them in.

Creating a positive experience for visitors, one that will make them want to return time and time again, involves many considerations. For

Creating a positive experience involves everyone in the museum, from the marketing department to the admissions, coat check and security staffs, as well as volunteers, and gift shop and restaurant personnel.

one, museums are recognizing that people learn in a variety of ways; so they're reinterpreting their collections and planning new exhibitions and programs to offer a more meaningful experience for traditional visitors and new audiences alike. But creating a positive experience involves more than the expertise of curators and museum educators. It involves everyone in the museum, from the marketing and public rela-

tions departments that extend the invitation to the admissions, coat check, and security staff who meet visitors at the door. Interactions with volunteer docents, gift shop clerks and restaurant servers influence the quality of a visitor's experience, as does the maintenance department's attention to the cleanliness of the bathrooms and shoveling of snow. Some museums even evaluate staff on their service to visitors and tie salary increases to participation in customer-service training.

“We are looking at the visitor’s experience from 360 degrees,” said Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience development at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis.

“Everyone’s job is to make visitors more comfortable,” she said. That message has been made clear to all staff through employee manuals and training sessions. “Audience engagement,” Patridge added, “is the central focus of our next long-range plan and it’s what’s driving our current expansion.”

Officials at the Cleveland Museum of Art acknowledge a similar change in attitude toward visitors. “For quite a long time, the understanding at the Cleveland Museum of Art was that people who were educated enough would find their way here,” said Kate Sellers, the museum’s deputy director. “Admission has always been free, but there was no real effort to invite people in.”

Soon after the late Robert P. Bergman became director in 1992, the Cleveland Museum of Art developed a strategic plan that made “becoming visitor-centered” one of its primary objectives. “We returned to the principles that guided the museum’s founding in 1916, which is to become a museum for all people,” Sellers explained. “Toward that end, we’ve expected total commitment to the mission from the top down, including every employee and volun-

teer.” That commitment entails fulfilling a required number of customer-service training hours each year. And it’s measured in annual performance reviews and rewarded with raises.

As deputy director from 1992 through 1999, Sellers was also director of development and external affairs, encompassing marketing, public relations, membership and visitor services, which includes ticketing and front-desk opera-

tions. Grouping those areas together, she said, encourages interaction among them and reinforces a visitor-centered orientation. “We see a continuum of efforts,” she explained, “from getting the message out to people that their presence is wanted at the museum to making sure they have a positive experience once they get here.”

The Toledo Museum of Art has already enjoyed

success in reaching new audiences through its “Art & the Workplace” initiative, underwritten by the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund. The museum reaches out to people through their place of work, offering specially tailored programs for them on the job and in the museum. The museum’s new community gallery, where it hosts employee art shows, has provided a fruitful way of introducing people to the museum. “People feel more connected to the museum when they see their coworkers’ art on

To ensure visitors feel welcome and well-served, the Cleveland Museum of Art requires its employees to attend customer-service training, and rewards good performance with raises.

view here,” explained Roger Berkowitz, the museum’s director. “Now we’re trying to deepen workplace participation by customizing programs even more to better meet the needs of our workplace partners.”

That may be one of the first tasks put before the museum’s newly restructured staff. In early 1999, the museum reorganized to better serve its audiences. In a pamphlet describing the restructuring, the museum articulated its vision for change: “While the core of a great museum must be a great collection of works of art, it is the audience experience that unites people with the works of art, brings a collection to life and gives the museum, as an institution for the benefit of the public, its meaning.”

“In the new structure, audience development is built into everything,” said Berkowitz.

The staff is organized in work groups: asset management, fundraising, reference services, art management, marketing, amenities management and arts participation. In addition, a staff member from each work group has been assigned to serve as the leader of a process area that addresses audience needs. The process areas are information access, art collection, audience development, visitor experience and resource creation and allocation.

“The new structure is process oriented and we hope it smoothes collaboration among staff to improve the visitor experience,” Berkowitz said.

“We want to make a visit a memorable and engaging event,” said Holly Taylor, the visitor experience process leader. “Visitors tell us they want more information on the art. We’re giving them more all the time, but we also have to make it fun. Some people like to use our audio guide, some want a guided tour with a docent and others want to be on their own but want more information. Some new visitors may feel inadequate and need help. Whatever we do to accommodate these needs, it can’t just be educational. It has to have entertainment value, too.”

Timothy Rub, former director of the Hood Museum of Art, which is located on the campus of Dartmouth College, said the museum’s long-range plan from the early 1990s articulated a visitor-service mission. “The message was ‘This is a museum whose mission is to serve the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire, and you are welcome,’” Rub said. “To continually make good on the invitation extended, there must be a willingness to respond to visitors’ needs. That might mean making graphics larger and clearer, retraining security staff or allowing students to bring small backpacks into the museum.”

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, is adjusting to its rapid expansion and trying to maintain a small, friendly feeling for visitors. In July 1996, the museum moved to a new building more than five times larger than its previous site. The staff grew from 75 to 200.

“In the old building, it was easy to provide customer service because it was so small,” remembered Amy Corle, who became visitor services manager at the time of the move. “People walked up to the front desk all the time to talk about the art. People still do that in the new building, but we have to work harder to keep the feeling of intimacy and accessibility?”

Corle is responsible for providing customer service training to the 17-member front-of-house staff, which includes admissions, box office and coat check. She’s also developing a customer service manual for the security staff.

While the rest of the staff currently doesn’t receive formal customer-service training, Helen Dunbeck, director of administration, says that every employee understands that anyone who enters the museum must be made to feel welcome. “Our director, Robert Fitzpatrick, has made it clear that attention to visitor service is the key to success,” she said.

“We know that contemporary art can be challenging, and visitors may have difficulties grappling with it,” explained Dunbeck, who

oversees visitor services. “They must not be hampered in their consideration of the art by distractions or discomforts.”

Corle agreed. “We try to make the visit as nice and easy as possible, because the art often isn’t like that.”

“Fortunately, we have an advocate for visitor services at the top of the organization,” Dunbeck said of Fitzpatrick, who joined the museum in 1999 after serving as CEO of EuroDisney. “He wants the museum to be open and accessible and visitors to feel comfortable and well-treated.”

One way the museum plans to increase its accessibility is by staying open late on Tuesdays and making admission free for the entire day. “Even though we won’t be collecting admission then, it would be wrong to think we need fewer staff on duty,” said Dunbeck. “We’ll attract more people and there will be a lot of first-time visitors who will have questions and need help.”

**Becoming More Visitor-Centered:
How Do Museums Afford It?**

Extended hours, more staffing, customer-service training, community outreach, more programming, audio tours, computers and other interpretive aids—the cost of better accommodating and engaging audiences must seem daunting to most museums. But, as many are discovering, when done in conjunction with other efforts to make their institutions more visitor-centered, the payback and rewards make these investments worthwhile.

“Since we became a participant in the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund program in 1996, the number of visitors has increased from 450,000 to 600,000,” said Kate Sellers, deputy director of the Cleveland Museum of Art. “And our membership has increased from 16,000 to 25,000. We’re making money in the café and store, and if we charged admission, I imagine the payback might be tremendous there, too. But the greatest reward is the museum’s enhanced value to the community.”

Walker Art Center in Minneapolis does charge admission and its earned revenue is up due to increased attendance by target and general audiences, reported Mag Partridge, director of public relations and audience development. “But the real payoff,” she said, “is in knowing that we’re reaching audiences and engaging them, and in seeing the excitement of our board, staff and community.

“A lot of visitor service activities began as something new, but now they’re integrated,” Partridge explained. Although the museum has had to assume new expenses for staff training, it has been integrated without expanding the human resources staff. Partridge added that some new staff positions were created, and the teen program requires a lot of staff time.

At the intimate Hood Museum of Art in Hanover, N.H., which has increased the number and breadth of visitors from the region, former director Timothy Rub said the museum’s efforts to better reach and serve visitors did not entail significantly adding to staff, except in the education department. “What it mostly required was ownership of the new mission by staff and a change in the institution’s culture.”

II. What Makes and Breaks the Visitor's Experience?



Visitors to several museums, when asked, have mentioned that security guards dressed in police-like uniforms detract from an otherwise positive museum experience. In response, guards' uniforms at the Walker Art Center were replaced with "friendlier" khakis and vests. (Photo courtesy of the Walker Art Center)

Like any business or organization that deals with the general public, museums must put themselves in their “customers’ shoes.” The checklist of what can “make” or “break” a visitor’s experience is long and multifaceted. It covers everything that can happen from the moment a person decides to visit to when he or she first arrives. For example: Is the institution easy to locate, and are directions clear? Are parking and public transportation adequate and easily accessible? And once there, do visitors have difficulty finding the museum’s entrance? Are the admissions and coat-check processes efficient and easy to negotiate?

Other factors that can add or take away from a visit include having information readily available, from staff or from printed materials. Similarly, finding one’s way through the museum should be fairly effortless. Once in the galleries, are the labels and wall text legible and jargon-free? Is there ample seating? Beyond that, this focus on quality service also extends to physical amenities, such as seating, cleanliness, room temperature, lighting and signage. Even the restaurant and gift shop must be monitored to make sure their quality and services are up to visitors’ standards. And just as important, if visitors do have problems or complaints, are staff members accessible and ready to listen and respond to visitors’ needs and concerns?

While no means complete, these are among the many aspects of the visitor experience that muse-

ums participating in the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund’s Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative are spending a great deal of time and energy on getting right. What follows are examples of how they are doing that.

How do Visitors Rate Frontline Services?

A survey conducted in 1998 for the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund of 28 museums participating in its Collections Accessibility Initiative asked visitors to rate frontline services—such as parking, admissions, ticketing, information, coat check and the gift shop. Of all visitors polled, 85 percent reported they had contact with the lobby desk or ticketing operation, 52 percent had exchanges with security guards and 28 percent had contact with the museum shop. Overall, most visitors were pleased with these interactions. Ninety-one percent of those surveyed said they felt welcome or very welcome by the lobby desk staff and ticket sellers; 84 percent were pleased with the service and treatment they received in museum stores; but only 77 percent reported they felt welcome by security staff.

Finding the Museum

Anyone who visits Chicago could find his or her way with relative ease to the Art Institute of Chicago, located for more than 100 years on Michigan Avenue, downtown’s primary thoroughfare, just off the lakeshore.

Not all museums enjoy the landmark status of the Art Institute or its immediately recognizable address. In fact, locating some museums can be a bit of work for first-time visitors, especially if they’re from out of town.

The Heard Museum of Phoenix recently made it easier for its audience, predominantly tourists, to find it. In February 1999, the museum, which showcases Native American art and artifacts, unveiled its newly expanded facility. One of the most surprising—and successful—features of the expansion was a reorientation of the museum’s main entrance. The museum now fronts on Central Avenue, the main north-south artery through Phoenix. The Heard also worked with the city to install a traffic light with a directional signal to assist visitors in turning into the museum’s parking lot.

“Simple visibility on the avenue helped increase visitors,” said Martin Sullivan, former director of the Heard Museum. Being on a main thoroughfare has also made it easier for the museum to describe its location to potential visitors over the telephone, in brochures, and on its web site.

While it helps having a Fifth Avenue address, New York’s El Museo del Barrio is somewhat further north of the string of world-renowned institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Frick Collection and Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum that most people associate with this section of the city. To make it a “must-place” stop, El Museo del Barrio worked with the city’s transit authority in the mid-1980s to install a mosaic

mural by community artist Nitza Tufiño in its neighborhood subway station. The colorful artwork unmistakably gives visitors, and potential visitors, an initial aesthetic experience of the museum.

When reaching out to new audiences who don’t have a history of visiting museums, sometimes a long-established location and clear

directions aren’t enough to overcome all obstacles. The Walker Art Center in Minneapolis provides participants in its Explore Membership Program free bus service to the museum for openings and special programs. Launched in 1994, Explore offers low-income families and the community organizations that serve them all the benefits of membership without the fees.

