

# **The Process and Effects of Word-of-Mouth Communication In A Museum Setting**

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So far as I can determine, the exploratory study reported here was the first to assess word-of-mouth (WOM) accuracy and influence in a museum setting and the first to apply the subject to the practice of public relations. The study was conducted in 1988 and 1989 as the basis for a public relations graduate thesis, which is available at the Boston University Mugar Library (Adams, 1989). Several questions were addressed. Is WOM the most prevalent factor in making people aware of a museum and in influencing them to visit? Are a museum's publicity and advertising theme and its stated educational mission accurately communicated through WOM? Following a visit to a museum, will people, in their WOM, say to others the same things they heard via WOM before their visit? Will visitors talk more to others about those things they heard by WOM that also were confirmed by the visit? In the current practice of public relations at museums, are there strategies being used to stimulate an accurate and a positive WOM?

Is there a flow of effects? That is, do positive pre-visit WOM recommendations about specific aspects of a museum visit influence the meeting of expectations regarding those aspects on site and stimulate the mention of those aspects in post-visit WOM?

This study was intended to be a starting point for developing methodologies to make qualitative assessments of museum WOM. It was hoped that it would stimulate work on a body of research that would inform the conduct of public relations in settings that are dominated by WOM communication.

## **The Importance of Word Of Mouth (WOM)**

The easiest part of the study involved documenting the importance of WOM. A review of data collected over a several year period involving Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village (HFM/GV) precipitated this inquiry into the process and effects of WOM. The dominance of WOM as the vehicle by which people heard about HFM/GV, ranging from 64% to 74% in the period 1980-1988, prompted a search for corroborative data.

This search was conducted at Colonial Williamsburg from August 5 to September 17, 1988 when 82% of their first-time visitors were found to

have heard about Colonial Williamsburg by WOM only. WOM was cited as most influential in the decision to visit by 74%. Among repeat visitors, 46% cited WOM as the way they were reminded of Colonial Williamsburg, and 35% said WOM was most influential in their decision to revisit.

A mail-back questionnaire study of 1,400 HFM/GV visitors during July through September, 1988 showed that 84% of first-time visitors heard about the museum by WOM and that for 70% WOM was most influential in their decision to visit. Among repeat visitors, 66% said WOM was how they were reminded about the museum. It was most influential in their decision to revisit for 51% of them.

An assortment of data, gathered as part of a variety of studies by other museums, further corroborated the importance of WOM. In the summer of 1980, when Brandywine River Museum visitors were asked how they became aware of the art museum, 74.9% checked WOM (Slowik, 1980). The Conner Prairie outdoor history museum posed the same question to its visitors in 1984, and 48% said they heard about it by WOM (Conner Prairie, 1982, 1986). Similar results were obtained at the Anniston Museum of Natural History in 1986 (Bitgood, Patterson, & Nichols, 1986), where 63% of visitors reported WOM was the most common way of hearing about the museum. At Biltmore Estate, 60.1% claimed WOM as the way they heard about the house museum during the summer of 1987 (Biltmore Estate, 1987). The Museums at Stony Brook (Museums at Stony Brook, 1976-84, 1987, 1988) tracked how people heard about them over an eleven year period. Their data showed WOM as the most dominant source of awareness, averaging 42% over the years from 1976 to 1988.

A further understanding of the importance of WOM was gained by comparing it to publicity and advertising, both in making people aware of museums and in influencing them to visit. The small number of museums cited is due to the infrequency with which museums track this information. WOM made 58% of the visitors to eight museums aware of the museums, publicity only 12%. Among the four museums that had influence data, WOM was most influential in the decision to visit for 52%, publicity for only 9%.

It follows that a public relations program that is aimed at increasing attendance and is mindful of the potency of WOM should be organized around strategies to produce satisfied visitors, and that central concerns of a museum's public relations practitioner in such a program should be: producing pre-visit messages that create accurate expectations; participating in planning the on-site visiting experience, making sure that public expectations are considered; and recommending refinements in the on-site programs that reflect both the data from ongoing visitor research and the need to accommodate the public within the museum's stated educational goals.

