
The Art of Relevance

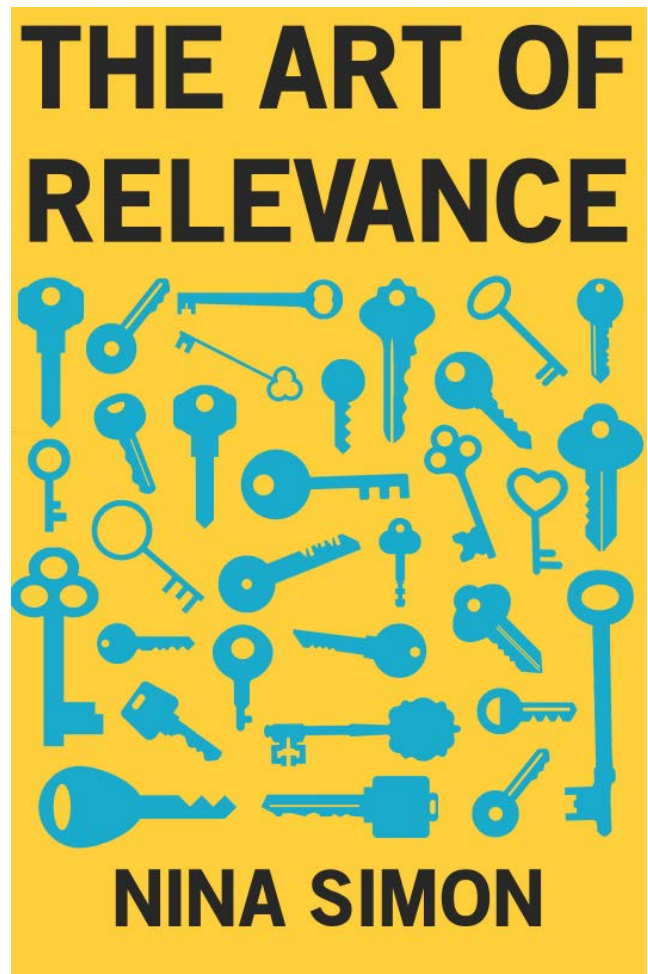
Reviewed by Christina Ferwerda

In the last several years, the word “relevance” has become a cultural buzzword, used to describe and evaluate everything from Google[®] advertising copy to the latest album by the rapper Snoop Dogg.

As museum professionals, many of us embrace the term wholeheartedly, using it to question our institutions’ mission statements, family programs, and more. Are they “relevant”?

Broadly, the term “relevance” describes our search to connect with audiences – to understand how they relate to the collections or experiences we offer, especially as technology and generational shifts alter the way we communicate with and listen to them – and to have an impact on their lives. But “relevance” is a big term, and it can mean different things to different people working in the museum field. For long-time audience advocate Nina Simon, relevance is a key that can unlock powerful museum experiences, and her new book explores this concept in a provocative, insightful way.

For those familiar with Simon’s blog, *Museums 2.0*, her book, *The Art of Relevance*, might initially feel a bit like binge-watching your favorite television show on Netflix[®]. Short chapters reflect her incisive and punchy writing style, and the theme stays true to her participatory, community-focused roots. However, mistaking it as a big chunk of her blog writing in one massive download would be missing the point. This work takes the charge of really describing how to “do” relevance in a museum, almost as a trial-and-error case study played out over Simon’s work as the Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History.



The Art of Relevance

Nina Simon

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191 pages

The book begins on a note that will feel familiar to those of us who've worked in a museum's education or visitor services departments: Simon is traveling to a surfing demonstration hosted by her institution, and wondering about the attendance and outcome. Will the people come? Will they like the event? Simon captures the anticipation, concern, and (in this case) the elation of success that are recognizable to readers who work as educators, directors, and exhibition professionals. The story flows into a thoughtful deconstruction of how the museum's 2015 exhibition, *Princes of Surf*, changed Simon's personal and professional life, and inspired her to think critically about how to create relevance.