“The Explore Membership Program came out of the frontline,” explained Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience development. “We recognized that it was insensitive to expect economically disadvantaged people to show their



To make it easier for first-time visitors and out-of-towners to find The Heard Museum, the main entrance was relocated so it now faces a more trafficked thoroughfare.

social services cards to gain free admission to the museum,” she said. “An intern designed the program, it’s been fully embraced by the institution and now we have a dedicated frontline staff member who works on it.”

Entering the Museum, Getting Oriented

The first-time visitor has located the museum and is about to cross the threshold. What will that experience be like? If it’s a small museum like the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, the receptionist at the lobby desk will look up, smile and make eye contact with the visitor, and then proceed to take admission and provide information on current exhibitions. Previously, the museum’s receptionist might not have been so attentive to the visitor walking through the door because he was responsible for answering hundreds of phone calls a day in addition to processing and assisting visitors. But the museum installed a voice-mail system so he can attend to visitors’ needs and not keep them waiting.

A recent visitor to the popular Diego Rivera show at the much larger Cleveland Museum of Art might have been greeted in the lobby by a member of an elite security corps chosen from the museum’s security staff because of their bilingual skills. The greeters, who wore buttons saying they spoke Spanish, were coordinated in anticipation of a large Latino turnout for the show, according to Karen Ferguson, manager of marketing and visitor services. As an additional effort to make these visitors feel welcome, the museum offered each of them bilingual audio guides of the show.

Providing Materials to Engage Special Audiences

At the information desks of museums, visitors can find a variety of materials to help break down language and physical barriers.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, has produced its gallery guide and map in five languages to reflect its international audience: Japanese, German, French, Spanish and, of course, English. El Museo del Barrio provides signage in English and Spanish throughout the museum, and all the materials at its front desk—calendars, exhibition brochures, catalogues—also are available in both languages. At the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, calendars, brochures and the museum’s web site are also bilingual, and so is the audio tour the museum is producing for a major exhibition, *Modern Mexican Masters*, scheduled to open in early 2000.

To mitigate any physical barriers to visiting the Art Institute of Chicago, the museum has created a pamphlet called “People on Wheels,” which provides information on accessibility throughout the museum. It keeps wheelchairs and strollers on the premises for use at no charge. (Back carriers for babies are not allowed in the galleries.) The museum is also developing a special map of destinations and amenities in the museum especially suited to and popular with families.

At the Toledo Museum of Art, visitor services representatives rove the two lobbies as well as galleries to greet visitors, direct them to programs, provide a gallery brochure and offer a free audio tour. Information desks are staffed with volunteers to do the same, but Darlene Lindner, amenities manager, said: “We know through observation that visitors are hesitant to ask for help. So we have the visitor service reps there to reach out to visitors when they are visibly in need of help or have a special need, say for a wheelchair or stroller.”

Greeters also regularly meet visitors at the door of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. These volunteers point visitors to the admissions desk, hand them a gallery guide and tell them about the audio tours that are available. When the visitor proceeds to the front desk for admissions and further information, staff will be alert and ready to serve them. Like the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, the front desk staff at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, has been relieved of all duties other than serving visitors. During quiet times, they are expected to read exhibition catalogues and related articles and art books.

At the Walker Art Center, the lobby desk staff is encouraged to engage visitors in conversation, particularly members of target audiences, to find

out their needs. Families with younger children are given a WAC Pack with interpretive materials and gallery activities for kids. Teenagers visiting with their families or on their own receive *Fig. 12*, a publication of the museum’s Teen Arts Council that publicizes Walker events and exhibitions that are particularly interesting to this age group, as well as other interpretive materials geared to teens.



Visitor services representatives rove the lobbies and galleries greeting visitors, directing them to programs, providing gallery brochures and offering free audio tours.

Like the Toledo Museum, The Art Institute of Chicago is exploring placing clusters of roving information volunteers at sites throughout the museum where they find visitors often have difficulty finding their way, according to Andy Nyberg, director of visitor services. Meanwhile, the museum offers visitors a wide range of information through its four information desks, strategically located throughout the museum.

Staffed by volunteers, they are a primary source for directions to galleries and amenities. But the volunteers are also trained to access information from a computer system that provides member information and can locate by artist specific works in the permanent collection with details on when and how they were acquired. In addition, volunteers maintain an index of helpful visitor information on hotels, restaurants, buses and trains. They also keep an assortment of brochures on attractions throughout the city.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago is planning to offer this concierge-like service, too, but will take it a step further, according to Amy Corle, visitor services manager. “If a visitor asks for directions to a restaurant, we’d like our front desk staff to not only provide the information, but offer to call and make a reservation,” she said. “We want to provide outstanding service to strengthen the visitor’s connection to the museum, but we also see ourselves as contributing to tourism in the city.”

Ticketing, a Bugaboo for Larger Museums

Weekend visitors to The Art Institute of Chicago might very well find themselves at the end of an admission line that stretches across the main lobby and out the doors, says Andy Nyberg, director of visitor services. The museum plans to improve the admissions process over the next few years through the renovation of its Michigan Avenue lobby, which calls for a greater number of admissions and ticketing stations. The museum is also installing a new computer ticketing system that will speed up transactions and reduce waiting time by half, Nyberg adds.

And that’s just the daily walk-in business. The museum must also handle hundreds of thousands of ticket requests — in person and by phone—for the special exhibitions it mounts about once a year. For its 1997-98 blockbuster, Renoir’s Portraits, the museum sold 489,000 tickets. The museum works with a vendor that provides the ticketing software system as well as the computer terminals used for processing daily admissions and special

ticketed exhibitions and programs. The vendor also provides an off-site telemarketing service for phone orders.

The Cleveland Museum of Art and Toledo Museum of Art offer visitors free admission — increasingly rare for museums — but do ticket special exhibitions. Both museums handle their ticketing operations in-house. The Toledo Museum of Art used an outside service before deciding 10 years ago to develop its own ticketing staff to execute on-site and phone sales. “For us, contracting out that service was a nightmare,” said Darlene Lindner, amenities manager. “To say the least, it was impersonal.” Currently, the museum has two ticketing desks in the museum and a phone room with a direct line.

The Cleveland Museum of Art decided to bring its ticketing operation in-house in fall 1997 in anticipation of its Vatican Treasures show. Previously, the museum contracted an outside service but found its customer service was substandard. “There were a lot of problems and we received a lot of complaints from customers,” said Karen Ferguson, manager of marketing and visitor services. The operators were not well trained, she said, and some even provided incorrect information.

Currently, the museum maintains a ticketing counter in the main lobby and has a phone room that operates during business hours, Tuesday through Sunday, with eight lines staffed by three or four people. Sixty percent of sales are handled on-site and the rest by phone, according to Ferguson. However,

because the museum is planning a major Impressionism show for summer 2000, it plans to select an off-site vendor to absorb the overflow of calls. “We don’t have the space to handle the huge volume of requests we expect for this show,” she said.

Using an outside ticketing service has obvious benefits for The Art Institute of Chicago, too, with its huge volume of visitors. Not only does the museum draw on the vendor’s computer programming expertise, it also avoids the difficulties of hiring, housing and supervising a large temporary staff. “We need as many as 100 operators on duty to ticket some special exhibitions,” Nyberg said.

Contracting an outside ticketing service has presented customer-service challenges for the Art Institute of Chicago, too. “To ensure quality service, we have to constantly monitor what’s going on,” Nyberg added. “After all, it’s the vendor’s interest to keep talk time to a minimum so they can handle the greatest number of calls possible with the fewest operators. But we want to make sure our customers are able to get all the information they need on transportation, parking and other amenities. So we call in several times a week to shop the service.”

The amount of time phone customers are left on hold is another concern. In early 2000, when the museum will begin selling tickets to its next special exhibition, Pharaohs of the Sun, it plans to use telephone hold time to advertise its web site to customers as another way to purchase tickets. And, with the installation of its new ticketing system, the museum

will also give callers the option of ordering tickets through an automated voice system.

Visiting the Galleries

Coat checked, admission paid and map in hand, the visitor is now ready to look at some art. Will the museum map or directions given by the lobby staff be clear enough for the visitor to find the galleries he’s interested in visiting? Will signs help confirm the way, or will the visitor need additional help? Will the visitor find answers to his questions about the art in labels, wall text and other available interpretive materials? When feet tire and hunger gnaws, will amenities be at hand?

The Art Institute of Chicago formed a signage and way-finding committee to standardize the building’s extensive signage. “Signs were popping up all over that were not consistent with each other and created confusion for visitors,” reported Christine O’Neill Singer, vice-president for development. The committee, she said, found a way to visually tie signs and labels together so they don’t compete with each other. All signs now have the same background color and typeface and are available in two sizes. The museum also redesigned its floor plan so that it and the new signage reinforce one another.

Having doubled its space through its recent expansion, the Heard Museum created a new system of signs to guide people through the museum. According to the museum’s former director Martin Sullivan, the museum hired a design firm that specializes in way-finding solutions. “Photographs of key objects in galleries are used as icons on the signs,” he said. Sample signs

were tested with visitors before being installed throughout the building.

Still, many visitors don't read maps and signs or they have difficulty remembering and following verbal directions. So where's the nearest security guard?

**Interpretives: Bigger is Better.
So is More, Some Say.**

"We want bigger labels and larger type in easy-to-read fonts"—most museums have heard that message loud and clear from visitors, especially older ones.

At The Art Institute of Chicago, labeling has become a carefully considered process, according to Christine O'Neill Singer, vice president for development. "For the Renoir portrait show, there were lengthy discussions about where labels and wall text should be placed, especially since we expected school groups and families with children to attend," she said. The graphics and content were scrutinized, too. "We know not to use language most visitors won't understand," she said. Singer also reported that the museum has, over time, replaced all the labels on its permanent collection, and, as part of the process, content and language were carefully reviewed.

According to several museums, visitors are also asking for more information. For El Museo del Barrio's hugely popular 1998 exhibition The Taino Legacy, Director Susana Torruella Leval said visitors couldn't get enough information. "We had a lot of good text, but people wanted more information and were asking for reading lists," she said.

"Our reading room, where we made available supplementary printed and audio materials, was always full."

The Mint Museum of Art has introduced a large amount of interpretive material with the reinstallation of its pre-Columbian and Spanish colonial collections, according to Cheryl Palmer, director of education. "The increase in interpretive material doesn't seem to overwhelm our audiences," she said.

The museum has captured anecdotal feedback from its docents and community advisory group, as well as the teachers and school children who use the galleries every day. (The study of pre-Columbian America is part of the social studies curriculum for fifth graders in North Carolina.) "One of the concerns of teachers and docents was how information on the collection could be adequately conveyed when a curator or docent isn't available," Palmer said.

The interpretive materials include theme panels, detailed label copy, and lots of graphic material, such as maps, line illustrations and photo reproductions. The museum is also developing a bilingual audio tour of the collection and will soon open a resource center that will be located at the end of the exhibition. In the resource center, visitors will have access to a computerized catalogue of the collection, as well as selected web sites on pre-Columbian art and archeology, Palmer said. Books, periodicals, selected videotapes and hands-on activities for students and families will also be offered. The first hands-on theme will be textiles. Raw llama wool, natural

cotton and a simple backstrap loom will be present for visitors to try pre-Columbian weaving techniques.

“Our idea is to provide visitors with a variety of opportunities to get more information, whether they’re comfortable with computers or books or a hands-on experience,” explained Palmer. “I find people are curious about the objects, but they don’t want to feel like they need a doctorate to understand it or learn more.”

Focus groups conducted by the Walker Art Center of first-time and occasional visitors revealed that participants needed to feel more comfortable with modern art. “They said they didn’t know much about it, but were interested in learning,” explained Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience development.

In response, the Walker changed its methods of interpretation to better connect with audiences. For example, it developed brochures—What is Modern Art? and What is Sculpture?—that explain some of the movements, materials and terminology found in its galleries and the adjacent Minneapolis Sculpture Garden.

The museum also installed the Anderson Window Gallery, which focuses on a single work of art, a movement or an artist found in the permanent collection and offers in-depth interpretations. A particularly successful installation, said Patridge, was Edward Hopper’s painting Office at Night. “The interpretation was rich and offered a variety

of perspectives on what went into creating the painting, what was going on in our culture at the time and the history of women in the workforce. People would spend 45 minutes looking at it.”