Or as Charles Longworth, President of Colonial Williamsburg, said in his 1987 President's Report (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 1987): "I

think of quality in two ways. First, it is meeting our visitors' expectations. For Colonial Williamsburg, with its tradition of excellence, it is exceeding them."

This suggests that public relations strategies might be organized around three phases in the visitor experience – each influenced by the preceding stage: gathering consumers' post-visit impressions; inputting these impressions into the on-site program planning process; and communicating the benefits of a visit to prospective customers.

### **WOM Study at Henry Ford Museum/ Greenfield Village (HFM/GV)**

To address the WOM issues that might be involved in this approach to public relations, questionnaires were administered to 400 HFM/GV visitors who had been made aware of the museum by WOM and had been most influenced to visit by WOM. The line of questions involved how WOM functions in the museum setting. Are those who are exposed to WOM receiving accurate messages? What impact does pre-visit WOM have upon satisfaction during the visit? What impact does it have upon what visitors are communicating to others later on?

To make a qualitative assessment of the questionnaire responses, they were measured against HFM/GV's stated educational mission and its publicity/advertising theme. The museum's educational mission, stated in simplest terms, is to tell how technology influenced America's change from a rural, agrarian to an urban, industrial nation. The museum's publicity/advertising theme is, "HFM/GV – The Great American Museum That's Also Great Fun." This theme was developed through extensive focus group and other kinds of research and represents the visitors' own impressions of the museum's product.

Regarding the educational mission, survey participants were provided with a list of choices, which were identified as themes, and asked which had been conveyed to them by WOM. Two were correct: "How technology influenced their lives" was one specific aspect of the mission; "How America changed from farm to urban," was a statement of the overall mission.

The outcomes regarding the mission: "How technology influenced their lives" was number one in what respondents heard in their pre-visit WOM. "How America changed from farm to urban" was fifth. (Table 1 a.)

When asked which is the theme that was communicated to you as most dominant, "How technology influenced . . ." still was number one. "How America changed . . ." moved up to fourth. (Table 1 b.)

When asked which did you perceive during your visit and mention to others, "How technology influenced . . ." remained number one; "How America changed . . ." remained fourth. (Table 1 c.)

Finally, when asked which theme you feel is most dominant, "How technology influenced . . ." still was number one, but "How America changed . . ." moved up to second. (Table 1 d.)

Clearly, the "How technology influenced . . ." aspect of the overall "How America changed . . ." educational mission was what HFM/GV visitors heard pre-visit and told others about post-visit. Moreover, visitors perceived the correct overall educational mission theme with greater frequency once on-site and carried that descriptor into the WOM that they communicated to others.

In another section of the questionnaire, twelve aspects of HFM/GV were listed, two of which, "fun experience," and "an important American museum," correctly represented the market position that had been addressed in the museum's marketing and promotion. "Fun experience" was the number one aspect mentioned to respondents in their WOM; "an important museum" was fifth for HFM, seventh for GV (Table 2 a & 2 b). "Fun experience" was most important in the decision to visit while "an important museum" moved up to third (Table 2 c). "Fun experience" was first in meeting or exceeding expectations; "an important museum" was fourth (Table 2 d). "Fun experience" was first among aspects they mentioned to others; "an important museum" was sixth (Table 2 e).

These data did not confirm a clear flow of effects. However, they suggest that WOM is at work, at least in this museum case study. In terms of response percentages, half of the HFM/GV visitors indicated that they were exposed to the correct marketing and public relations position and educational mission in the WOM they received and that they went on to mention these aspects to others.

The study revealed that both WOM and on-site experience were consistent with the "fun experience" half of the market position, but the sense of "an important museum" was less clear.

When addressing the meeting or exceeding of expectations, the "important museum" did increase in rank by one position, but dropped by two positions in the frequency of what visitors mentioned to others.

