



# My TripAdvisor: Mining Social Media for Visitors'

## Perceptions of Museums vs. Attractions

by Elizabeth L. Maurer

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The International Council of Museums (ICOM) defines a museum as “a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment” (ICOM, 2007). Visitors would not be expected to know or necessarily care about the technical definition of a museum. Instead, visitors define a museum based on personal criteria. If the visit does not match their expectations, they may conclude that an organization that ICOM defines as a museum is not, in fact, a museum.

Many non-museums have adopted museum identities or presentation techniques. They include web sites organizations that stage exhibitions to advance a point of view, groups that build exhibitions with a profit motive, and businesses exhibiting corporate history. Many organizations that in the past would have identified themselves as attractions have adopted museum labels for marketing purposes. Many museums concurrently have borrowed presentation techniques pioneered by attractions and gaming. As attractions have sought to present themselves as museums and museums use attraction-like techniques it is natural that their distinctions would blur.

This paper examines visitors' statements about visits to museums and museum-like organizations to explore their definition of a museum and evaluate how the organizations meet expectations. The paper further discusses why visitor perceptions are important for museums to examine, understand, and react to in their practices. Four organizations were

selected: the International Spy Museum, Colonial Williamsburg, the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum (NASM), and the World of Coca-Cola. Colonial Williamsburg and NASM fit ICOM's definition of a museum. The International Spy Museum self-identifies as a museum; though, as a for-profit business, according to ICOM, it is a museum-like entity. The World of Coca-Cola does not self-identify as a museum but is categorized as one by tourism organizations and uses museum presentation techniques.

### **The Organizations in the Study**

#### ***The Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum***

The National Air and Space Museum commemorates the national development of aviation and spaceflight while educating and inspiring the nation (Office of Communications, National Air and Space Museum, n.d.). The National Mall location welcomes more than nine million visitors a year, making it the most visited museum in the world.

#### ***International Spy Museum***

The International Spy Museum is a for-profit organization in Washington, DC. The organization describes its mission as educating the public about espionage while fostering understanding about its role in history (Spy Museum, n.d.). The average annual attendance was reported in 2008 to be 670,000 visitors (Trescott, 2008).

#### ***Colonial Williamsburg Foundation***

Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum in Williamsburg, VA, was established as a private, not for profit, educational organization to preserve Williamsburg's colonial-era buildings and to educate Americans about the

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revolutionary era (Colonial Williamsburg, n.d., *History*). Paid general admission in 2009 was 660,000 visitors (Campbell, n.d. *President's Report*).

### The World of Coca-Cola

The World of Coca-Cola opened in Atlanta, GA in 2007. The organization describes itself as a “place where you can explore the complete story—past, present, and future—of the world’s best known brand” (Coca-Cola, n.d., *About Us*). The tour is advertised as including 1,200 artifacts that include the world’s largest collection of Coke memorabilia and world class, pop culture artwork. The visitation is not published; however, the company planned for an annual visitation of one million.

### Study Methodology

The research data were drawn from reviews posted on TripAdvisor, the largest travel site on the web and the first to attract 40 million unique visitors a month (TripAdvisor, 2010). The site boasts information about visit experiences posted by thousands of museum visitors. TripAdvisor reviews are available for hundreds of museums and attractions, but—more importantly—the information is collected systematically. Only registered users post reviews. When setting up an account, users are asked to report age, gender, and place of residence, and many do. For this study, where possible, a minimum of 100 reviews was downloaded and analyzed for each organization. (Only NASM did not have 100 reviews posted within the last three years.) The reviews were pasted into an Access database and coded according to several factors. The coded data were analyzed using SPSS statistical software to determine the frequencies of visitors’ self-reported experiences.

Conclusions were based upon analysis of the numerical averages combined with the narrative evaluations. TripAdvisor asks reviewers to post a single rating for a site based on a scale between 1 (low) and 5 (high). As the site does not provide rating criteria, it is not always possible to isolate the specific factors that contributed to each rating. The narratives in “3” ratings were more negative than positive, leading to the conclusion that 3 and below is a negative rating.