Walker Art Center also offers visitors audio guides of the permanent collection and sculpture garden. The system, which works with a handset, allows visitors access to a variety of information about individual works and artists. “We tapped our archives to enhance the options we can give listeners,” said Patridge. “They can hear an artist talking about a particular work of art or hear music we commissioned as a setting for a particular work.”

The Changing of Security Guards

According to the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund’s visitor survey, more than half of respondents said they had contact with security guards, but only three-quarters of these individuals were pleased with the quality of that interaction. Traditionally, the primary role of security guards has been to protect the art. They provide a sober reminder for visitors not to touch the art or, in some cases, even get too close to it. But, increasingly, museums are recognizing that security guards, because of their high degree of contact with visitors, can and do play a larger role as greeters and information providers. Many museums are working to enhance the job responsibilities and skills of security guards in this area.

The Walker Art Center learned from focus groups that visitors perceived security as having a police-like presence and felt they were being fol-

lowed through the galleries. The museum responded by taking security staff out of their stern-looking uniforms and dressing them more casually in khaki pants and vests, with easy-to-read name tags. The museum also reversed the order of the galleries through which the guards rotate so that a guard seen by a visitor in the first gallery does not seem to be “following” anyone.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, was dismayed by the poor satisfaction rating its security guards received on the visitor survey. Anecdotal visitor comments clued other staff that appearance might have been part of the problem. When Robert Fitzpatrick became director in 1999, he changed the guards' black outfit to more casual-looking slacks and sweater vests with an identification badge. Satisfaction ratings rose after the change, reported Lori Kleinerman, director of marketing and public relations.

Not only did the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College change its security guards' uniforms, it expanded their function and gave them a new title that included visitor services. Their primary job duties remain protection of the art and safety of the visitors, but the security and visitor services staff also greets and welcomes visitors, provides information and does all it can to make visitors feel comfortable.

New Ways of Staffing Galleries

Through its participation in the Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative, the Hood Museum of Art came to understand that its target audiences, students and rural residents of the region, are wary of police and security people in police-like uniforms. The security and visitor services staff now wears green blazers and identification badges that carry a reproduction of


the staff member's favorite work of art from the permanent collection.

“We wanted to sensitize the security staff to how audiences experience the museum,” said Timothy Rub, the museum's director at the time of the change. “When we asked them to take on additional responsibilities, we talked about how the change would be made, solicited their input and heard their questions and concerns.”

The staff also received

training in how to meet and greet visitors.

“Most of the visitor services staff said the change made their day more interesting,” reported Rub. “They feel more connected to the museum and able to contribute.” The museum has also installed a computer at the front desk that links video cameras throughout the museum, and giving the security and visitor services staff access to



Surveys of museum visitors show that their satisfaction ratings go up when the stern-looking uniforms guards wear are replaced with more casual attire, such as khakis, vests and name tags.

the museum's web site and collection data base. "This gives the front-of-house staff more resources for answering questions and speaking about what the museum does."

The Hood Museum of Art has also made a special effort to hire students to make the museum seem more welcoming to their peers. In addition, the museum now hires from a different pool of candidates. "Previously, the museum hired people with security or policing backgrounds," he said. "Now, the type of person who likes working with the public and is comfortable meeting and speaking with people, but also understands security procedures, is who's best for the job."

The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, shifted the function of its security staff and also changed its name to emphasize visitor services.

According to Charles Castle, the newly titled gallery attendants are still responsible for safeguarding the art, but pay more attention to welcoming visitors and making them feel comfortable.

With the early 1999 opening of its new craft and design museum in downtown Charlotte, the Mint Museum of Art "created a new type of employee," said director Bruce Evans. "We've

hired and trained gallery attendants to bridge the gap between traditional security and the visitor," he said.

Identified by their long aprons, the gallery attendants fulfill a security function while roaming the galleries to engage visitors and answer their questions. They are backed up by a contracted security service that is stationed near the museum's entrance and patrols the galleries.



At the Mint Museum, gallery attendants who meet, greet and answer questions from visitors also perform security duties, with back up from contracted guards stationed near the entrance.

The gallery attendants, who are supervised by the education coordinator, receive the museum's docent training. The education department provides them with additional training on the craft and design collection, a significant portion of the Mint's holdings that was largely unseen by the public before the new site opened. Unlike most docent programs, the Mint's gallery attendants approach individual visitors to initiate conversations about objects

in the collection. They have the authority to take objects out for closer examination and to explain an artist's technique. They might also show visitors samples of the materials used to make an object. Gallery attendants can respond immediately to groups of tourists by organizing a tour on the spot, or they might invite a family with children to take part in a scavenger hunt.

“We’re hearing from visitors that their contact with the gallery attendants really makes a visit,” said Carolyn Mints, director of community relations.

In 1997, the Walker Art Center introduced information guides who are stationed in the galleries on Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. This paid staff of 20 was created in response to focus groups, said Hillary Churchill, audience advocate. “Some participants asked, ‘Why can’t there be someone right there when I have a question about the art and help lead me through the exhibit?’”

The information guides, who receive tour guide training, are encouraged to engage visitors in conversation. They can also convene and lead tours spontaneously. Anecdotal audience response to the information guides has been very positive, Churchill reported. “Visitors tell us they’re finding out more about the art. They say the guides are not intrusive and present an easy alternative to taking a formal tour.”

Like most museums, the Heard Museum uses volunteer docents to lead tours of the museum. But, during the summer, the museum hires Native American high school students as guides. The young people earn school credits for completing the museum’s 90-hour training course, which equips them with skills for working with the public. The museum’s visitors, who are predominantly non-Indian, often comment on how much they enjoy meeting the young guides, said former director Martin Sullivan. To make it easier for visitors to identify who’s available to answer their questions, both the volunteer and Native American high school guides wear special shirts that display the museum’s logo.

Seating, Food Service And Other Amenities

Universally, museum visitors want more seating. Most museums attempt to accommodate this request as best as they can. But the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago sometimes must forego seating in certain galleries because of the nature of the installation. “When there aren’t any benches, we get lots of visitor comments,” said Amy Corle, visitor services manager. “I am always fighting for more seating.”

The Toledo Museum of Art went a step further and found out from visitors what type of seating they wanted. Rather than benches, which many visitors found too low, they said they preferred arm chairs that are light enough to be moved around and positioned in front of the art works they wish to look at.

The museum also took a cue from visitors to extend its hours on weekends, said Director Roger Berkowitz. The museum now stays open until 10 p.m. on Fridays and opens on Sundays at 11 a.m., two hours earlier than in the past. The museum’s restaurant is better accommodating visitors by serving brunch on Sunday, and a café that’s set up in the lobby on weekends is always full, Berkowitz reported. To better meet the needs of families, he said, the restaurant now serves foods that children typically ask for, such as pizza, hot dogs and peanut butter sandwiches.

At the Heard Museum, its new café will be treated as an extension of the museum’s education program, according to Martin Sullivan, the museum’s former director. The menu will feature southwestern and Native American food, with an emphasis on New World food. “Photographs

and other graphics as well as take-home recipes and cookbooks will enhance the experience of eating at the café,” he said.

At the Cleveland Museum of Art, a restaurant service that was the source of many visitor complaints has become “too popular,” said Kate

Sellers, deputy director. The restaurant, she explained, was run in past years by the museum. “The kitchen was much too small to carry it off well,” she said. Since the museum contracted a fine local catering service to run the restaurant, tables are always in demand.

Balancing Visitors’ Needs

“Audiences can be at odds with each other sometimes,” reflected Andy Nyberg, director of visitor services at the Art Institute of Chicago. The museum is working to attract more families and more young professionals, he said, but sometimes can’t be as accommodating as it would like to be. “Strollers are allowed in the museum, but they can become a problem in special exhibitions, which get crowded,” he explained. “We place a sign outside the exhibition warning visitors that we may need to ban strollers at certain times.”

Roger Berkowitz, director of the Toledo Museum of Art, said strollers were previously barred from special exhibitions until the museum learned from visitors how important it is to them to be able to bring young children in strollers. “Now we leave it up to the security guard to judge if the galleries are too crowded to handle strollers,” he said. “We’re being a lot more flexible as long as there’s not a risk to people or to works of art, and we’re finding good results.”

Before its expansion, the Heard Museum received frequent complaints from adult visi-

tors about galleries being jammed with school groups, which they found noisy and distracting, said former director Martin Sullivan. Rather than cut back on its commitment to serving students the museum took advantage of the expansion to make changes that now allow it to better accommodate students and adults. The Heard created three classrooms where students receive an orientation and discuss what they’ve seen during the visit to the museum—things they used to do in the galleries—and also to provide a place where students can engage in crafts and other hands-on learning activities. School groups also have a separate space for storing their belongings and eating their lunches.

When planning special events, the Mint Museum makes a concerted effort not to interfere with the experience of visitors during regular operating hours. It keeps set-up to a minimum during hours the museum is open and makes sure everything is cleaned up before the museum re-opens to the public. “We try to maintain a sensitivity among various areas of the museum about meeting the needs of all our audiences,” said Carolyn Mints, director of community relations.

Voicing Problems, Complaints and Affronts

Galleries too crowded at a ticketed exhibition; offended by a work of art; no place for an elderly companion to sit? When a visit goes sour, visitors usually turn to frontline staff to voice their dissatisfaction. How will they be treated? What will be the response?

“The philosophy we try to impart to our front desk staff is that no one should have a bad experience,” said Carolyn Mints, director of community relations at the Mint Museum of Art. Mints supervises the front desk and provides much of the staff’s customer-service training, which includes instruction on how to handle difficult customers and provide service recovery. “We give the front desk a lot of leeway to keep the customer happy,” she said. Sometimes that includes refunding admission and giving a free pass to return another time or to visit the museum’s other site.

Similarly, the Cleveland Museum of Art authorizes frontline staff to deal with difficult situations as they arise and make decisions on the spot. “We even equip our parking lot security staff with battery rechargers,” said Karen Ferguson, director of marketing and visitor services. “So if a visitor leaves their car lights on and the battery runs out, the security staff can recharge it for them by the time they return.”

Contemporary art brings its own challenges in visitor relations. “Contemporary art is minimalist

in nature, but some first-time visitors expect salon-style galleries with paintings all over,” said Amy Corle, visitor services manager at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. Galleries are also dark for an entire month between shows, and that can be the source of confusion and dissatisfaction, she said. “We alert visitors to this as soon as they come in since the temporary galleries are a large part of the museum,” she explained. “We have a suggested admission of \$6.50, so if they

seem confused about what to pay we openly suggest five dollars. I think visitors like to feel that we’ve conceded something.”

The art itself sometimes prompts strong reactions from visitors, according to Corle. “The biggest, most frequent complaint we get is about the art. Some people

will say it’s not art, it’s a hoax or something’s offensive to them.” To handle the complaints, she said the front desk staff had to learn more about conflict resolution and how to handle people who are upset.

“We listen and empathize without agreeing,” she explained. “We might say something like ‘I’m sorry you’re so upset and I’ll share your comments with the rest of the staff.’ Then we’ll offer them a comment card so they can put their feelings in their own words.”

“We do everything we can to appease them,” she continued. “If they want, we give them their money back, and we give free passes for future shows. We will also offer them a free audio tour

The front desk staff at the Mint Museum is trained to make sure all problems are efficiently handled so no one has a bad experience.

if they're at all receptive to learning more about the work and possibly hearing the artist talk about it in his or her own words."

But the museum also works with the visitor services staff to prepare it for public reaction to difficult work. "The front-of-house staff tours each exhibition with the curator," explained Helen Dunbeck, director of administration. "It's essential that they have a basic understanding of the exhibition, and if there are difficult objects or aspects to the show, the public relations department works with them on developing responses."

Dunbeck and Corle reported that the museum was preparing to open what they expected would be a controversial exhibition for some visitors. The show of works by Charles Ray would feature a dozen nude mannequins involved in sex acts.