The first part of the book introduces the cognitive science that helps to decipher what a relevant experience is, setting apart the book's purpose from the pop-culture definition of "Who's hot. What's trending." Simon identifies two leading theorists who study relevance, and explores their criteria for a relevant experience. They identify positive cognitive effect, i.e. when something has meaning or makes a difference in your life as a marker of relevance, and assert that lower effort to obtain this effect results in a higher degree of relevance. Along with the scientific theory, examples establish clear guidelines of what relevance is, before delving into the sticky business of creating it.

Part guidebook and part reflection, the rest of *The Art of Relevance* heavily relies on the metaphor of a key and a locked door to describe the visitor experience, and the methods we can use to provide more access (more doors and more keys) to the museum. The short, clever chapters illuminate several aspects of creating that access (for example, how to attract museum "outsiders," understanding needs of diverse communities, or how to create asset-based programming) that Simon ponders in relationship to her institution.

In many cases, this work unpacks issues that are likely familiar to educators and interpretive staff. For many of us, the idea that the museum should be "inviting people in their terms, with generosity, humility, and a nod to what speaks to them" is not new. However, at times these explorations create interesting revelations and analogies around well-known challenges: her description of the British organization Maths on Toast shows how topics long considered boring can be attractive and relevant to audiences while aligning with an institution's mission. This aspect of the book makes it a great primer for students and newcomers to education, interpretation, and visitor services.

To explore relevance in a deeper, broader fashion, Simon often juxtaposes the issues she ponders in the book with examples from outside the museum realm to illustrate how other organizations or experiences can be made to be meaningful, relevant parts of people's lives. Peppered with personal stories and detailed profiles of organization – like the San-Francisco-based Odyssey Works performance collective, which she highlights for its highly personalized, audience-forward creative process) – these examples are especially engaging. Reading Simon's personal reflections is a journey all its own, and in them I found several new, inspirational approaches to audience and community engagement.

Even for professionals with strong backgrounds in education or audience advocacy, parts of the book are still new and unexpected. A very small but very resonant example: I never thought I would hear someone suggest that public events could be better without offering food, but in *The Art of Relevance*, Nina Simon methodically explores how programs at her institution are improved without the distraction. There are additional ideas that feel new and radical, such as her assertion that fun is mostly irrelevant



to teaching math and science, or the idea that programming for target audiences is contrary to the public mandate at many institutions. These glimpses of innovation feel like the high points of the book, where she is challenging the conventional approaches to creating museum exhibitions and programs.

Simon has done the hard work of being willing to try something new based on her investigations (and by association, being willing to fail) in order to provide an example of how programs might be more relevant to audiences. This strength to her case is also something of a limitation. Simon is able to experiment because she has set the institutional culture as fail-forward. For individuals in a large and slow-to-change institution, having a documented case to illustrate that a change has worked somewhere else is invaluable, but it is hard to imagine being able to implement some of these strategies without strong support from high levels of management.

Seeing that Simon draws from a wide net of inspiration in deciphering how to be a relevant institution is just one way that the book provides a window into the way that she thinks and plans. In contrast to her blog, *The Art of Relevance* is a deeper dive into a bigger question. The question of relevance is an evergreen concern that will continue to shape museum work long into the future. Museums want to be relevant now, and will want to be relevant to future generations. In this book, we get to follow the path that one person takes to think and rethink how to approach this concern. To me, this is one of the most interesting aspects of the book: it gives us a focused look at how Nina Simon approaches the long-term sustainability of her institution.

It is a book I know I will return to, as a professional working at the intersection of exhibitions and

programs, to help me think and rethink some of the challenging projects ahead – as we all strive to create more relevant museum experiences. ■

Christina Joy Ferwerda is an independent exhibit and curriculum developer in New York City.
christina.ferwerda@gmail.com

