

Attracting and Serving Homeschool Audiences

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The homeschooling community is fast growing, diverse and well networked. As museum professionals seek to grow their audience, it is important to understand this unique group. Prior to Carillon Historical Park's introduction of Homeschool Days, we did not have much in the way of special offerings for homeschooling families. As a museum, we did not effectively communicate with, serve, or strategically plan to improve as a homeschooling destination.

As the local population of homeschoolers began to grow and would increasingly call to inquire about what we offer, we began to notice several of our weaknesses. All of our available workshops were ideally created to serve large public or private schools. The workshop series was designed for groups who brought one age level, attended the workshop for a specific and scheduled period of time, and involved primarily student participation. As you will see, we quickly learned that we needed to tailor our existing programming for homeschoolers and seek to do a better job of knowing and understanding their needs.

Getting to know why an individual would choose to homeschool helped us to realize that there is no such thing as a unified homeschooling audience. It is very much an individualized decision made for varying reasons. However, through research, we were able to establish a few primary reasons individuals in the United States choose to homeschool. These are by no means the only reasons, but merely what we found to be the most prevalent.

The most widespread reason cited was the declining quality of public schools. This included reasons such as; living in districts where schools lack individualized instruction for their students; schools with low academic goalposts; prevalence of school violence, racism or access to drugs or alcohol; schools with a lack of student-tailored learning plans.

After declining quality, many families cited an objection to public school curriculum on the grounds of religious freedom. This often went hand-in-hand with political motives, including an opposition to state and federal involvement in the schools. Families often expressed an opposition to increased standardized testing as well as a desire to have the freedom to choose field trip destinations, to choose and tailor curriculum for their students, and to make sure tax funding did not limit their student's access to educational resources. Lastly, many families cite public school inability to serve students with learning disabilities or with other disabilities such as auditory, sensory, or developmental. Public schools are not always able to provide Individual learning styles or embrace the different interests, abilities, and challenges of each student.

After developing an understanding of the needs of homeschoolers, it became clear how museums provide a wealth of resources to this unique audience. Museums can not only provide research on almost any subject, but they supply families with a humanities approach to learning and a wealth of facts not readily available in the home. Museums can show the context of how people make history us-



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ing various disciplines to solve problems, get ahead financially, or dream dreams and fly, in poetic or actual terms.

Museums can also create programs that serve students of all ages, include active teacher or chaperone involvement, go above and beyond state or federal educational standards, and make use of sensory learning environments. Museums allow homeschooling families to take students beyond the textbook and back in time with dynamic and creative educational programming. They serve as an excellent supplement to any homeschooling family's curriculum and have everything families need to make their homeschool visit an adventure.

After establishing why families often make the decision to homeschool and how we can best serve them at our museum, reaching out and finding new ways to better communicate with them is imperative. Just as the reasons to homeschool are unique to each family, so are they ways they communicate.

Reaching out online has and remains an essential tool for communicating with individual homeschoolers and homeschooling organizations.

(continued on page 7)

Facebook has proven to be one of the strongest most widespread tools. Co-ops, bloggers, and parents reaching out to each other often use Facebook to stay connected. Tapping into one of these existing networks can reach many individuals at once.

Don't forget to include your own website in your efforts. Posting homeschool specific resources and offerings can draw more traffic to your website and allow families to see that you can serve as a great resource. You can also use this as a way to collect e-mails from willing individuals and send them information about future programming.

Though using the internet to reach out has been very successful, the best and most successful tool has been networking within our community, with guests to our museum, local churches, schools, Co-ops, and special needs organizations. These groups and individuals can help spread the word and provide invaluable information about your organization. Always remember that homeschoolers are well-networked and reaching out to a few can help open the door to many.

As museums strategically plan for their future, the homeschooling audience is continually growing. Museum educators should look to other organizations with strong homeschooling programs and seek to find what fits well within their institution, be flexible, and formulate new ways to serve this audience. ■



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