"With an exhibition like this," said Dunbeck, "we talk extensively about whether or not to alert visitors to the content of the show before they enter. We have to balance our interest in preserving the artist's freedom of expression and the

sensitivities of families." On occasion, she said, the museum has put signs outside galleries stating that the exhibition includes some material that may not be appropriate for young visitors.

In such instances, Corle said, when anyone arrives with children, the front desk staff will suggest they preview the exhibition before bringing the children in. "People appreciate the warning," she said. "Sometimes the adults will take turns viewing the show, while steering the kids to the permanent collection. But most people stay."

Dunbeck concurred: "Parents may want to introduce their children to contemporary art, but they don't want to be surprised."

How Different Museums Staff and Support Visitor Services Operations

Each museum defines its visitor services area a bit differently. At many museums, it often includes such frontline staff and functions as admissions and ticketing, coat check, front desk, gallery attendants and gift shop. Security sometimes constitutes its own area or, with maintenance and restaurant operations, may report to the amenities manager.

No matter how they are structured, all these areas are considered frontline services and have direct impact on the visitor experience.

Coordinating visitor services requires working with the frontline operations and with other behind-the-scenes departments. The people designated to head visitor services must manage frontline staff and act as liaisons not only to security and amenities, but also education, curatorial, marketing and public relations, development, human resources and finance.

The ways museums manage and coordinate visitor services are as varied and innovative as the museums themselves.

At the Cleveland Museum of Art, visitor services is part of the marketing department. This reflects the museum's view of visitor services as a continuum of coordinated efforts—from issuing the invitation to greeting the visitor at the door—to ensure a positive experience that meets, and hopefully surpasses, visitors' expectations.

“If you're marketing an exhibition or other program, you want to be sure the front-of-house staff and the rest of the museum are prepared to receive those people,” said Karen Ferguson, manager of marketing and visitor services at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

Before assuming full responsibility for visitor services, Ferguson worked in the marketing department heading up group sales and membership and coordinating the ticketing of special exhibitions and programs. In her new capacity, she continues to supervise ticketing and group sales, but also oversees the information desks, switchboard operators and audio tour rentals. In addition, she monitors the flow of traffic in the lobby and special exhibition galleries, the use of signage in the lobby and the cleanliness

of amenity areas. As liaison between the front-of-house and other areas of the museum, Ferguson said she is trying to get more involved in the scheduling of programs. “I’d like to see a more unified approach to what we offer the public,” she reflected.

Amy Corle, visitor services manager at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, hires, trains and supervises a 17-member staff in front-desk admissions and information, coat checking and the box office. To keep herself fresh and in touch with her staff’s capacity and the public’s needs, she said she tries to work on the floor as much as possible. One full day a week, she serves as floor manager and the rest of the week, she spends up to three hours a day filling in for employees who are absent or taking lunch breaks.

Under the Toledo Museum of Art’s recent restructuring (see page 9) most of its frontline services have been placed under the supervision of amenities manager Darlene Lindner. She oversees ticketing, information desks, switchboard operators, visitor services representatives, class registration and tour scheduling as well as the gift shops, restaurant and lobby café, theater operations and rentals and special events. She also works closely with security, sends a member of her staff to attend security staff meetings, and often gives the head of security feedback on how the guards are interacting with the public.

“Visitor services is still the new kid on the block,” said Lindner. “To function well, we need to know what’s going on in the museum, and that makes us dependant on information from other departments,” she continued. “I’ve had to beat the bushes for information.”

In the new organizational structure, Lindner works closely with the visitor experience process leader, whose mission is to bring a visitor focus to all areas of museum operations. “It’s great not to be the lone voice for the visitor experience,” said Lindner. “The emphasis on the visitor will be stronger.”

The Walker Art Center has a visitor services manager who supervises the lobby desk staff and box office. “That’s what we originally saw as visitor services,” said Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience

development. But, in 1998, the museum created a new position called audience advocate to better understand the visitor perspective and represent it to other areas of the museum, and to strengthen the link between frontline services and other departments.

“Essentially, the audience advocate’s job is to find out what we need to do better,” said Patridge. One of the primary responsibilities of the position is coordinating all audience research, which is extensive, and assessing it under Patridge’s guidance. The types of research include attendance records and demographic studies of visitors; surveys and focus groups of members, target audiences and potential visitors; timing and tracking studies of visitors; exit interviews, including evaluation of interpretive materials; outside evaluation of customer service; and visitor comment forms.

Hillary Churchill, who holds the position, said: “I also see my role as making sure that the messages curators and programmers direct to visitors are getting across.” Toward that end, Churchill shares with curators, education staff and others what she is learning about visitors and potential audiences through the research. She also reviews exhibition text (labels, wall text, brochures and catalogues) and other printed outreach materials to evaluate their accessibility to audiences.

Churchill said she uses the Flesch Readability Formula, a statistical analysis of prose difficulty, to analyze a range of the museum’s printed materials, such as labels, brochures and calendars. The technique, which she learned as a graduate student in museum studies in Britain, helps determine the grade level at which something’s written. “Most of the materials at the Walker are written at the college level or higher,” she said. “I think they should be writing at the eighth grade level, but they have a hard time giving up their academic style.”

Churchill also helped form and leads the frontline managers’ forum. The group includes supervisors of the admissions and information desk, box office, gallery monitors and volunteer tour guides, restaurant and shop. It meets one or two times a month to share information on upcoming events and developments at the museum and to discuss problem areas. Churchill will introduce a monthly newsletter for the frontline staff that will include announcements from various departments.

“Since they don’t have access to e-mail, the frontline staff tends to feel alienated from the rest of the museum,” said Churchill. “The frontline managers forum and the newsletter will help increase the flow of information to the frontline staff.”

The Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art and Hood Museum of Art also have convened visitor services committees. At a large museum like the Art Institute of Chicago, where frontline staff can easily feel cut off from other departments, Visitor Services Director Andy Nyberg said he invites someone from curatorial or other administrative staff to talk at the monthly meetings. By contrast, at the intimate Hood Museum of Art, a visitor services committee deals with audience issues cross-departmentally. According to the museum’s former director, Timothy Rub, the committee, which includes heads of security, facility management, education, marketing and exhibitions, meets regularly to review every aspect of the visitor experience. Outdoor signage, seating, labels and the development of a new study room for teachers are issues the committee has recently addressed.

The Cleveland Museum of Arts has a front-of-house service committee that meets as needed, but is particularly active prior to and during special exhibitions, said Karen Ferguson. In addition to front-of-house staff, the committee includes representatives from security, the restaurant, ticketing, group sales and education. “Our purpose is to work through points of confusion,” Ferguson explained.

With its visitor task force, the Mint Museum of Art uses a somewhat different tact by inviting the perspective of visitor services professionals from outside the museum. In addition to staff from the museum’s front desk and gift shop and a docent, the group includes representatives from Charlotte’s Convention and Visitors Bureau and an important local hotel. “We assemble this group for major visitor services issues,” said Carolyn Mints, director of community relations, who also takes part. “The visitor task force has helped us with redesigning our gallery maps and with choosing a new look for our gallery guards that would feel more welcoming to visitors.”

III. Investing in Staff to Improve Visitor Services



Volunteer docents at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego lead discussions with school groups before they enter the galleries, providing background and other information about the works they will see during their visit. (Photo courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego)

When a museum opens its doors to new audiences it takes on several challenges. One of the biggest is to do everything it can to make sure those who come the first time leave wanting to return, while also ensuring its long-time visitors are equally satisfied by the level of service and programs offered. Key to this effort is making sure employees throughout the institution have a clear understanding of the museum's service standards, and the skills and enthusiasm to meet those standards.

Museums have come a long way in learning how to create an institutional culture that is welcoming and sensitive to satisfying the needs of all who visit. They've stepped up staff training in customer service, conflict resolution and diversity awareness, and helped staff become more knowledgeable about the museum's collections and program offerings. Some have revamped hiring, evaluation and compensation practices. This willingness to invest in staff reflects museums' growing awareness that it's not just the collection, but the people who work in a museum that shape its image and reputation and influence the visitor's experience.

Below, some participants in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund's Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative share some thoughts, strategies and practices for preparing staff to create a welcoming environment for visitors.

The Art Institute of Chicago

At The Art Institute of Chicago, some 350 volunteers and 30 paid staff work in front-line positions, which include admissions, coat check, information and membership sales. Volunteers, who primarily staff the information and membership sales desks, participate in a four-hour training session on how to use computer databases and other available resources to answer

the myriad questions visitors pose. Volunteer trainers spend three sessions on the floor mentoring new volunteers in their specific jobs.

Like the volunteers, paid staff receive both formal and mentor-style training. Before working on the floor, new employees spend a four-hour session studying the visitor services manual to learn about policies, procedures and standards for visitor service. Then each recruit works for a week

with an experienced staff member who observes and evaluates his or her performance.

"We've found that teaming up with someone who's good at dealing with customers is the most effective way to train," said Andy Nyberg, director of visitor services. "We tried motivational speakers and corporate customer-service training, but most of our employees are graduate students and they felt they were being talked down to." Through the one-on-one approach, the museum is better able to make its paid staff aware of the "need to be accommodating and friendly with all visitors," he added.



There is a growing awareness that it's not just the collection, but the people who work in a museum, that shape its image and reputation, and influence the visitor's experience.

Recognizing the need for everyone who works in the museum to take a similar approach to his or her work, regardless of position, in spring 1999, The Art Institute of Chicago launched a six-hour employee-training program that includes sessions on diversity awareness, visitor-service values and principles, and customer-service skills. “We want all our employees to understand they are an integral component in ensuring visitors have a wonderful experience here,” said Carl Williams, vice president for human resources.

The training will involve 500 to 600 employees, in groups of 20 to 30, from all areas. The content of the training was developed after gathering input from employees through focus groups. “It’s designed to help them understand and grapple with diverse visitors and give them skills for conflict resolution,” Williams said.

Approximately 15 employees from various departments and areas have been invited to serve as trainers for their colleagues. The employee trainers will team up with someone from the human resources staff or an outside trainer to lead sessions. “The knowledge they bring about their areas of specialty gives them credibility with other employees,” Williams explained.

He expects the sessions will serve more than one function. “We hope they will be highly interactive and provide us with an opportunity to gather feedback from employees from all areas in the museum on what their challenges are and how they could benefit from additional training and support.”

Cleveland Museum of Art

In 1997, soon after launching its audience-building initiative, “Convening the Community,” the museum introduced an ongoing program of visitor-centered training for all staff. Currently, new employees are required to complete a 10-hour program, offered quarterly, that introduces the museum’s policies and its standards for quality service. Participants learn about the history of the museum and its collections, and then representatives of various departments give overviews of their areas. A behind-the-scenes tour familiarizes them further with what goes on inside the museum and where things are located. An employee handbook lays out the museum’s mission statement, strategic plan and visitor-service standards.

In 1999, the museum began requiring established employees to complete four hours of training, said Heather Galligan, coordinator of training and recruiting. “For 2000, it will probably be eight hours,” she said. Employees can easily fulfill the requirement by choosing from a wide selection of workshops and lectures offered monthly—including such topics as diversity awareness, harassment in the workplace, conflict resolution, interviewing skills, training in CPR and how to use a fire extinguisher. Attending special exhibitions or talks by curators about the collection also count toward meeting their training requirements, as does taking part in scheduled tours, or going on the museum’s self-guided audio tour of its permanent collection.

Staff receive a monthly calendar sent by e-mail and internal mail inviting them to choose from upcoming training programs. Galligan organizes

and conducts about half of them, while the balance are organized by other departments or by outside presenters she hires. There also have been times when other staff members have been asked to help out with training needs. “For the recent Diego Rivera show, I approached a sergeant in protective services who is Mexican American and very involved in the Hispanic community. He arranged a workshop on the history and culture of Mexico. Not only do we get great turnouts for these types of programs,” she said, “they help build relationships among the staff.”

At certain times or for special needs, the museum makes additional training available. For example, in anticipation of a large Latino audience for the Diego Rivera show, the museum held Spanish classes for employees. Sign-language classes have also been offered in the past. Galligan also said that for the exhibition *Buddhist Treasures from Nara*, the museum organized programs for the staff on Japanese history, calligraphy and tea ceremonies.

