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PR & Marketing Committee    Marketplace of Ideas  
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## What Audience Research Can (and Can't) Tell You

A discussion with:

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# Discussion outline

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1. What is audience research, anyway? Is it the same as evaluation?
2. What kind of things can it tell you?
3. Whom should you research?
4. What kinds of research are there?
5. When should you do it, and how often?
6. Why conduct audience research?
7. What biases should you keep in mind?
8. What can't research tell you?

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# What is audience research? Is it the same as "evaluation"?

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- Focused on specific program or exhibition
- Long history in museums ("visitor studies")
- Traditionally a tool of education, exhibit design, programming

- Focused on audience development and engagement
- Relatively new in museums ("market research")
- Usually a tool of marketing dept., external affairs, strategic planning



- Important to funders: demonstrates outcomes
- Usually looks at current visitors
- Had been focused on internal priorities and agendas, but now becoming more responsive to visitors' own agendas

- Important to funders: helps build and diversify audiences
- Can look at both visitors and non-visitors
- Had been focused on external issues (especially marketing communication), but now including more about the visit experience

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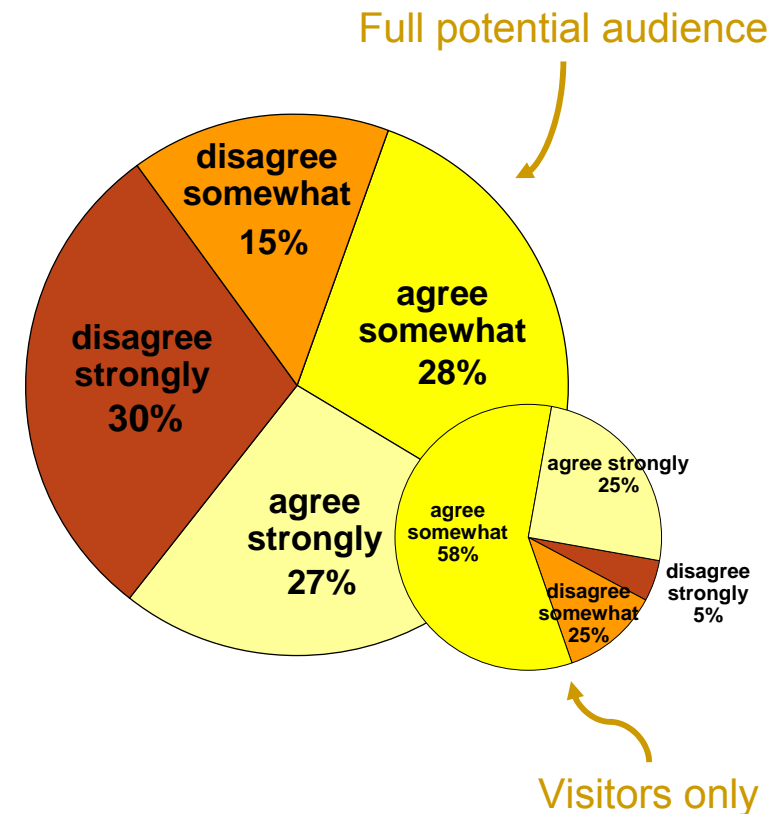
# What kinds of things can it tell you?

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- Info on non-visitors:
  - ▶ Attitudes and values
  - ▶ Demographics and geography
  - ▶ Awareness
  - ▶ Perceptions
  - ▶ Competitive cultural activity
  - ▶ Benefits sought / needs / preferences
  - ▶ Barriers
  
- Info on visitors:
  - ▶ Motivations for visiting / joining
  - ▶ Activity (what they do, how they use museum)
  - ▶ Perceptions / image of the museum
  - ▶ Overall satisfaction / engagement / desire to return
  - ▶ Demographics and geography
  - ▶ Media usage / sources of information
  - ▶ Appeal of proposed changes, messages, experiences

# Whom should you research?

- Non-visitors
  - ▶ high-potential (similar to your current visitorship but attending infrequently)
  - ▶ segments targeted for expansion (e.g., based on ethnicity, geography, or other demographics)
- Visitors
  - ▶ general (usually segmented in one or more ways)
  - ▶ program- or exhibition-specific
- Members
  - ▶ current, lapsed
  - ▶ come-and-go vs. long-term loyal
  - ▶ specific categories that are important to your museum (e.g. family members, young professionals)
- Donors
  - ▶ new vs. longstanding
  - ▶ entry-level vs. high level
- Staff, volunteers, local opinion leaders, etc.



*Agree-disagree statement: "The Central Science Museum always has something going on for people like me."*

You'll get different responses to the same question depending on what population you ask.

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# What kinds of research are there?

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- Primary vs. secondary research
  - ▶ Primary: collecting new data from your target population
  - ▶ Secondary: analyzing existing data for your own purposes
    - your own data: membership database, visitor ticketing data, store/catalog sales, etc.
    - third-party data:
      - public (census, foundation studies on cultural attendance, etc.)
      - commercial (Experian, Personix, etc.; can be appended to your own data)
- Within primary research, qualitative vs. quantitative
  - ▶ Qualitative: conversational approach used to explore issues in depth
    - **examples:** focus groups, in-depth interviews, observation, etc.
    - **used for:** identifying important issues, revealing how people think and feel, exploring new concepts and possibilities
    - **limitations:** can't draw statistical conclusions, can't always extrapolate to larger populations
  - ▶ Quantitative: numerical survey approach used to draw statistical conclusions and comparisons
    - **examples:** web, phone, mail, and in-person surveys
    - **used for:** measuring importance of issues, testing assumptions, evaluating changes over time, etc.
    - **limitations:** can't give you the texture behind the responses, doesn't allow for subtle distinctions
- Other types: peer best-practices studies, literature reviews, competitive analysis, benchmarking, etc.

