

The Five Minute Falk

A very brief explanation of John Falk's Visitor Identity Related Motivations

by Antoinette Duplessis

1. Who is John Falk?

Dr. John H. Falk is a leading figure in research on free-choice learning, museum visitor studies and science education in the United States. He is co-founder of the research firm, Institute for Learning Innovation. He is the author of over one hundred scholarly articles and chapters in the areas of biology, psychology and education, co-author with Lynn Dierking of *The Museum Experience, Learning from Museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning* and *Lessons without Limit: How free-choice learning is transforming education*, and editor of *Free-Choice Science Education: How we learn science outside of school*. And author of *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience*.

2. What's so important about his work on visitor identity related motivations?

Drawing on his 30 + year career in studying museum visitors, in *Identity And the Museum Visitor Experience* Falk has attempted to create a predictive model of the museum visitor experience, one that can help museum professionals better meet those visitors' needs. What is exciting about this work is that it doesn't look at visitors in terms of demographics (age, income, gender, race, etc), which most of us currently rely on but delves into the motivations behind these visits.

3. Coles Notes summary of the book: (Caveat – I couldn't possibly summarize this entire book in 5 or 10 mins as it very thoroughly reviews the literature on visitor studies, discusses issues of identity and memory and leisure, etc and contains much more info than we can discuss in this brief time slot).

So, what you need to know for today's discussion:

- Central question of this book: How can we understand the museum visitor experience?
- The museum visitor experience is neither about the museum nor the visitor but the unique moment when both of these realities become one and the same – Visitors are the Museum and the Museum is the Visitor.

- Need to think of museums and content not as fixed and stable entities but as intellectual resources capable of being experienced and used in different ways for multiple purposes.
- Need to stop thinking about visitors as definable by some permanent quality or attribute such as age, gender or race – instead need to appreciate that every visitor is a unique individual and each is capable of having a wide range of very different kinds of visitor experiences.
- **RESULT** – a model of the museum visitor experience that is framed around visitors identity related visitor motivations – the series of specific reasons that visitors use to justify, as well as organize their visit and use in order to make sense of their museum experience.
- **What is identity?** Speaks to how others see us, as well as how we think about ourselves. Humans don't have one single permanent identity – we use an ever changing set of identities to fit particular situations. Often unconsciously done – you sift through leisure options that will meet your needs and if a museum is a good fit – that is what will be chosen.
- Feels it is not only a descriptive framework but a predictive model that we can use to anticipate who will visit a museum, what they do there and what long term meanings they make of their experience long after their visit.
- There is a lot of competition for leisure activities – if museums are going to keep their current popularity and success – they will have to get better at understanding and serving the visitor. His research showed that most leisure experiences aren't initiated by a desire to see or do something specific but as a desire to fulfill a specific identity related motivation.
- After interviewing hundreds of visitors to the California Science Center – five basic identity related categories of leisure benefits that they perceived emerged:
 - **Explorers**
 - **Facilitators**
 - **Experience Seekers**
 - **Professionals/Hobbyists**
 - **Rechargers**

*These are not qualities of the individual but temporary roles visitors enact to fit the specific needs and leisure realities of the moment. You can have different motivations on different days or even shift during a visit.

Explorers: visit museums because it interests them and appeals to their curiosity. They highly value learning but are not an expert. This is the group most likely to be attracted by a new exhibit and the rare items on display – appeals to their desire to expand their horizons. They comprise a large number of visitors. Don't want a structured visit – so will avoid interpretive tools and guided tours – too restrictive for them. They don't want the Blockbuster Shuffle. Will likely read labels.

Facilitators: visit museums in order to satisfy the needs and desires of someone they care about rather than just themselves. This group is price conscious and aware of time. Two sub-groupings but in both cases – the primary objective with this motivation is to ensure their companion is satisfied:

- Facilitating Parents – come with kids or grandkids. Perceive that learning is fun! But when pressed can't say what they learned. Goal is really to satisfy their identity related need to be perceived by themselves, children and others as good parents. Will sign kids up for camps, classes, etc.
- Facilitating Socializers – come with another adult (spouse, friend, visiting relative). This visit is social and is more about hanging out with friends and chatting and may only occasionally glance at the exhibits.