**Table 1: TripAdvisor Ratings of Subject Organizations by Subgroup**

National Air and Space Museum				International Spy Museum			
Respondents		Average Rating	Rated a 4 or 5	Respondents	Percent of Audience	Average Rating	Rated a 4 or 5
All	68	4	76%	All	105	3	49%
Men	31%	4	90%	Men	25%	3.4	54%
Women	38%	3	50%	Women	41%	3.4	77%
Unknown	31%	4.5	77%	Unknown	34%	3	42%
Parents	15%	3.5	50%	Parents	30%	3.3	53%
Exhibits Dated	16%	3	44%	Exhibits broken	8%	2.5	13%
Crowded	37%	4	67%	Crowded	28%	2.8	28%
				Cost too high	29%	2.4	13%
Median Rating 4.16				Median Rating 3.27			
Colonial Williamsburg				World of Coca-cola			
Respondents	Percent of Audience	Average Rating	Rated a 4 or 5	Respondents	Percent of Audience	Average Rating	Rated a 4 or 5
All	125	4	73%	All	100	4	65%
Men	22%	4	64%	Men	30%	3.5	53%
Women	51%	4	75%	Women	47%	4	79%
Unknown	27%	4	74%	Unknown	23%	3.1	52%
Parents	31%	4	69%	Parents	23%	4	74%
Cost too high	18%	2.6	13%	Cost too high	25%	3.6	60%
				Crowded	14%	3	36%
Median Rating 4.06				Median Rating 4			

Note: TripAdvisor reviewers rate sites on a scale of 1 to 5 with one being low and five being high.

Courtesy of Elizabeth Maurer.

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(continued from page 29)

People using social media to rate and rank products and services have become increasingly important in influencing consumer decision-making.<sup>1</sup> An independent study by Yoo and Gretzel (2008) found that 97.7% of internet users planning trips used travel review web sites to make decisions. A TripAdvisor-funded study concluded that people who read online reviews believe they provide more up-to-date and reliable information than travel professionals. Eighty percent of respondents believed that the information helped them to make better travel choices by avoiding hotels, restaurants, and activities that they might not enjoy (Gretzel, 2007).

Reviewers broadcast their opinions using social media. They provide a lot of detail to make their arguments and influence others. The level of detail in reviews allows the subject organizations to better understand what their current visitors think of them. They may ask themselves: What are the perceptions of our organization's goals and purposes? Are we meeting expectations? How might we change perceptions? Are there changes that we want to make based on contributions to social media? This is important because organizations can change their marketing to better emphasize or de-emphasize their "museum-ness."

### **Visitor Opinions of "Real" Museum Experiences**

This study views museums and attractions at opposite ends of a spectrum. The TripAdvisor data shows that visitors to each of the four organizations perceived them at different points along the spectrum. Several aspects of a visit influenced whether people saw the organization as a museum or a tourist attraction. While there are many different factors that influence visitor

perception including marketing, reputation, and presentation technique, this paper will focus on three: admission, accessibility, and educational experience. Based on these criteria, NASM lies on the museum end. World of Coca-Cola lies near the attraction end, though with museum-like aspects. Colonial Williamsburg and the Spy Museum fall in the middle with some seeing them as either more museum-like or attraction-like.

### **Cost and Commercialism**

Cost was the most significant factor in determining whether people viewed an organization as a museum or an attraction. While cost was never the sole factor, admission fees highly influenced perceptions. When visitors felt that the experience was not worth the cost or that the organization valued the admission over their experience, they dismissed it as a "tourist trap." Free entry strongly reinforced the perception of a museum.

NASM does not charge admission, and, though visitors criticized many aspects of the experience, it was the highest rated and most often described in museum-like terms. Visitors understood that the free admission to NASM affected the quality of their experience through crowding and worn out exhibits, but the free admission made it more museum-like. "Yes, its crowded. Yes, its old. Yes, it's a must see/do attraction. This place is just amazing. Remember [sic] is FREE!!" They were less accepting of the paid experiences in the museum. More than half who participated in paid programs including the planetarium show, flight simulators, and IMAX movies were critical of them saying that they were not worth the extra cost and were commercial.