The market position did not confirm a clear flow of effects. What was intended to be communicated by publicity and advertising and what most met expectations were not necessarily what was communicated by visitors in their post-visit WOM.

In spite of its inconclusiveness, the study seemed to say not only that improvements in the accuracy of a museum's WOM needed to be made, but also that they could be made by bringing marketing and publicity themes into greater consistency with on-site public programs and by focusing those programs on a museum's educational mission. Also, it seemed to call for better monitoring of visitors' expectations and impressions to enable the making of course corrections where possible.

## The Role of the Public Relations Practitioner

From the final section of the study, I concluded that these concerns should be of greater influence in the practice of public relations at museums. Questionnaires completed by 89 institutions that hold membership in the American Association of Museums Committee on Public Relations and Communications were the basis for assessing the current practice of museum public relations. The scope of the current practice was set out by asking for public relations time allocations. Publicizing special events and exhibits was the area in which most practitioners were spending most of their time, followed by responding to requests for information initiated by the media, then queries to the media with story ideas, then writing copy for publications that are produced by the museum, and finally researching the museum's key publics to determine their impressions of the museum and its programs. ( See Table 3.)

Somewhat alarmingly, with the exception of publicizing short-term programs, it appears that pre-visit messages conveyed by the museum may be comprised mostly of stories developed in response to ideas initiated by the media. Under such circumstances, the media is greatly influencing the agenda of what is being said about the museum, sometimes making it very difficult to be proactive in building public awareness of the museum's marketing position and educational mission. When public relations practitioners have fully internalized the thinking behind a museum's stated mission by participating in the mission's development, they are better prepared to establish extensions of the mission through stories that they present to the media and through information given in response to ideas generated by the media.

Public relations practitioners were asked how often they were included in meetings where a number of different activities were discussed. It was discouraging to find that in subject areas most related to the on-site visitor experience, they were involved only about half the time or less. The same was the case when respondents were asked to describe areas in which they were very involved in providing an ongoing assessment: educational mission, only 28%; visitor impact on new exhibit ideas prior to the construction of the exhibit, only 14%; visitor assessment of new exhibits, only 30%; strategies for learning about the opinions of key museum publics, 59%; and hospitality training of public contact employees, 25%. That the involvement of a museum's public relations specialists would be of value in assessing plans and implementing strategies in these areas is too often overlooked by museum directors.

The museum public relations specialists were asked to indicate the pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit areas in which they thought they were very influential. Seventy-three percent felt they were very influential pre-visit, but only 31% felt influential on-site, and 25% post-visit. Only 26% felt they were very influential at focusing the museum's public programs on a

clear mission. Forty-five percent felt very influential at stimulating visitors to broadcast a favorable WOM after their visit. However, history museum public relations practitioners rated themselves as very influential in the pre-, on-site, and post-visit components of their museum's management, with more than twice the frequency of their art museum colleagues. Perhaps the first step in making better use of a public relations person's knowledge of a museum's relationship with its public is to structure the creating, implementing, promoting and evaluating of the museum's public programs around pre-, on-site and post-visit components, each staffed by a team that includes a public relations person.

For the most part, the practice of public relations in museums is cast in the very narrow role of publicist. The museum public relations practitioners' involvement in institutional management generally is limited to short-term special events and exhibits that need publicity to attract an audience and to answering questions from the media. Public relations usually is absent from opportunities to contribute to planning discussions about the initiatives that shape the visitor experience long-term, such as permanent exhibit reinstallation, capital improvement, and educational mission refinements. In other words, museum public relations practitioners are largely divorced from their museum's product.

If public relations practitioners were involved in these areas, their contributions would not be informed by a good knowledge of the museum's visitors in most cases. Nearly all respondents spent less than 5% of their time researching the museum's key publics to learn about their impressions of the museum. Only 22% had engaged in visitor research. Only a very few museums have others on their overall staff involved in this kind of research. Clearly, this is not a case of where this work is absent from public relations because it is being done by other departments in the museum. In most cases, it simply is not being done at the participating museums. The respondents summed it up when fewer than half indicated that they were very influential in stimulating visitors to broadcast favorable WOM following a visit.

