

Making Your Site a Welcoming Place for Visitors

By Laura Herron, Former
Local History AmeriCorps
Member, Ohio History
Connection, Columbus

We are all so familiar with the places at which we work or volunteer that it can be easy to lose sight of how they may appear to new visitors. Despite our best efforts to be welcoming, good intentions may not always produce great experiences. How do we engage our visitors, encourage them to feel comfortable at our facilities, and bring them back time and again? Anna Altschwager, Visitor Experience Manager and Ohio Village Site Director for the Ohio History Connection, recently shared with me a number of important points that all organizations should consider when making their museum or site more welcoming.

Have your own house in order first: Identify what your site does really well and make it the focus of your message. Know who you are and be clear about it so people can relate to you. Staff and volunteers should all agree on this shared vision of your mission.

Know your audiences: Identify who will be your target audiences. Will they be school groups or affinity groups? Children, young adults, or senior citizens? (Etc.) What do they need and where do their needs overlap? Be aware of any special needs your visitors may have and plan for how you will accommodate them. If you decide to focus on school groups, be sure to talk to local teachers to find out what sorts of programs their students enjoy most. Having school groups as a target audience can have an additional benefit to your site. Great school trips prompt kids to return with their parents.

Map your audience's access points: Plan for how you will engage people before, during, and after their visits. Will you reach out through social media, advertisements, posters, or other forms of communication? Web pages should



Knowing your target audiences (like families) and interacting with visitors all help to make your museum a more welcoming place. Photo courtesy of the Ohio History Connection.

be simple—closer to big posters than encyclopedias. After all, you want to bring visitors to you. The most basic type of contact—the telephone—should welcome guests rather than deter them. Your outgoing message, at a minimum, needs to include the name of your organization and the dates and times your facility is open. It should also include upcoming events and be refreshed regularly. It is also crucial to check messages that are left for you and to respond promptly to all inquiries, even if they seem trivial.

Interaction is everything: Think about your programs as chances to engage in a dialogue with your visitors. In order for your experiences to be positive and memorable they need to be participatory. Visitors need to see connections to their own lives in what you are presenting to them. Try to keep your programs flexible enough to enable you to connect with diverse audiences with some of the same information. Remember to pay attention to feedback. Surveys and social media comments can be very helpful in telling you what visitors think. It is also important to conduct staff and volunteer debriefings on a regular basis to compare observations about a program, event, or exhibit.

Events bring new visitors through the door: Building community partnerships with restaurants, radio stations, and other businesses will enable you to offer broadly-appealing special events. Doing something unexpected like this keeps your appeal fresh, not only bringing in new visitors but giving others reasons to return.

Think about the visitor as a whole person: The line between a positive and a negative experience is thin, and it takes very little to push a visit over the line one way or the other. Annoyances like not being able to find the restroom or not having a spot to sit and rest can ruin an otherwise pleasant trip. Keep in mind that you should have either clear, visible signage to help visitors find their way or staff available to direct them. If you do not have food available at your location, keep a few menus for local restaurants handy to inform hungry visitors. Be ready with directions to local highways and points of interest. Warm, sincere hospitality can make all the difference in how your visitors remember their day at your site and in how they tell others about it. ■