Galligan also conducts specially tailored workshops to help members of the protective services staff learn how to deal with particular visitor issues they face. “Sometimes we get comment cards from visitors saying that they felt they were being followed by a guard or that they didn’t like the way they were approached about backpacks,”

she explained. “In cases like that, I’ll do role-playing with the guards to find ways to get visitors to understand our policies, keep stress levels down, deal with an offended visitor or handle groups. We do workshops on team-building, problem-solving and handling confrontational situations.”

A training library in the human resources department has videotapes and audiocassettes staff can borrow, and as a next step, Galligan said she hopes to introduce on-line training.

Consistent with the museum’s commitment to helping raise the customer-service skills of its staff through a range of training options, employees are evaluated each year on how well they live up to these service standards. During annual performance reviews, supervisors rate employees in categories that reflect how well they provide excellence in service and exhibit pride in the

museum, maintain a safe and healthful environment, produce quality work in service to visitors and adhere to the museum’s visitor pride values. Likewise, volunteers, who receive customer-service training, are evaluated annually. To qualify for a merit raise, employees must fulfill training requirements and demonstrate visitor-centered values in their job performance.

The Cleveland Museum of Art conducts special training on an as-needed basis, such holding Spanish classes for employees in anticipation of a large Latino turnout for a Diego Rivera exhibition.

Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

Currently, the 17-member visitor-services staff (admissions and information desk, box office and coat check) receives on-the-job customer-service training. But, in reality, training begins even before new recruits report for work. “We expect any new visitor-services staff person to spend significant time in the galleries to experience the museum from the visitor’s perspective,” explained Helen Dunbeck, director of administration. “Otherwise, once they’re behind the scenes, it’s easy to lose any sense of connection to what it’s like to be a visitor.”

Amy Corle, visitor services manager, spends a day with each new employee to teach the responsibilities of the job while demonstrating proper behavior toward visitors. She also developed a visitor services handbook that delineates job procedures and provides guidelines for customer service. Corle, who attended the Disney Institute for Customer Service Training, says that the security services staff also use her customer-service training manual, but that she would like to tailor one specifically to their needs and provide them with customer-service training.

Curators regularly meet with the visitor-services staff to brief them on and give tours of exhibitions. The public relations staff works closely with visitor services to prepare the staff for handling visitor comments and questions during particularly controversial or challenging shows.

While the museum invests considerable time and energy in customer-service training, it only hires individuals for visitor services positions who have

worked with the public before. “That’s because they have to be able to deal with pressure, must always be courteous and can’t show signs of being tired,” said Dunbeck. “We also have a preference for people with an interest in the art field and who speak another language.” (Sixty-seven percent of visitors are tourists.)

“It takes more than an interest in art to work with visitors,” said Corle. “We try to be up front about what we expect in the way of customer service and what’s entailed in the day-to-day job responsibilities.”

Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego

At the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego, the front-desk staff and gallery attendants receive two half-day training sessions in job responsibilities and customer service. Since late 1997, the museum has offered all-staff Spanish language classes and required that the receptionists, head events manager and directors of the education and curatorial departments to participate.

In addition, the museum has been actively recruiting volunteers and inaugurated a new docent training program with more stringent requirements. Weekly classes are offered on the collection and general art history.

“The demographics of the docents are changing,” said Charles Castle, associate director. “What used to be a predominantly white group is gradually becoming more diverse.”

According to Castle, the museum is using its docents to better serve school groups. “We send

them into classrooms to give a talk about art and let the kids know what they're going to see when they visit the museum," he explained. "When the class arrives for their visit, the docent is there to greet them and take them through the exhibit.

"The investment in the docent group is paying off," he said. "It's a huge step forward for us."

To fully benefit from the substantial investment the museum makes in training, it also has taken steps to hold on to its best employees. "The job market is more competitive now and so we have to be more competitive in compensating employees or we lose our investment in them when they leave." Castle noted that after years of paying frontline staff minimum wage, the museum's base wage is now \$8 an hour for part-time and \$10 for full-time. "The longer employees stay, the more polished is their rapport with visitors."

Toledo Museum of Art

In early 1997, the museum introduced staff training by sending 40 willing employees from various departments to a half-day seminar on positive approaches to customer service. Within a year, a group of employees had created a set of service standards and the museum designed and launched a formalized in-house training program for all employees. Now, new employees are required to attend a one-hour orientation, offered quarterly, in customer service.

The program also includes participatory training sessions and regular communications with staff on pertinent visitor-service issues.

When the program was implemented, all full-time staff members were required to participate in a three-hour introductory seminar on diversity awareness that was offered twice on two different workdays. (While not required to attend, part-time employees were invited to participate and

those who did were paid for the time.) Since then, seminars have also been offered on conflict resolution and preventing harassment.

"These sessions will be ongoing," said Diane Tohle, human resources administrator. "We're trying to create a user-friendly environment by emphasizing

in the training that everyone we come in contact with, whether from inside or outside the museum, is a customer. How we treat visitors and how we treat staff go hand in hand. Someone who's not happy with his or her job is not going to be good with visitors."

Tohle leads some training sessions, but she said most are conducted by outside consultants she hires.

To support the museum's recent restructuring (see page 9), Tohle said she's developing a leadership training program for those who have moved into leadership positions but don't have previous experience in that capacity. In addition, the

Museums are taking steps to hold on to their best employees in a competitive job market.

museum plans to introduce customer-service training for part-time instructors in the education program.

The security staff has adapted its own set of service standards that they've printed on cards and use as a pocket reference, Tohle said. "They emphasize friendliness, openness and making eye contact," she explained. "We're very fortunate that the security chief is sensitive to customer-service and diversity issues."

"We devote a substantial amount of money to staff development," said Director Roger Berkowitz. In the 1998-99 fiscal year the museum spent nearly \$60,000 on staff development. Some of this money supports employees who want to pursue job-related training and education outside the museum. Each full-time employee is entitled to \$200 a year for a course or training program to enhance job skills. In addition, employees can apply up to \$1,600 from a special staff development fund. A group of employees review the applications bimonthly.

Walker Art Center

In recent years, the museum has intensified training for frontline staff. As part of this effort, it revamped its training materials, and introduced an orientation program for new frontline staff and employees from other areas. Over a number of days, the visitor services supervisor and audience advocate introduce new employees to the building and staff and tell them about the history of the museum and its mission. They also inform them about different audiences and the issues and concerns those audiences may have.

In early 1997, the museum invited a customer-service consultant to present a half-day workshop for the frontline staff and heads of other departments. "It was a wonderful opportunity to share the mission and discuss customer-service ideas and concerns," said Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience development. "By broadening participation, we were able to reinforce that customer service issues are not just the responsibility of the guards and lobby staff." Since then, all staff have been encouraged to spend a day at the lobby desk, she said, "to understand the interactions with the public that take place there and see who's coming."

According to Patridge, the museum has also started cross-training frontline staff so they can fulfill more than one function and be more helpful to visitors. For example, she said, the lobby desk staff and shop supervisors are learning each other's jobs so they can cover for each other when one is particularly busy or short on staff. The lobby desk staff is also taking the tour-guide training so they can fill in if a volunteer tour guide cancels.

The museum has also expanded its training for the rest of the staff. Today, all employees are required to attend two full-day introductory sessions on cultural diversity. The human resources department organizes a monthly lunch-time series of workshops, lectures and performances called "Beyond Baggage." The sessions, which are led by invited speakers or artists whose work is being featured at the museum, address issues of racism and cultural sensitivity, as well as communications and community advocacy techniques. Participation is optional, but attendance is taken

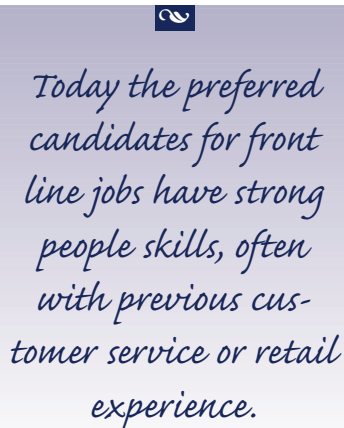
at each session and considered in employees' job performance evaluation.

A portion of bimonthly all-staff meetings is devoted to customer-service training, Patridge reported, and the museum's employee policy manual contains standards for customer service and cultural sensitivity.

To make sure that employees are meeting the museum's visitors' services standards, annual performance reviews include a self-assessment on diversity awareness and customer service. All staff members are asked to appraise how they've contributed to cultural diversity at the museum through, for example, actions taken, training attended, self-education and reading. They are also asked to discuss how they've provided good customer service to visitors and colleagues. The self-assessments are reviewed by the employees' managers, who recommend merit raises and promotions. "We want to reward people for their initiative and their ability to integrate these principles in their day-to-day work," Patridge said.

The museum is also taking steps to address two other factors that affect the quality of the museum's visitors' services: hiring practices and turnover. For example, today the preferred candidates for frontline jobs are individuals with strong "people skills." According to Patridge, "Previous customer-service or retail experience is critical."

Because many of the front-desk staff and box office personnel are part-time employees, including students and artists, turnover in the past has been high, with average stay lasting only one to two years. To address that problem, the museum has extended healthcare coverage to all part-time employees and offers them free admission to museum events. "We're trying to demonstrate that we value their services and, in turn, hope we can nurture their commitment to the Walker," she said.



Today the preferred candidates for front line jobs have strong people skills, often with previous customer service or retail experience.

Helping Contract Staff Become More Visitor-Centered

Museums frequently hire independent contractors to supply specialized services, typically security, maintenance or restaurant operations. Often the employees who perform these duties come into daily contact with visitors. To ensure they meet the museum's service standards, these individuals need to be trained and their performance monitored just like other permanent staff members.

At the Toledo Museum of Art, which contracts its restaurant operations and outdoor security from outside firms, Director Roger Berkowitz says, the institution monitors the level of services "very closely." It has made its outside suppliers aware of the museum's standards for visitor service, he said, and relies on the firms to make sure the workers they hire know what is expected of them.

"The café staff are generally good with the public," Berkowitz said. He added that with "outdoor security" it's a bit more challenging. "Turnover is high, and even though we invite guards to participate in our employee training programs, they seldom come."

As part of its contract with the company that provides its restaurant services, the Cleveland Museum of Art requires the firm's employees who work at the museum to attend training. "To visitors, they're museum employees and how they interact with the public reflects on us," said Kate Sellers, the museum's deputy director.

In turn, Sellers said, the museum picks up half the wages of restaurant workers for time spent in training sessions they are required to attend. "They're complying, and they love the training," she said.

The visitor services staff at the Art Institute of Chicago is responsible for training the outside telemarketing operators hired to handle ticket sales for major exhibitions. Says Andy Nyberg, director of visitor services, "We go to the vendor's location and set up the training there." Operators are instructed in how to answer the phone, as well how to find information visitors are likely to ask for, such as directions to the museum, where they

can park, how to get there on public transportation and recommendations of hotels and restaurants.

Nyberg added that the museum also relies on the outside operators to pitch memberships and audio tours to callers. “We’ve worked out a plan with the vendor to give operators sales incentives, and sometimes they can double their hourly wage.” To ensure quality customer care, Nyberg said his staff monitors the ticketing service by calling in several times a week to see how the operators handle their requests.

The Walker Art Center is making a concerted effort to integrate contracted security and restaurant workers with the museum’s staff, according to Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience development. “We’re embracing them in a more holistic way,” she said.

Contract workers participate in the orientation and customer service training program required of all new employees, she said, and they’re invited to participate in the museum’s diversity training sessions. In addition, contract staff are welcome to attend meetings of frontline managers and are invited to contribute to long-range planning.

“We’re asking everyone, including contract staff, for their thoughts on visitor services, audience engagement and how we can make the Walker better,” Patridge said.