In the three admission-charging organizations, visitors consistently linked the value of the experience to cost. Twenty-nine percent of the Spy Museum respondents said that admission was too high, the largest percentage of all four. In November 2010, the Spy Museum's advertised admission was \$18 per adult with a discount for children aged 11 and under. (Spy Museum, n.d.) The largest segment of Spy Museum complaints, 28%, was about crowding. A full 80% of the visitors who complained about crowds also complained about admission prices.

If it had been free I might not mind missing out on 3/4 of the exhibits as much, but paying \$18 for the privilege of cramming my way through a mass of hot, sweaty bodies and not being able to comfortably enjoy any single exhibit without getting pressured to move on or someone breathing down my neck makes this a big lesson learned!

Others expressed dissatisfaction that the experience did not match the expectations set by marketing, such, "So we thought that a game was starting and that we would indeed 'have a mission' ...What a deception! There are indeed some stands near the exit where you can test if you remember your identity but nothing more." The visitors who found it highly interactive and not crowded were more likely to say that the experience was worth the admission.

This was also the case at Colonial Williamsburg where 18% of the reviewers wrote that the ticket prices were too high. Their most common complaints were about rude staff and a dearth of exhibition buildings. Many found the retail shops to be more numerous and prominently located than the exhibitions and concluded that Colonial Williamsburg consisted mainly of colonial retail stores. When this was the case, they equated it with being an attraction. Visitors who rated the site a 1 or a 2 consistently said that the ticket prices were too high. The ticket price did not by itself lead to dissatisfaction; rather it was the cost in conjunction with accessing the educational experience.

Many World of Coca-Cola visitors complained that the tour was overly commercial (24%) and repeatedly compared it to a Coke advertisement. Twenty-five percent said that the admission was too high. While some visitors may not have had prior knowledge of the content, many had no objections to the commercial message. Though some felt the cost was too high, it had a limited effect on visitor ratings. Sixty percent of the people who complained about the cost rated the museum a 4 or a 5, which was a higher percentage than for Colonial Williamsburg or the Spy Museum. Though they complained of commercialism, the majority of visitors understood that World of Coca-Cola's mission was to promote the brand. Many described it as a corporate museum. Charging admission does not

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(continued from page 31)

automatically signal that an organization is not a museum. Visitors accept admission fees when they feel that they receive value for money, but even in a free museum visitors question whether paid segments add value. They often link the visit's value to accessibility and content. If they think that the organization is more interested in revenue than the visitor experience, they re-categorize it as an attraction. Based on this conclusion, organizations that charge admission may find several issues to consider. Do visitors feel that they are receiving the expected experience? Do visitors feel welcome? Do visitors feel that the organization has a commercial purpose or an educational purpose?

### **Accessibility**

Visitors reported that accessibility was a prerequisite to facilitating learning and enhancing enjoyment. Visitors made value judgments as to why organizations were more or less accessible. When they concluded that lack of accessibility could be blamed on internal factors such as poor management or a commercial intent, they tended to view the organization as an attraction. When they concluded that inaccessibility could be blamed on factors such as free admission or in-depth content, they saw the organization as being more like a museum.

Crowding and worn/broken exhibits were repeatedly cited as negative accessibility factors at NASM and the Spy Museum. While 37% of NASM's reviewers said that it was crowded and 23% wrote of crowding at the Spy Museum, visitors assessed the reasons differently. Several NASM visitors pointed out that the free admission explained although did not excuse the crowding and/or broken exhibits, and therefore was a mitigating factor in their evaluations. Seventy-two percent of people who complained

about accessibility at NASM rated the museum either a 4 or a 5.

The Spy Museum's reviewers were influenced by physical accessibility. Among those who cited a negative impact of crowding, three quarters rated the museum as a 3 or lower. The Spy Museum's visitors blamed crowding on management that allowed too many people inside. As one visitor wrote,

We would not have paid over \$50 to get in if we had known we wouldn't even get to experience most of the museums interactive stations due to the large crowds of people that just kept flowing out of the elevators.

