

Curate your own

Nina Simon finds out about the exciting new membership scheme at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Audience segmentation and research has become a hot topic in museums, especially when it comes to crafting appealing offerings that are customised to different kinds of visitors. Last autumn the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, started offering a new membership called 'Curate Your Own', in which members select one of five specialised 'buckets' of benefits in addition to core admission and discount benefits. This isn't just a prototype and the Whitney expects to transition all basic-level memberships to segmented memberships over the next few years. Nina Simon sat down with Kristen Denner, Director of Membership and Annual Fund, to learn more about the programme's development and the museum's goals for its future.

How did this project start?

It started over a year ago, with a couple of moments of insight. First, we realised that our museum is different from other museums, but our benefits and membership structure were the same as others. We saw an opportunity to really differentiate ourselves, the way we do with our exhibitions and programmes. Our membership programme should be as unique as our institution.

Second, in 2008 and 2009, when the economy dipped and membership renewal rates started to soften, we started to think more seriously about the emotional factor of supporting

the arts in the community. We wanted to find a way to really connect with our members and understand what experiences they value most at the Whitney. And we also wanted to respond to the general consumer desire for customisation. I think museum visitors are ready and eager for museums to catch up to retail and the for-profit world and recognise them as individuals rather than homogeneous groups.

And so we started the first major research project we've done that focuses on membership. We began with focus groups with current and prospective members, asking about their interests and what kinds of experiences they would really value as part of membership. I wanted to test a hypothesis that we should be segmenting our members not by demographics but by interest, in order to foster that emotional connection. And we confirmed that hypothesis. Some experiences completely cut across demographics – some people like parties, some people want a solitary experience with art ... and that solitary-experience person might be 20 years old or they might be 80. People want to experience art in quite individual ways.

How did you end up with the five segments of membership – social, learning, insider, family and philanthropic?

The focus groups revealed these five strong attitudinal segments among members and prospective members.

It was pretty unusual from a research perspective that there weren't just one or two dominant ones – all five of these had robust levels of interest.

Why did you segment the benefits, instead of offering them totally à la carte?

We wanted to do that [à la carte] initially, maybe assigning points to different benefits and letting people have ten points, that kind of thing. But logistically it was just impossible to pull off. It was going to be incredibly difficult to track who had what. After we had brainstormed ideas for benefits, we did quantitative research and were able to rank benefits for different interests. It became really clear that certain benefits really only appealed to some segments. The overlaps we put in the core benefits – everyone wants free admission, for example, and the neighbourhood discounts.

At some institutions, visitors have been turned off by being labelled with a particular segment. It can feel constraining.

We worked carefully to avoid associating the different membership series with words that leaned too strongly toward self-identification. This is definitely a challenge that comes up when you work with attitudinal segmentation. We didn't want to use terms like 'cutting edge' to describe people. Because I like this handbag, I'm 'fashion forward'? I think that's suspect.

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What are your goals for the Curate Your Own Membership?

Our membership base right now is about 12,500, and about 8,000 of those people are at our individual (\$75) or dual (\$120) levels. Curate Your Own (CYO) is \$85 for individuals, \$125 for duals.

Our goal is to sign up 2,000 new CYO members in the next 12 to 18 months, and to convert 25% of those 8,000 current individual and dual members to the new structure. It's not about upselling as much as it is about getting to know more about them and giving them a customised experience. A lot of our current members are excited about this and want to switch. This conversion is really important and it's just the beginning ... our larger goal is to eventually get to 100% of our basic members being CYO members.

How do you plan to change your communication strategy once these segments are in place?

This is really what I'm excited about. Currently, all I know about a basic member is whether they are an individual or a dual. They are one person or two people. That's it. When the CYO membership becomes more prominent, I'm going to know who's interested in which kinds of opportunities. We'll be tailoring e-newsletters and invitations to different groups. It will cut down on waste both environmentally and financially, and we'll be able to communicate relevant information to our members, which is a better experience for them too.



What were the biggest challenges of this project?

Funding a research project that was serious. We had never done a real research project in membership before. It was a really worthwhile investment, especially as the museum is moving to a new building soon. And then the other thing that was challenging was just the logistics of coordinating all the different departments to come together and make this happen. We had so many smart people from education, curatorial, web and operations helping us, and we just had to make sure the project was institutionally supported and that we could really make it happen. ●



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Nina talked with Kristen Denner, Director of Membership and Annual Fund, The Whitney Museum of American Art

The full interview can be read at <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2010/09/curate-your-own-membership-interview.html>