IV. Museums Learn that Audiences Have Much to Say That's Valuable



Museums are using formal and informal research, such as focus groups, surveys and advisory committees, to learn why individuals and families visit and find out what would make the experience more enjoyable for people of all ages. (Photo courtesy of the Toledo Museum of Art)

Corporations have relied on market research for decades to effectively position and sell their products and services. But museums and other cultural institutions have been slow to embrace it, mostly because of the cost. Now, however, museums are discovering that to effectively reach and serve audiences they need to learn about their schedules, interests and perceptions.

For the 29 museums participating in the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative, the opportunity to formally survey their audiences has yielded valuable data about the demographic composition as well as the needs and interests of the people they are serving or want to. This information has helped museums strengthen exhibitions and programs, formulate marketing and outreach strategies, and improve services to visitors.

For most of the museums, the initiative provided the first opportunity to conduct in-depth research on existing and potential audiences, and to assess the impact of their audience-building and visitor-service strategies. Through this effort, museums have discovered that audiences have much of value to tell them, and that by using a variety of formal and informal methods to gather information, they can improve the visitor experience. Best yet, some of the data collection methods cost little or nothing.

Formal Research

When the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego received the summary of its first year of data using the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund visitor survey, it scheduled a staff

meeting to review the findings. The meeting made a dramatic impact on the staff, recalled Deputy Director Charles Castle.

Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund Visitor and Community Surveys

As part of their involvement in the Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative, the 29 participating museums conducted research at the start of their Fund-underwritten projects and continued it up to two years after their projects are completed. For a few weeks each month, museums administer a printed survey designed by the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and they survey general audiences as well as people targeted for audience-building efforts. Information is gathered on six topics: demographic characteristics of visitors; visitation patterns and motivations; types of activities pursued at the museum; perceptions of the museum; how visitors hear about the museum; and how visitors travel to the museum.

In addition, at the start of their projects, the Fund commissioned telephone surveys with people in 12 museums' communities. The survey helped the museums learn how visitors and non-visitors perceived them and also provided useful data about the household characteristics of their target audiences. The Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund returned the data and findings to the museums for their individual use.

“It helped us as much as anything in reorienting ourselves to the audience,” he said. “The survey gave our visitors a voice. For the first time, we could identify in our minds who they are, where they live, what they think about us and what they’d like to see from us.”

The meeting helped frontline staff, such as those who greet visitors, better understand its role with visitors, Castle said. Senior management saw that visitors reacted negatively to the constant turnover of minimum-wage workers. “We finally recognized that longevity on the front line is important and that we have to give the staff incentives to stay,” Castle added.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, used the findings to strengthen its frontline, too. Although visitors reported high levels of satisfaction overall toward frontline staff, according to Lori Kleinerman, director of marketing and public relations, the survey uncovered dissatisfaction with the museum’s security guards. “We had suspected that was a problem area and the survey gave us the numbers to back it up and specific issues to address,” she said. Similar to other museums facing this problem, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, replace the guards’ uniforms with less intimidating outfits and now provides customer service training to security personnel.

Some museums, particularly large ones, use many other types of audience research in addition to the Lila Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund’s visitor survey. The Art Institute of Chicago, Walker Art Center and Toledo Museum of Art,

for example, use a range of more in-depth methods to learn the perceptions, behavior and composition of the various segments of their current and potential audiences.

Toledo Museum of Art

At the Toledo Museum of Art audience research has grown from a series of focus groups held several years ago to activities that range from regularly gathering information on visitor demographics, behavior and satisfaction, to surveys conducted specifically of visitors who attend special exhibitions. The museum also focuses on learning as much as it can about members, teachers who use the museum, evening visitors, restaurant patrons and visitors to the museum’s web site. The research is coordinated by Steve Nowak, the museum’s audience-development process leader.

“We’re trying to learn why people visit, what they need for their visit and what could make the visit more enjoyable,” explained Toledo’s Director Roger Berkowitz. He noted that the museum has responded to audience feedback by making some significant changes in how visitors are accommodated. These include being open longer on weekends to make it easier for people to visit; expanded food services; more and improved seating throughout the museum; and allowing strollers at special exhibitions (see pages 25-26). In addition, the museum has increased the type size of its labels and also carefully reviews all label copy to ensure it is understandable to general audiences. “People don’t like jargon,” said Berkowitz. “It’s a turnoff when they hit words

they don't know. We've also discovered our audience is not so young and many people said they found labels hard to read."

The Art Institute of Chicago

The Art Institute of Chicago conducts a range of qualitative research to supplement what it learns through the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest visitor survey, according to Christine O'Neill Singer, vice president for development. Activities include pre- and post-exhibition focus groups on major exhibitions; testing of selected marketing strategies; occasional exit surveys when the museum needs audience feedback on a particular question; and a major member survey every 10 years. Like most museums, The Art Institute of Chicago also solicits audience feedback through comment books placed in exhibition galleries.

Singer said the research has helped the museum uncover concerns that might otherwise have gone unnoticed if they hadn't asked visitors what they like and don't like about coming to the Art Institute. "We have problems in the lobby," she said. "It gets congested because we need more admissions stations. Coat check in the main lobby is so small they can only accept parcels, and the other coat check area is on the other side of the museum."

Those problems will be relieved, she said, by a reconfiguration of the main lobby (see page 19).

The coat check area will be expanded to four times its current size, she reported, and the museum will add more admissions stations and reposition them to one side of the lobby to improve the flow of visitor traffic.


"But visitors give us good marks on our restrooms and facilities for people on wheels," she said. "Visitors find our food service excellent, but say they need more of it. They'd also like it located closer to the education center."

"By and large, people aren't overwhelmed by the museum and are able to negotiate a complicated building," she reflected. "However, at closing time, some say they feel rushed."

The museum has also specifically surveyed African-Americans visitors, the audience the museum

has worked hardest to increase since 1994. "We know from research that African-Americans largely feel welcome and comfortable and find few barriers to attending," said Singer. "In the African-American community, we have a positive image.

"In terms of programs, the museum is strategically planning on a constant basis to attract African-American visitors," she added. "Increasing attendance means constantly extending the invitation and paying attention to marketing our considerable offerings."


Asking visitors what they like and don't like about coming to the museum helps uncover concerns that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Singer also reported that the museum has formed an audience research communications committee. Periodically, representatives of most museum departments meet with the director of research and evaluation to review audience feedback. “They take the information back to their departments to discuss how they can use it in their areas,” she said.

“What’s fascinating about research committee meetings is that you’ll find curators saying, ‘This is who I think will come to this exhibition; here’s what I’d like them to experience; what can I do to help the process?’” related Singer. “Ten years ago, exhibition research would have been all about objects; we’ve come a long way.”

James Wood, the museum’s director, concurred. “So much is about making available more information,” he said. “Curators never had information about audiences to work with before. Now they’re eager to know who’s coming and what people are taking away from the experience.”

Walker Art Center

Before the museum’s first in-depth study of audiences in 1991, “staff thought they knew who was coming and what experiences they were having,” said Mag Patridge, director of public relations and audience development. “Now we know.”

The museum conducts special studies of members and target audiences, and it researches non-attenders through awareness and perception surveys and focus groups. The museum also surveys visitors about their experience through exit interviews and evaluations of interpretive materials. Timing and tracking studies of visitors document the path they travel through exhibitions and how much time they spend looking at individual art works. In addition, the museum hires a

“secret shopper” service to help evaluate customer service, and it collects demographic information on visitors to see if it’s reaching its audience-development goals.

Research has led to many changes at the museum, according to Patridge, including the introduction of customer-service training for frontline and other staff; the formation of the frontline managers forum (see page 40); an increased

flow of information among staff; and physical changes in the museum. The lobby desk, for example, was redesigned to make it easier for visitors to have direct eye contact with staff so they get immediate attention. Timing and tracking observations have been helpful in the design of exhibitions and evaluating the layout of the building.

Research of first-time visitors, occasional visitors and non-visitors from the Walker’s target audi-

Curators at the Art Institute of Chicago pay close attention to what research tells them about customer interests and use these findings in planning exhibitions, something that never happened 10 years ago.

ences of teens, families and low-income communities also pointed to the need to strengthen interpretive materials. The museum developed new informational brochures, new audio materials and the Anderson window gallery, which highlights a work in the collection to provide in-depth interpretation of a single artist, artistic movement or work of art.

The coordination of audience research is one of the responsibilities of the recently created position of audience advocate (see page 31), held by Hillary Churchill. “She is the liaison between the audience and the museum staff, and her job is to find out what we need to do better,” said Partridge.

Summaries of research findings, the implications of the findings and recommendations for various areas of the organization are regularly presented at board meetings, all-staff meetings and senior management meetings.

Informal Research

Beyond surveys, focus groups and other formal methods of audience research, many museums also invite informal feedback from visitors and community members through volunteer advisory committees, comment books and cards, and staff-visitor interactions. These sources of information are given weight, too—in some cases even more than formal data—and can provide museums with insights to make big changes or simply help them fine-tune the visitor experience. And while these informal methods may require staff time, they otherwise cost very little to implement.

Advisory Committees

When the Art Institute of Chicago studied its African-American visitors to understand how they use the museum and if they're satisfied with the experience, it also turned to its African-American Leadership Committee for its assessment. The committee, which freely voices its opinions on a range of topics, including the effectiveness of programming and marketing efforts, not only echoed but amplified the research findings, according to Christine O'Neill Singer, vice president for development. “They expressed complete confidence in the quality of the visit for first-time or experienced visitors and in the value of membership,” she said.

The Mint Museum of Art in Charlotte, North Carolina enlists the help of its 13-member Community Advisory Council to review each exhibition, reported President Bruce Evans. The broad-based group of volunteers, he said, helps the museum fine-tune its visitor focus and determine whether it has reached its goals for exhibitions. “They tell us what works, what doesn't and where the language is wrong.”

At the council's first meeting, one member who works on a monthly publication for senior citizens helped cue the museum about the needs of older people. “‘There's no place to sit!’ she told us. ‘You can't expect elderly people to stand for an hour,’” Evans said. “Well, we created seating, and then she used her contacts with senior groups to encourage them to visit.”

“Five years ago, there was no seating in the galleries,” confirmed Carolyn Mints, director of community relations. “Now we have seating in

our permanent collection galleries, and it's part of the planning of all major exhibitions.”

The Toledo Museum of Art works with several volunteer advisory groups. One, the exhibitions advisory group, formed in 1998, has significantly helped shape the visitor experience, according to Steve Nowak, the audience development process leader, who co-facilitates the group. The 10 members, who include three marketing professionals and representatives of various audiences the museum serves, offer their reactions to exhibitions in the early planning stages.

Nowak cited how the group had been vital to the planning and success of several exhibitions. First, for the museum's winter 1999 show, the group helped bring a focus to the work of conceptual artist Sandy Skoglund. “They confirmed for us that targeting a young audience, 35 and under, was a good fit,” Nowak explained. “Then, they helped us see that the appeal for these visitors would be understanding how Skoglund makes her installations.” In addition to organizing the exhibition, which included four installations and photographs of other works by the artist, the museum commissioned Skoglund to collaborate with community members in creating an installation. Participants were invited to bring objects, including photos, for the construction of the piece.

The group was also helpful in evaluating wall panels and labels for the installation of the museum's African art collection, which, Nowak said, is a popular learning environment for school groups. The advisory group reviewed the narrative line of the copy, the use of graphics, and type design and layout. In addition, the group is cur-

rently working with the exhibitions staff to make an upcoming show of quilts interactive. “The group pointed out to us that visitors will want to know how the quilts are put together and what they look like from the back,” Nowak explained. “They came up with the idea of creating sample quilts that visitors can handle to make the experience more meaningful.”

Comment Books and Cards

Many museums gather audience feedback from comment books or cards placed in galleries, at the lobby desk and in other strategic locations. Visitors can freely register their thoughts and opinions about any aspect of their visit, and they can do it anonymously or they can include their name and address if they welcome a reply.

“Our comment books and comment cards provide ongoing tools for monitoring audience feedback,” said the Walker Art Center's Mag Patridge. “We constantly review and analyze them. At times, audience comments have caused us to change interpretive materials, and they inform our audience-development efforts by giving us information on the effectiveness of program design.”