By drawing upon work in the relatively new field of visitor research and evaluation, museum public relations practitioners will better understand how people interact with a museum. Museum public relations practitioners will need to continuously monitor and evaluate interpersonal communication and will need opinion research skills. This requirement is corroborated by a 1989 Ketchum survey of 945 public relations practitioners (Hiebert, 1989). More than nine out of ten felt that public relations research would have to get more sophisticated in the next decade, and 97% felt that public relations professionals would need to become better educated in research techniques and applications.

An interdisciplinary educational background, combined with a developed skill in using words and images to communicate, should prepare one to assume museum public relations tasks in the future. I predict that,

compared to today, these tasks will be more central to the overall management of the museum and more effective in maximizing the opportunities presented by WOM.

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**Table 1a**

Which of the following themes were conveyed to you by word-of-mouth prior to your visit as the MAIN THEMES of Henry Ford Museum/ Greenfield Village? (Multiple responses allowed)

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
How technology influenced our lives	63.9	69.8	59.7
How famous people lived	58.4	62.7	54.4
How crafts were practiced	50.0	55.0	45.6
How Henry Ford viewed American history	45.5	42.0	48.1
How America changed from farm to urban	45.0	43.8	46.1
The history of Michigan	16.6	18.3	15.0
None of the above	5.3	2.4	7.8
Other	4.7	5.3	4.4

**Table 1b**

Which of the following themes was referred to in the word-of-mouth as MOST DOMINANT THEME of Henry Ford Museum/Greenfield Village?

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
How technology influenced our lives	27.6	25.4	29.6
How Henry Ford viewed American history	17.4	14.2	20.4
How famous people lived	16.8	18.9	14.6
How America changed from farm to urban	16.8	15.4	18.4
How crafts were practiced	12.9	14.2	12.1
The history of Michigan	4.5	7.1	2.4
None of the above	1.8	2.4	1.5
Other	1.8	1.8	1.9

**Table 1 c**

Which of the following themes did you perceive during your visit and MENTION TO OTHERS? (Multiple responses allowed)

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
How technology influenced our lives	63.9	63.8	64.6
How famous people lived	62.6	62.1	62.6
How crafts were practiced	57.1	56.8	57.3
How America changed from farm to urban	54.5	52.1	56.8
How Henry Ford viewed American history	42.1	36.7	46.6
The history of Michigan	12.4	13.6	11.7
None of the above	5.8	4.7	6.8
Other	1.6	1.8	1.5

**Table 1d**

Which of the following themes is the ONE THEME you feel is MOST DOMINANT?

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
How technology influenced our lives	38.7	37.3	40.3
How America changed from farm to urban	18.7	17.8	19.9
How famous people lived	13.9	17.2	10.7
How Henry Ford viewed American history	13.7	13.6	14.1
How crafts were practiced	9.5	13.0	6.3
The history of Michigan	3.9	5.3	2.9
Other	3.7	3.6	3.9
None of the above	1.1	1.8	0.5

**Table 2 a**

About which of the following aspects of **HENRY FORD MUSEUM** did you receive a **POSITIVE** word-of-mouth reference prior to your visit? (Multiple responses allowed)

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
Fun Experience	89.7	90.5	88.8
Exhibited Objects	87.1	84.6	88.8
Location	81.1	81.1	80.6
The Automobile in American Life Exhibit	76.3	75.7	77.2
An Important American Museum	75.0	74.0	75.2
Famous People Associated With Collections	71.1	69.2	71.8
Size/Time Required to see it	67.9	66.9	68.0
Amount of Walking	57.1	55.6	57.8
Employees	50.8	53.3	48.5
Craft Demonstration	48.7	53.8	44.7
Ticket Price	45.0	41.7	47.8
Other Things to See or Do in the Area	30.5	34.3	27.2
Other	8.2	9.5	7.3