Visitors also wrote that exhibit components such as a climbing tube and computer interactives encouraged children to run wild, which detracted from the museum-like nature of the visit. When visitors equated low accessibility with poor management and high admission, they were more likely to view the organization as an attraction.

The amount of content also influenced perceptions. Organizations with more in-depth or scholarly content were seen as being more museum-like while somewhat less cognitively accessible. NASM was seen by visitors as having in-depth content, which made it less accessible to people who were not already interested in the topic. NASM was the most likely to be described as "boring," but the scholarly content rendered it *more* museum-like. At Colonial Williamsburg many reviewers with children wrote that the organization was difficult for children to access. The information was either too complex or the experience was not structured for children's attention spans. "Hard for young ones who

are tired, hot, and not impressed/entertained (4-11 yr. olds were bored). More for the avid historian adult.” Even though parents rated Colonial Williamsburg lower than non-parents, 69% of them still rated it a 4 or 5. While it may have been difficult for children to access, the adults noted that the scholarly content made it more museum-like. Adults enjoyed it more than children.

Accessibility played a role in visitors’ perceptions of whether an organization was a museum or not as did the reasons for high or low access. Visitors to NASM recognized the museum as being inaccessible but excused it because it was free and scholarly. This was not the case with the admission-based organizations. Spy Museum visitors described lack of physical access to exhibits as making it less museum-like and more attraction-like because they perceived that collecting admission was more important than visitor experience. Though Colonial Williamsburg’s visitors noted that the scholarly content was not accessible to children, they did not see the lack of accessibility as making it less museum-like. Instead the depth of content made it more museum-like. As noted in the **Cost** section, Colonial Williamsburg visitors who were not well-oriented tended to characterize it as attraction. Accessibility became an important factor in visitors’ perceptions of whether an organization was an attraction rather than a museum when accessibility was correlated with cost and content. Using TripAdvisor reviews, organizations can reevaluate entry procedures or methods of communication. Knowing which segments of visitors are not being reached also allows organizations to develop better, more targeted staff training.

### **Educational Experience**

TripAdvisor reviewers discussed their visits in blow-by-blow detail. They described everything from the order in which they visited exhibits to orientation film plot lines. Within these descriptions lies valuable information regarding their perceptions of the level of content and educational engagement. As we saw in the **Accessibility** section, visitors perceived organizations that offered more scholarly content as being more museum-like. In order to measure their perceptions of learning, the frequency with which visitors described the educational/content aspects of their visits was coded for this study and averaged across the population. The educational ratings did not correlate to TripAdvisor’s numerical ratings. An organization may be fun to visit and receive a high rating but not be seen as educational and vice versa.

NASM was highest rated on TripAdvisor, in this study, with a median rating of 4.16. Its visitors expressed an average of 2.2 education comments apiece. Almost one third of the comments were about information they learned or artifacts that inspired them. As only 7% of the respondents wrote positively about the ways in which information was delivered (e.g. programs, tours, exhibit components, interactives, etc.), it was clear that interacting with “real” artifacts, i.e. the content, was the highlight. In contrast, Spy Museum visitors more often wrote about the *way* the experience was delivered. The Spy Museum’s median TripAdvisor rating was 3.27. While the average number of educational words per visitor was 2.2, like NASM’s, 44% of reviewers made *no* reference to content/education. This was unique in that the educational comments were more evenly distributed among reviewers of the other

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## When carefully deconstructed, sites like TripAdvisor provide valuable insight.

(continued from page 33)

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three organizations. There was a division among the Spy Museum's reviewers who reported learning and those who did not. Some said that the exhibits lacked focus, while as was noted in the **Cost** and **Accessibility** sections, many had difficulty interacting with them. Others said that the content was superficial and sometimes incorrect. Yet, the Spy Museum's visitors were much more likely than NASM's to say that the visit was fun.

The method of content delivery may influence how visitors report their educational encounters. Colonial Williamsburg's reviewers averaged 4.7 educational comments, twice the total for any other organization. Though its median TripAdvisor rating of 4.06 was lower than NASM's, visitors appear to have found it more educational. Even among those who were critical or found it commercial almost all mentioned things that they learned. Unlike the other three museums, Colonial Williamsburg's visitors access content through interaction with front line staff rather than static exhibits. The interpersonal delivery method may be more influential in visitor-reported learning.