The Museum of Contemporary Art, San Diego has comment boxes at its La Jolla and downtown sites. Visitors can complete a short check-list survey about the quality of their visit and add their thoughts, questions or concerns. “People usually have a strong reaction to contemporary art,” said Charles Castle. “This gives them a chance to share, vent or get off their chests any feelings they have before they leave the museum.”

The museum receives 10 to 15 comment cards a day, said Castle. They're collected and reviewed each week by the education curator, who forwards cards that require a reply to the departments that are best suited to respond. Senior staff reviews the collected comments monthly.

"We were surprised to learn that visitors to our La Jolla site had a hard time finding the front door," said Castle. "We introduced new signage.

There was also concern about the men's restroom. Visitors thought the urinals should have partitions, so we added them."

Not surprisingly, restrooms didn't meet visitors' standards at the museum's small downtown site, which shares amenities with a trolley station. "We opened a room in the back gallery to create another restroom for visitors," Castle reported.

The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago positions comment cards at the lobby desk and wherever information materials are dispensed; by the elevators and in the coat check area, according to Helen Dunbeck, director of administration. A weekly report of visitor comments is e-mailed to staff, she said. "There's a lot of visitor feedback, which everyone reads, and it can be a catalyst for change." Each month, the visitor services manager, Amy Corle, said she writes approximately 30 letters to visitors who've left information on how to reach them.

In addition, the staff receptionist keeps a journal of calls from the public. A weekly report is circulated to staff to help them understand callers' questions and information needs. "Calls range from questions about our hours and what shows are on view to how to register for education classes, how to get tickets to events and what to wear," said Lori Kleinerman, director of marketing and public relations.



Comment cards provide ongoing tools for monitoring audience feedback--and are often a catalyst for making changes.

The Cleveland Museum of Art places a high level of importance on the solicitation of visitors' comments, and relies on it as a primary method of information gathering. The museum has positioned three comment-card stands throughout the museum; it places visitor comment books in special exhibition galleries; and a note from the director,

included in membership renewal mailings, requests members' comments.

Deputy Director Kate Sellers reviews every comment from every source, she said. Visitor Services Manager Karen Ferguson responds to them whenever an address or phone number is included. Sometimes she routes the comments to other staff members who can help her with a response or who can benefit from the feedback.

"We make sure staff sees the comments to sensitize them to visitors' needs and perceptions," Sellers said. Entries from the exhibition comment books, for example, are discussed at exhibi-

tion follow-up meetings with curators and designers to help refine the design and interpretation of future exhibitions.

“We take visitor comments very seriously,” she noted. “We review the comments frequently and respond as quickly as possible. Especially in cases where we need to recover service, I always suggest a phone call if possible,” she added. “It’s faster, and sometimes writing feels too formal.”

Staff-Visitor Interaction

While it’s important to give visitors the opportunity to write down their thoughts and opinions, many visitors won’t take the time to fill out a comment card or book. That’s why some museums rely on key front-line staff to report on their interactions with visitors and on visitors’ responses to the museum and its offerings.

“Most of the visitor feedback I get comes from the front-desk staff,” said Carolyn Mints, director of community relations at the Mint Museum. “I rely on them to give me a picture of what’s going on with visitors — how they’re reacting to exhibitions, what might have made for an unpleasant experience.”

Mints, who spends a great deal of time tutoring the front-desk staff in customer service standards and techniques, said the staff had become such a

consistent source of information on visitors that curators now look to them for feedback. For example, the curator of a recent show of drawings from the permanent collection created a form to query the front-desk staff about the public’s response to the show.

According to Timothy Rub, former director of the Hood Museum of Art in Hanover, N.H., the museum had conducted research earlier in its

Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative project that indicated “folks were having a hard time finding their way to the museum. I couldn’t believe it until I spent time at the front desk and heard for myself visitors’ frustration at not being able to find the entrance.” The museum, he said, introduced new signage to alleviate the problem.

“Over the years, the museum collected a lot of audi-

ence feedback— anecdotal and from surveys—that seemed to just pile up” said Rub. “We found staff-visitor contact and talking with members of the community to be much more valuable.”

The museum, which is located on the campus of Dartmouth College and serves the Upper Valley region of New Hampshire and Vermont, has worked to increase attendance by school-age children and their families from throughout the

The front-desk staff can be a valuable source of feedback, which museum staff can use to get an ongoing fix on how visitors are reacting to exhibitions and other likes and dislikes.

region, which is predominantly rural. “The museum works in partnership with communities to engage them,” Rub said. “The staff meets frequently with teachers, school superintendents, professors from the college and members of the Friends’ organization, who provide a lot of rich feedback. They let the museum know what they’re thinking—it’s encouraged as part of the partnership—and what other people in the community are thinking and saying.”

V. Visitors' Needs Drive Plans for Capital Improvements Projects



Artist demonstrators--such as Hopi potter Lucille Maho--at the Heard Museum in Phoenix are available to assist visitors with a variety of interactive hands-on activities in new spaces designed specifically for that purpose. (Photo courtesy of the Heard Museum)

When the Heard Museum unveiled its \$16 million renovation in February 1999, local Phoenix residents and out-of-town visitors greeted the changes with delight. Along with a doubling of its usable space, the Heard made a number of improvements—from adding seating and expanding food services to creating new kinds of gallery spaces—designed to make visits to the museum more enjoyable and rewarding.

For the Heard, like a number of other participants in the Fund's Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative, this major capital improvement project was motivated by more than the need to add more space. A desire to improve services for visitors and enhance the quality of their experience also figured prominently into the decision.

In describing the thinking behind some of the Heard's changes, former director Martin Sullivan, who spearheaded those efforts, noted that many who visit the museum are tourists. "People in a group are rarely in sync with each other," he said. "Because some tire sooner than others, the 'fatigue factor' had to be considered in planning our expansion."


As an example, Sullivan points to the array of new indoor and outdoor spaces at the Heard, including a shaded courtyard with fountains that offers visitors a place to relax or to watch artists

demonstrate their art forms; patios, walkways and gardens; as well as a café featuring Native American and southwestern fare. Here gallery-fatigued visitors can rest, eat or sip a beverage while simultaneously being steeped in Native American culture.

Changes inside the museum include a new and larger gift shop and bookstore, more seating in and around galleries and a newly created artist

studio that allows visitors to meet and talk with artists and watch them at work. Hands-on activities have been introduced in every gallery to help engage families with children, and an outdoor learning area, created in partnership with the Desert Botanical Garden and Phoenix Zoo, provides visitors a close-up look at the plants and animals of the Southwest.

Other changes were intended to more fully integrate Native American culture into the museum experience. "For Native Americans, the arts are not separated from one another, nor are the arts an isolated part of life," Sullivan explained. "Thus we want our expanded facility to similarly reflect the Native American view that the arts are a culmination of a long process of cultural traditions and influences—family, nature, song, prayer and patience."



Capital improvements are motivated not only by a need for more space, but a desire to improve services for visitors, and enhance the quality of their experience.

Sullivan said that philosophy influenced the design of the museum's new 400-seat auditorium, which blends music, dance and storytelling along with the visual arts.

Even the museum's new orientation gallery, appropriately titled "More than Art," was developed with help from an advisory committee comprising Native American elders, educators, artists and tribal leaders.

Some of the other changes at the museum are intended to serve people with specific needs or respond to comments from visitors. For example, to accommodate the visually impaired, the Heard added a multi-sensory gallery. It features six audio stations where visitors can listen to young Native Americans talk about their cultures in English, Spanish or their tribal languages. Signs in braille also can now be found throughout the museum.

The new education pavilion created as part of the museum's expansion provides a place for the estimated 25,000—sometimes noisy—school children who visit annually. The pavilion contains three classrooms, a courtyard and additional teaching spaces.

"Adult visitors complained about the galleries being jammed with school groups," Sullivan said. "They found them noisy and distracting. With the new education pavilion, kids have a place to

settle in when they arrive, where they can participate in orientation and interact with materials before visiting the galleries," he explained. "Then they can return to the pavilion to do crafts or other learning activities and even have lunch. It's better for everyone."

The Heard also doubled the size of its library and archives, increasing access to its research collection. The library's new computer system allows

users to link up to research centers throughout the world.

Calls for café, bookshop at El Muséo del Barrio

Another museum from the Fund's program that is in the process of responding visitors' calls for more amenities is El Muséo del Barrio. Director Susana Torruella Leval reported that the museum has secured \$750,000 in funds from the city of New York to renovate its courtyard.

In addition, the museum is

hoping for an additional \$800,000 from the East Harlem Empowerment Zone to expand its shop and construct a café.

"Visitors want a place to sit and talk and have coffee, but we don't have the space for that now," said Leval. "We hope to design a café that opens to the courtyard so people can sit outside in good weather. We have a view of the Central Park Conservatory Garden, which is glorious,



To address complaints about large, noisy school groups in the galleries, a new education pavilion provides a place for students to learn about what they will see before they actually enter the museum's public spaces.

and we'd like to take advantage of it."

Plans to expand the museum shop, Leval said, are also in response to visitors' demands—in this instance, for more bilingual books about the arts. Currently, the shop occupies a tiny space that is shared with the admissions desk.

Signs look positive for construction to begin at El Muséio in January 2001, with completion expected by the summer, she said. In addition, by 2005, the museum plans to renovate its ground floor and increase the space available for displaying its permanent collection.

Resolving Lobby Problems

The Art Institute of Chicago, Cleveland Museum of Art and Mint Museum of Art all plan to renovate their main lobbies to make them more welcoming and efficient.

"When our visitors enter the museum, they're met by 50 feet of cold gray marble between them and the admissions desk," said Bruce Evans, director of the Mint Museum. "And there's no art along the way. Some of them ask, 'Is this the museum?'"

"It can be particularly intimidating for non-traditional audiences," added Carolyn Mints, director of community relations.

According to Evans, the museum is planning a \$25 million expansion of the building that is

expected to get underway in 2003. For help in determining changes to the museum's current configuration, Mints said staff members were surveyed for their perspective on what visitors need. "We asked them what they think needs to be located where, and what people ask for when they enter the museum," she said.

Plans include renovation of the lobby and a new layout for galleries that is less linear and more

compatible with random-access audio tours. Two libraries, currently with limited access, will be moved closer to the main entrance.

In addition, the museum is seeking a relaxation of neighborhood zoning regulations so it can build a café. Current restrictions prohibit food services inside the museum.

At The Art Institute of

Chicago, renovation of main the entrance will include "much needed technical improvements to make the lobby more welcoming and efficient," said Director James Wood.

According to Director of Visitor Services Andy Nyberg, nearly 90 percent of the museum's visitors come through the Michigan Avenue entrance. On some days, especially weekends, lines extend out the doors. At present, however, the main lobby's coat check area can only accommodate 640 coats and bags.

Some museums are reconfiguring their lobbies so first-time visitors know immediately upon entering that they, indeed, have found what they were looking for.

The planned reconfiguration of the lobby calls for the admissions stations to be moved to an area adjacent to the lobby. “This will open the lobby back up to its original size and allow for an easier flow of people through the lobby and quicker processing,” Nyberg said. Renovation of the coat check area will expand its capacity to 2,600 coats, with additional room for backpacks, too.

“We’re also refurbishing the main auditorium,” Wood said, “making it far more beautiful and technically enhanced.” The auditorium, which is used for lectures, music concerts and dance performances, will also function as an orientation space for visitors, he added.

In addition, Wood said that the museum has commissioned architect Renzo Piano to submit plans for a major expansion. Piano’s design, which will be presented in 2000, will address the need to expand space for certain collections, including Southeast Asian, Amerindian, African, and modern and contemporary art. “We need more education spaces and more amenities for visitors, too,” Wood said. “The expansion also gives us an opportunity to find new ways to look out on the city.”

The Cleveland Museum of Art has launched a \$1 million planning study for a huge capital project, according to Deputy Director Kate Sellers. “We’ve asked members, staff and the board for their input on what does and doesn’t work, what they consider sacred spaces and what they’d like to see done,” she said. “What’s clear is

that we need to make the lobby more welcoming and create more gallery space and more parking.”