Experience Seekers: are 'collecting' experiences. They want to feel like they've 'been there' and they've 'done that' – they want to see the destination, building or what's iconic on display. They are often tourists but could just be looking for fun things to do on the weekend. They are socially motivated and want to have fun with friends or family. Not strongly motivated by the topic. Unlikely to have visited as children and are not likely to be regular museum visitors. Except for the large iconic museums – most museums don't attract large numbers of Experience seekers.

Professional/Hobbyists: Represent the smallest category of visitors but they are very influential. Could be museum professionals, art and antique collectors, teachers, artists, etc. Often the most critical visitors. They come with a goal in mind and are on a mission. Not likely to visit as part of a group. Perhaps a teacher is planning a lesson on a particular artist and comes to the gallery for information. Micro niche audience – can hold Collector's Days or allow them to have gatherings or meetings at your site.

Rechargers: visit in order to reflect, rejuvenate or just bask in the wonder of a place. Art museums, botanical gardens, aquariums have lots of these visitors. See museums as places that afford them the opportunity to avoid the noisiness of the outside world. Museum as respite from the world. Not very concerned with objects – they are just part of the scenery. Come to get away from people - will rarely be attracted by special exhibits or blockbusters.

Summary: Every person has identity related needs and interests. Either to express their curiosity or support being a good parent or finding relief from the stresses of daily life. These needs are common to virtually all people in the 21st century. If we can help visitors with these motivations feel like they have succeeded then they will leave feeling good and are either likely to return or to give word-of-mouth recommendations. People won't come if they don't perceive that the museum will satisfy their identity related needs.

4. How can I use this model in my work place?

- Review all promotions and marketing tools with an eye to meeting the above motivations. But keep in mind that the majority of visitors say that word-of-mouth recommendations from friends or family is the primary thing that influenced them to visit (while ads and promo count for 20%). Let visitors take photos. Have postcards they can send out – promoting the museum.
- Review all interpretive tools and exhibit layout, museum amenities – allowing for flexibility. Have good interactives and demonstrations. Have materials to support family groups that can be read quickly.
- When designing new exhibits or audio tours, writing new labels – think about the various identity related motivations and what would satisfy their needs
- You need to communicate multiple messages so that you appeal to different subsets of the visiting public. Think about what types of images may appeal to each motivation.
- Consider layered labels. Headlines, with in-depth text below, perhaps labels for young children. Centrally located, easy to read labels for parents to communicate info to children.
- If you can, try to provide opportunities to engage with visitors before and after their visit – online, email, mailings, etc. Ultimate goal is to help visitors reinforce their identity related motivations. Each and every one of us wants to feel special – whether its because of our curiosity, our concern for our loved ones, our hobbies

or interests, or our ability to discover beautiful over ugly. Reinforcing those feelings and making sure visitors feel good about accomplishing these goals are important.

- Falk specifically says in his book that he really wants museums to test his ideas to determine if they are reasonable.

5. Why is all of this so important?

- Falk believes that despite existing and competing in the 21st century Knowledge Age – most museums still operate in the 20th century Industrial Business Model (mass produced, one size fits all approach).
- Consumers are going to expect that goods and services be designed to specifically meet their own personal needs and interests and you won't be able to satisfy a diverse range of people with a single, generic approach.
- What you need to take away is the central point of this book – museum visitors are not alike – different groups of visitors have very different needs and interests. If a museum can't adapt to this, then the public will find alternate ways to satisfy their leisure needs.
- Falk's Visitor Experience Model provides a roadmap for how museums can begin to make some of the changes required in order to be more in step with the needs of consumers in the knowledge age.

***I can be reached at aduplessis@regionofwaterloo.ca should you have any further questions, comments or just want to chat more about these ideas.**

Questions for discussion:

- 1. What could we do individually or collectively to start implementing the museum visitor experience model?**

- 2. What are you currently doing that aligns with what you've heard today?**

- 3. Do you see yourself or your visitors in these 5 motivations?**

- 4. Do you think your museum appeals to these 5 identity related motivations?**