Visitors to the World of Coca-Cola also reflected educational experiences in their reviews at a higher rate than NASM or Spy Museum, at 2.8 each. The median TripAdvisor rating was 4.0, which was less than NASM but higher than Spy Museum. Coca-Cola's visitors may have responded to the highly focused exhibition. Comments demonstrated that the exhibition was successful in conveying a sense of Coca-Cola's brand, though not of soda generally. Many of Coca-Cola's visitors acknowledged the narrow perspective but still cited learning new, if not complex, information. The most popular exhibit was the *Taste It!* room in which visitors

had unlimited access to 64 different sodas from around the world. Sixty-nine percent of reviewers listed *Taste It!* as a highlight, more than any other element in any of the other organizations. Visitors reported learning from *Taste It!* that all taste buds are different. The lack of depth, though, was apparent in visitor comments wondering *why* taste buds are different, and a few expressly noted the absence of a world context to explain the differences. The World of Coca-Cola exhibition is highly experiential, and many visitors liked the aspects that engaged their senses. Coca-Cola was the only organization in which adults with children rated the experience higher than those without children. Though learning occurred, the overall rating was more influenced by the fun aspects of the tour than the depth of learning.

The techniques that museums use to convey content are important factors that influence visitor learning. Highly experiential exhibits that are also highly focused appear to engender more learning than those that are less experiential and less focused. Visitors who characterized Colonial Williamsburg and Coca-Cola as commercial still reported learning, which was likely due to their presentation techniques. NASM reviewers rated it a better overall place to visit but described less learning. Learning alone does not determine whether people view an organization as a museum because reviewers do not see learning as exclusive to non-commercial settings. The presence of scholarly content is more determinative of whether an organization is viewed as museum-like. Lack of content coupled with less engaging presentation techniques make an organization appear less museum-like. All organizations that want to promote learning can draw upon these observations. Providing highly

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focused content in an experiential manner promotes self reported learning. The depth of learning is predicated upon depth of content. Traditional museums may want to consider adapting the techniques of highly sensory exhibits such as Coca-Cola's *Taste It!* to reach more visitors.

### Conclusions

Reviewers on TripAdvisor described their visits to four organizations quite differently. They indicated that a wide variety of factors influenced their perceptions of whether each was a museum. Free organizations were more likely to be viewed as museum-like than those that charged admission. Difficulty in accessing exhibits at admission-based organizations reinforced perceptions that they were less museum-like. Commercialism was more determinative of perception than learning because visitors saw commercial entities as capable of being educational. While learning was not as determinative, depth of content was. Presenting scholarly content makes an

organization appear more museum-like while superficial or incorrect content leads to the opposite assessment.

Visitor evaluations on TripAdvisor are self-reported and are not necessarily representative of the feelings of all visitors to an organization. Comprehensive visitor surveys may yield different perception data. However, because TripAdvisor reviewers use social media to share their points-of-view, their opinions can have important impact. As studies indicate, large numbers of potential visitors use social media to make visit decisions. As social media continues to grow in influence, and as the number of reviews rises, organizations will find that the on-line opinions will only grow in impact. Organizations that seek to influence their identification as museums must be vigilant in assessing and responding to visitors' perceptions. When carefully deconstructed, sites like TripAdvisor provide valuable insight. Visitors freely offer their opinions, and organizations would be wise to listen. ✨

### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup> Research in this area is increasing. Suggested readings include: Bailey, A.A. (Fall 2005). Consumer awareness and use of product review ebsites. *Journal of Interactive Advertising* 6,(1). ; Vermeulen, I.E. and Seegers, D.(February 2009). Tried and tested: The impact of online hotel reviews on consumer consideration. *Tourism Management*, 30 (1), 123-127; and Huang, P., Lurie, N.H., and Mitra, S. (March 2009). Searching for experience on the web: An empirical examination of consumer behavior for search and experience Goods. *Journal of Marketing*, 73(2), 55-69.

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