**Table 2 b**

About which of the following aspects of GREENFIELD VILLAGE did you receive a POSITIVE word-of-mouth reference prior to your visit?  
(Multiple responses allowed)

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
Fun Experience	82.6	87.6	79.1
Exhibited Objects	74.7	77.5	72.8
Location	74.2	76.3	72.3
Craft Demonstration	67.9	73.4	63.6
Famous People Associated With Collections	67.4	67.5	67.5
Size/Time Required to see it	61.8	67.5	57.3
An Important American Museum	57.4	60.9	54.9
Employees	49.2	54.4	45.6
Amount of Walking	46.3	50.9	42.7
Ticket Price	41.2	39.3	43.7
The Automobile in American Life Exhibit	39.7	45.0	35.9
Other Things to See or Do in the Area	26.8	29.6	25.2
Other	5.8	7.1	4.9

**Table 2 c**

Which of the following aspects was MOST IMPORTANT in your decision to visit the Museum or Village?

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
Fun Experience	23.4	26.2	20.9
Exhibited Objects	20.1	20.7	19.9
An Important American Museum	20.1	20.7	19.4
The Automobile in American Life Exhibit	17.0	15.2	18.4
Famous People Associated With Collections	7.4	3.7	10.2
Location	6.3	5.5	7.1
Other	2.2	3.7	1.0
Craft Demonstration	1.9	4.3	0.0
Ticket Price	0.8	0.0	1.5
Size/Time Required to see it	0.3	0.0	0.5
Amount of Walking	0.3	0.0	0.5
Employees	0.3	0.0	0.5

**Table 2d**

Which of the following aspects MET OR EXCEEDED your expectations? (Multiple responses allowed.)

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL	Ever Visited Before	
	380	Repeat	1st Time
	169	206	
Fun Experience	92.9	92.3	93.2
Exhibited Objects	90.3	88.8	91.7
Famous People Associated With Collections	85.3	83.4	86.4
An Important American Museum	85.0	85.8	84.0
The Automobile in American Life Exhibit	83.4	82.2	85.0
Location	83.2	83.4	82.5
Size/Time Required to see it	79.2	78.7	79.6
Amount of Walking	72.9	76.3	69.9
Employees	72.6	71.0	73.8
Craft Demonstration	68.4	71.0	66.0
Ticket Price	61.8	60.9	62.6
Other Things to See or Do in the Area	32.1	33.1	31.1
Other	7.4	5.9	8.7

**Table 2 e**

Which of the following aspects DID YOU MENTION TO OTHERS after your visit? (Multiple responses allowed.)

TOTAL RESPONSES	TOTAL 380	Ever Visited Before	
		Repeat 169	1st Time 206
Fun Experience	73.7	74.6	73.3
Exhibited Objects	69.7	69.2	70.4
The Automobile in American Life Exhibit	59.5	54.4	63.6
Famous People Associated With Collections	52.9	47.9	56.8
Size/Time Required to see it	51.6	48.5	54.5
An Important American Museum	51.6	47.3	55.3
Location	47.6	45.0	50.5
Craft Demonstration	44.5	45.0	43.7
Ticket Price	41.1	43.8	38.3
Amount of Walking	41.1	39.6	42.7
Employees	21.6	18.3	24.3
Other Things to See or Do in the Area	18.7	14.8	22.3
Other	7.6	6.5	8.7

**Table 3**  
Public Relations Time Allocations\*

Please estimate how your department's time is allocated, over the period of a year, in the following areas:

	Less than 5%	5%- 10%	10%- 25%	25%- 50%	50%- 75%	75%- 100%
Publicizing special events and exhibits.	3	8	14	45	12	5
Responding to requests initiated by the media.	5	23	29	25	2	
Querying the media with story ideas initiated by your department and not related to publicizing short-term special events and exhibits.	28	24	19	12	1	
Writing copy for publications produced by the museum.	18	14	27	24	1	
Researching the museum's key publics to determine their impressions of the museum and its programs.	57	18	8	3		

\*Due to lack of responses in some cases, percentage totals are inconsistent.