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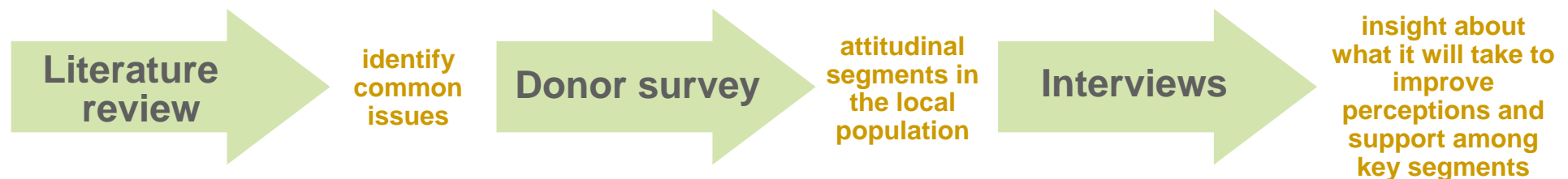
# What kinds of research are there? (cont.)

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## Example 1: A mid-sized museum planning to expand, reinstall, and rebrand



## Example 2: A small museum about to launch a capital campaign



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# When should you do it, and how often?

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## Strategic research

- An in-depth, holistic look at the relationship between the museum and its constituencies
- Undertaken only from time to time (e.g. every 5–10 years or during times of transition)
- Often multi-phase, multi-mode, requiring up to a year or more
- Can be expensive, sometimes funded outside of regular operating expenses
- Usually requires outside help
- Appropriate when...
  - ▶ you're planning a major change or long-term investment
  - ▶ you haven't done much research in the past and want to "catch up" on your audience

## Ongoing research

- A continuous or regularly scheduled "finger on the pulse" of your audience
- Structured simply, with repeating methodology to allow for comparison
- Examples:
  - ▶ annual quantitative tracking of awareness and perceptions in the community
  - ▶ quarterly visitor survey to assess progress toward institutional goals for engagement, intent to return, etc.
  - ▶ semi-annual qualitative concept testing to inform exhibition development, marketing planning, etc.
- Often handled in-house
  - ▶ sometimes with initial assistance on design and analysis from an outside vendor
- Usually part of your annual operating budget

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# Why conduct audience research?

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## Benefits of strategic research

- Brings staff together around a common understanding of the customer
- Grounds any long-range planning process in audience/community needs and interests
- Makes decision-making easier and more confident
- Directs resources to where they'll have the most impact (optimizes investment of time and money)
- Reduces reliance on anecdotal reports and the opinions of vocal minorities
- Allows you to segment your audience
  - ▶ compare those you're already attracting with those you should target
  - ▶ understand how to better engage each segment (experiences, marketing messages, etc.)

## Benefits of ongoing research

- Keeps the visitor top-of-mind for staff
- Makes responsiveness part of the organizational culture
- Makes audience engagement and development everyone's responsibility
  - ▶ involves all departments via regular reports
- Lets you evaluate the impact of specific changes and refine accordingly
- Reveals trends, highlighting problem issues early and allowing staff to capitalize on new opportunities
- Can feed into institutional "report cards" that measure improvement against strategic goals
- Helps develop (and justify) the resources to maintain internal research and evaluation capabilities

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# What biases should you keep in mind?

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- Self-selection bias:
  - ▶ visitors have already self-selected from the general population, and may think/feel differently
  - ▶ important if you're trying to grow or diversify your audience (don't just listen to the "converted")
- Cultural bias
  - ▶ many people believe museums represent a positive cultural value and therefore rate them highly
  - ▶ it can be hard to distinguish enthusiasm for your museum from respect for museums in general (or self-congratulation for being a museum patron)
- Courtesy bias:
  - ▶ survey-takers under your roof tend to be polite, especially when survey is administered by your own staff or volunteers
  - ▶ less of a problem with self-completed paper surveys than with verbal interviews
- Non-response bias:
  - ▶ refusal to participate by some people due to dissatisfaction with the visit, personality traits (feeling too important to take a survey), etc.
- Recency bias:
  - ▶ people rate products/experiences more highly when they've just experienced them than a few weeks later

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## What biases should you keep in mind? (cont.)

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- All of these skew responses in a positive direction
- So you can't assume a “4” on a 5-point satisfaction scale indicates sufficient engagement to generate repeat visits or positive word-of-mouth
- With leisure-time (non-necessary) activities like museum-going, only real enthusiasm drives loyalty and word-of-mouth

# What can't research tell you?

## Neither quantitative nor qualitative research can...

- Accurately predict visitors' future behavior or what they would be willing to pay for specific experiences/changes/etc.
- Elicit exhibition or program concepts from scratch
  - you need to provide them something to respond to, compare, and critique
- Determine your museum's mission, strategic plan, or brand for you

**Research informs your museum's decision-making process; it doesn't replace that process**