One of the primary goals is to correct a problem resulting from the addition in the 1950s of an education wing to the museum. Planners decided to wrap the new facility around the original entrance of the 1916 Beaux Arts building. “As a result, when visitors come through the door the first question they ask is, ‘Where is the museum?’ because you don’t see any art,” Sellars said.

Although plans for the capital project have not yet been completed and the museum’s board must still give its go-ahead, Visitor Services Manager Karen Ferguson is already thinking about how construction will affect visitors. “We’ll work hard to make sure the public has been alerted before they walk in the door. Even though some galleries will be closed, we’ll have to find ways to make the experience meaningful for visitors. And communication among museum departments will have to improve even more.”

Director of Walker Art Center Shares Vision for Expansion

In early 1999, the Walker Art Center decided to purchase the Allianz Life Insurance Company's two home office properties. The opportunity to buy these buildings, which are located next to the museum, answered the Walker's long-time quest to expand. A recent analysis had revealed that while the museum's permanent collection grew more than 50 percent since a 1984 expansion, current space only permits the Walker to show two percent of its holdings. At the same time, the museum's audience has grown dramatically, approaching one million visitors annually.

The acquisition of this additional space, which will take three to five years to complete, is propelling the Walker to develop its next long-range plan—the focus of which is enhancing the visitor experience, according to Director Kathy Halbreich.

“Active engagement of our audience is the lens through which we're looking at our long-range plan and the expansion,” she said. “We're most interested in finding ways to make visitors active participants who will engage in conversations with us and with each other. We still want to offer people a meditative experience in the galleries, but we'd also like to create spaces outside the galleries where people can talk about the art.”

Halbreich hopes the expansion will make the Walker Art Center even more multidisciplinary, providing more space for the visual arts, performing arts, film and video, and new media. She said she envisions each area of the arts having an indoor courtyard where visitors can engage in conversation or debate, or explore the artistic process.

“We might have a tour guide sit at a table and, with the help of technology, bring up what Marcel Duchamp or Merce Cunningham has said about beauty,” she explained. “Or we might create a performing arts space where rehearsals could take place and visitors could watch them. We're considering creating a small video center where we could organize film and video programs that might complement a performing arts program or gallery exhibit.

“We're very interested in drawing together disciplines and bringing the artists and the artistic process back into the life of the building and within

the reach of visitors,” she said. “Visitors want a more direct relationship with artists. In focus groups, people have told us they want to know more about the artists, that they’d like to see photos of them, for instance. But we think they want to know a lot more—the books they read, music they listen to, other artists they respect. Technology will help us answer that need.”

Halbreich said she and her staff have been studying the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, Disney World and Mall of America. One of their ideas is to create an “orientation plaza,” an inviting space with lots of amenities where people could sit and talk, eat and read materials from the museum’s nearby library. “We want to create a feeling of warmth, with sun, plants and music. It might be ringed by a colonnade offering a variety of interactive spaces, places where, for instance, they can join Merce Cunningham in a virtual dance. We want to provide opportunities for visitors to understand the context of certain movements or artists and to allow them to look at what was happening in other disciplines.

“We want this to be an extremely smart building that helps people move through the space without difficulty and use its capabilities,” she said. “We see people’s delight in learning not in a linear, but a hyperlinked fashion. If the experiences we make available are deep enough, people will spend the time.”

“Education is one of the things people value most,” she explained, “and it can be done as an entertaining adventure. We can accommodate different learning styles by offering many points of access—books, computers, an art lab that’s open all the time for visitors who want a hands-on experience, a media center where artists can work.”

Halbreich reported that the plans for expansion also include a new education facility on the ground floor and a center for teens, one of the museum’s target audiences, where they can meet, exhibit works and conduct a variety of program activities.

Appendix

Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund *Museum Collections Accessibility Initiative* Participants and Contacts

LILA WALLACE-READER'S DIGEST FUND

Two Park Avenue, 23rd Floor
New York, NY 10016
Phone: (212) 251-9800
Fax: (212) 679-6990
lwrd@wallacefunds.org
Schroeder Cherry, Program Officer
scherry@wallacefunds.org

THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

111 S. Michigan Avenue
Chicago, IL 60603
Phone: (312) 443-3934
Fax: (312) 443-0849
James Wood, Director and President
jwood@artic.edu or jbrietz@artic.edu

BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

Art Museum Drive
Baltimore, MD 21218-3898
Phone: (410) 396-6300
Fax: (410) 396-7153
Doreen Bolger, Director

BERKELEY ART MUSEUM/PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

University of California at Berkeley
2625 Durant Avenue #2250
Berkeley, CA 94720-2250
Phone: (510) 642-5783
Fax: (510) 642-4889
Stephen Gong, Associate Director
sgong@uclink2.berkeley.edu

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

11150 East Boulevard
Cleveland, OH 44106-1797
Phone: (216) 421-7340
Fax: (216) 421-0411
Nancy McAfee, Project Manager
mcafee@cma-oh.org
Kate Sellers, Deputy Director & Director of
Development & External Affairs
sellers@cma-oh.org

DENVER ART MUSEUM

100 West 14th Avenue
Denver, CO 80204
Phone: (303) 640-2295
Fax: (303) 640-5928
Lewis Sharp, Director
JMcFarland@denverartmuseum.org

EL MUSÉO DEL BARRIO

1230 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10029
Phone: (212) 831-7272
Fax: (212) 831-7927
Susana Torruella Leval, Executive Director
STLeval@aol.com
Maria Dominguez, Museum Education & Outreach
Coordinator

HAMPTON UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

Marshall Avenue at Shore Road
Hampton, VA 23668
Phone: (804) 727-5308
Fax: (804) 727-5084
Jeanne Zeidler, Director

HEARD MUSEUM

22 East Monte Vista Road
Phoenix, AZ 85004
Phone: (602) 252-8840
Fax: (602) 252-9757
Frank H. Goodyear, Jr., Director
Anne Marshall, Director of Research
amarshall@heard.org
Kim Fuchs, Marketing & Membership Coordinator
kfuchs@heard.org

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Dartmouth College
Hanover, NH 03755
Phone: (603) 646-2808
Fax: (603) 646-1400
Lesley Wellman, Curator of Education
lesley.wellman@dartmouth.edu
Vivian Ladd, School & Community Outreach
Coordinator
vivian.ladd@dartmouth.edu

INDIANAPOLIS MUSEUM OF ART

1200 West 38th Street
 Indianapolis, IN 46208
 Phone: (317) 923-1331
 Fax: (317) 931-1978
 imacindy.net
 Bret Waller, Director
 Carol White, Education Outreach Program Manager
 Susan Longhenry, Director of Education

ISABELLA STEWART GARDNER MUSEUM

2 Palace Road
 Boston, MA 02115
 Phone: (617) 566-1401
 Fax: (617) 566-7653
 Anne Hawley, Director
 ahawley@isgm.org
 Susan Olsen, Director of Development
 solsen@isgm.org

MICHAEL C. CARLOS MUSEUM

Emory University
 571 South Kilgo Street
 Atlanta, GA 30322
 Phone: (404) 727-0573
 Fax: (404) 727-4292
 Anthony G. Hirschel, Director
 aghirsc@emory.edu
 Julie Green, Manager of School Programs
 jgree09@emory.edu
 Elizabeth Hornor, Coordinator of Educational Programs
 ehornor@emory.edu

MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM

750 North Lincoln Memorial Drive
 Milwaukee, WI 53202
 Phone: (414) 224-3200
 Fax: (414) 271-7588
 Russell Bowman, Director
 bowman@mam.org
 Fran Serlin, Director of Audience Development
 serlin@mam.org
 Claudia Mosley, Program Coordinator
 mosley@mam.org

MINNEAPOLIS INSTITUTE OF ARTS

2400 Third Avenue South
 Minneapolis, MN 55404
 Phone: (612) 870-3041
 Fax: (612) 870-3253
 Evan M. Maurer, Director & CEO
 fnelson@artsmia.org

MINT MUSEUM OF ART

2730 Randolph Road
 Charlotte, NC 28207
 Phone: (704) 337-2000
 Fax: (704) 337-2101
 Bruce Evans, President & CEO
 bhevans@mint.uncc.edu
 Carolyn Mints, Director of Community Relations
 camints@mint.uncc.edu
 Cheryl Palmer, Director of Education
 capalmer@mint.uncc.edu

MISSISSIPPI MUSEUM OF ART

201 East Pascagoula Street
 Jackson, MS 39201
 Phone: (601) 960-1515
 Fax: (601) 960-1505
 Andrew Maass, Director
 mmaret@netdoor.com

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART

220 East Chicago Avenue
 Chicago, IL 60611
 Phone: (312) 280-2660
 Fax: (312) 397-4095
 Robert Fitzpatrick, Director and CEO
 fitz@mcchicago.org
 Wendy Woon, Director of Education
 wwoon@mcchicago.org

**MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART,
SAN DIEGO**

700 Prospect Street
 La Jolla, CA 92037-4291
 Phone: (619) 454-3541
 Fax: (619) 454-6985
 Hugh M. Davies, Director
 mcasd@aol.com
 Elizabeth N. Armstrong, Senior Curator
 armstrmca@aol.com
 Jennifer Yancey, Curatorial Programs Assistant
 jennif3578@aol.com

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON

P.O. Box 6826
 Houston, TX 77265
 Phone: (713) 639-7321
 Fax: (713) 639-7399
 Peter Marzio, Director
 pmarzio@mfah.org
 Beth Schneider, Education Director
 bschneid@mfah.org

Mercedes Perez-Meyer, Senior Project Manager
perezmeyer@compuserve.com

THE NEWARK MUSEUM

49 Washington Street
Box 540
Newark, NJ 07101
Phone: (201) 596-6650
Fax: (201) 642-0459
Mary Sue Sweeney Price, Director
msprice@email.njin.net
Ward Mintz, Deputy Director for Programs & Collections
wemintz@email.njin.net
Lucy Brotman, Director of Education
brotman@email.njin.net

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

Benjamin Franklin Parkway
Box 7646
Philadelphia, PA 19101
Phone: (215) 684-7750
Fax: (215) 236-0796
Anne d'Harnoncourt, Director
adh@philamuseum.org
Danielle Rice, Curator of Education
drice@philamuseum.org

ST. LOUIS ART MUSEUM

1 Fine Arts Drive
St. Louis, MO 63110
Phone: (314) 721-0072
Fax: (314) 721-6172
James D. Burke, Director
jburke@slam.org
Rick Simoncelli, Assistant Director
rsimon@slam.org
Elizabeth Vallance, Director of Education
vallance@slam.org

THE TOLEDO MUSEUM OF ART

Box 1013
Toledo, OH 43697
Phone: (419) 255-8000
Fax: (419) 255-5638
Roger Berkowitz, Director
Iris Steinberg, Partnership Liaison
isteinberg@toledomuseum.org

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS

2800 Grove Avenue
Richmond, VA 23221
Phone: (804) 367-0800
Fax: (804) 367-9393
Kathy Schrader, Assistant Director
kschrader@vmfa.state.va.us
Carolyn Adams, Community Relations Director
carolyna@vmfa.stte.va.us

WALKER ART CENTER

Vineland Place
Minneapolis, MN 55403
Phone: (612) 375-7600
Fax: (612) 375-7618
Kathy Halbreich, Director
khalbreich@walker.mus.mn.us
Howard Oransky, Assistant to the Director, Program
Planning
howard@walker.mus.mn.us
Sarah Schultz, Assoc., Director Public & Teen Programs
sarah@walker.mus.mn.us

WALTERS ART GALLERY

600 North Charles Street
Baltimore, MD 21201
Phone: (410) 547-9000
Fax: (410) 783-7969
Gary Vikan, Director

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

55 Salisbury Street
Worcester, MA 01609
Phone: (508) 799-4406
Fax: (508) 798-5646
James A. Welu, Director
jimwelu@worcesterart.org
Honee A. Hess, Director of Education
honeehess@worcesterart.org



Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund

Two Park Avenue, 23rd Floor New
York, NY 10016
Tel: 212 251-9700
Fax: 212 679-6990

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