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Is the Boom Over?

A Researcher Suggests That Shifts in Demographics and the Economy Could Spell 'Flat Demand' for Museums

By Stephen L. Gerritson

Museums, zoos, aquariums, and historic sites have seen explosive growth in the past 30 years, but this boom appears to be drawing to a close. Museums across the U.S. now should prepare for an era of sparser financial resources and flattened demand.

I make this assertion as a researcher in the field of economics. Here's what I mean: From 1960 to the present, the number of museums and other cultural institutions in the U.S. has doubled, and many of the older ones have expanded or rebuilt their facilities to handle ever-increasing numbers of visitors. But the demographic warning signs are there: The U.S. population as a whole is aging, household size is declining, families are having fewer children, women are emerging as a

major part of the work force, growth in real personal income is lacking, and technology is having an impact on how Americans use their leisure time. Each tells a story of what the future may hold for museums.

The 1980 Census found that the median age of all U.S. residents was 30.0 years, up from 27.9 years in 1970. Today, the median age is estimated to be 32.6 years, and all authorities expect it to continue to increase. There are several reasons for this. First is the increase in life expectancy and the growing number of persons over 65 years of age, who today make up an estimated 12 percent of the population. Second is the aging of the "baby boom" generation, those born roughly between 1946 and 1964. And third is the decline in the birthrate as couples elect to have fewer children.

The decline in household size, from 2.75 persons in 1980 to an estimated 2.67 today, has been consistent since at least 1950. Contributing to this trend, in addition to the declining birthrate, are the increase in the number of single-parent families, the in-

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“How did most Bostonians travel around the city?” (Answer: on foot.) Students get so caught up in the game that they don’t recognize the teaching strategy reinforcing skills and helping museum staff members evaluate the program’s effectiveness.

Fully booked for the past two years, students, teachers, and evaluators are enthusiastic about the program. The social history approach has equal appeal to adult audiences, with the information gathered for *Unknown Hands* and the interactive techniques used in teaching it finding their way into the tour programs for the general public.

Founded as a preservation organization, the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities has evolved into a museum of New England life, domestic architecture, and furnishings. The *Unknown Hands* program serves both museological and preservation goals: Students learn that Boston 200 years ago was a diverse community, just as it is today. The rhythm of daily life and material things were different, but people faced the

same fundamental human problems of earning a living and raising families. By creating a personal link with the past, *Unknown Hands* elicits a feeling of responsibility toward preserving Boston’s heritage for future generations.

And within the institution, the program is causing a shift from adult audiences and scholarly expertise in New England architecture, decorative arts, and architectural conservation to a growing devotion of the budget to education and a new body of research into social history. At two other properties in the Boston area—the Quincy House in Wollaston and Codman House in Lincoln—new educational programs now are being developed that link the lives of historical residents of the houses to the lives of today’s students.

The society also has changed in less tangible ways: As new projects develop, questions are being asked about social and cultural history and about the history of those who did not keep written records. Professionals throughout the institution see themselves as interpreters of a past that belongs to everyone. *Unknown Hands* is forging a link between the museum and the future, which is causing a complementary reflection on the view of the past. □

Students merge their identities with those of Boston residents from the early 19th century, which includes people representing a variety of social classes and professions.



crease in the number of persons older than 65, and the relatively recent trend toward independent living arrangements for persons who might previously have lived with relatives or in group situations.

The decline in the birthrate is itself attributable to at least two factors: Couples are choosing to have fewer children, and there are fewer couples. According to the Census Bureau, there are 20 percent more bachelors today than there were in 1980 as people wait longer to marry or pursue alternative lifestyles. The increase in divorces might also play a role as couples whose marriages might end are more hesitant about having children.

By all estimates, women's participation in the labor market has increased dramatically during the past 20 years. Some of this increase is attributable to later marriages, more frequent divorces, and the availability of child care, and this reflects a fundamental change in social values. As technological advances occur, making working at home more practical, the percentages probably will continue to increase.

According to a poll conducted last year by a national news magazine, a majority of all Americans feel less well off than they did five or 10 years ago. I believe this is a reflection, in part, of the lack of growth in personal income during the past 10 years (after inflation is accounted for). The "double-digit" inflation of the late 1970s and early '80s caused real income to decline for many Americans, and the gains experienced during the '80s years were not equally distributed.

Finally, technological advances in elec-

tronics and related industries have greatly influenced the ways in which Americans spend their leisure time. The videocassette recorder, interactive computer games, cable television, and other developments tend to keep people at home and somewhat isolated rather than out and in groups.

All of these changes and trends have influenced, and continue to influence, the ways Americans entertain themselves. For a fairly sizable percentage of the population, that entertainment will include at least one visit per year to a museum, zoo, or aquarium. We know quite accurately how many people visit these institutions each year, but how much do we really know about the visitors? Some surveys reveal the following:

■ *Museum, zoo, and aquarium visits are a group activity.* Average party size ranges from two and one-half to four persons, but the "average party" is most frequently described as a family unit: one or two adults with one or two children.

■ *The age ranges of the visitors are fairly narrow.* Adults of ages 25 to 40 and children 12 or younger appear to account for a majority of all visitors, particularly to science and children's museums and zoos.

■ *Weekends are the busiest times.* This might seem obvious, but it is also true that the percentage of visitors who attend on weekends is increasing, and this phenomenon is beginning to cause problems with capacity, particularly at science museums and aquariums.

■ *Older people are significantly under-represented in some audiences.* One institu-

After 30 years of explosive growth, museums, aquariums, zoos, and historic sites can anticipate flattened demand and sparser resources as museum visitors get older, families get smaller, and new technologies compete for leisure time.



tion reported that persons 65 years and older made up only 2 percent of the total audience. The average seems to be about 8 percent. Aquariums and history museums do much better in attracting older people, but zoos and (to a lesser extent) science museums do not seem to fare very well in this regard.

■ *School groups are an important component of total visitation.* On average, children in school groups make up about 10 percent of total visitation, although one institution reported a figure of 33 percent. These visits generally occur when few other people are using the facility and often help justify public appropriations.

■ *For the most part, museums, zoos, and aquariums have many successful membership programs.* The number of members can equal 10 percent or more of total annual attendance. Members tend to reflect the profile of the typical visitors: families with children younger than 12.

■ *Special events contribute significantly to overall attendance.* A special celebration or event in a large-size institution might attract as many as 30,000 visitors in one day. Many of these visitors will be seeing the institution for the first time, and some will return.

Putting together the demographic trends and the characteristics of museum, zoo, and aquarium visitors, I draw these inferences:

■ *Family visits will decrease over the next 10 years.* As the "baby boomers" age, the number of families with small children will decrease. The implication is that there will be fewer visitors to zoos, youth museums, science museums, and aquariums. This will be compounded by the increasing percentage of persons older than 65, who as a group do not visit some museums and zoos in accordance with their numbers. School visits also will decrease as the number of children age 5 to 12 decreases. Visitor distribution will continue to be skewed toward weekends, because of the growth in two-income families, single-parent families, and more convenient leisure time activities.

■ *As visitor composition changes, per-capita spending will change.* At museum-operated gift shops and restaurants, impulse purchases will decrease for both food and merchandise, although higher-priced merchandise items may become more popular.

■ *New audiences will be harder to attract with traditional special events.* Indeed, at many institutions, the special event already has become a regular activity.

■ *Economic pressures might cause an additional decline in visitation.* Many muse-

ums have major construction projects under way or in the planning stages. Increases in ticket prices could be required to help pay for these, an action that could shift some price-sensitive visitors to other activities.

All of these inferences suggest a likely decline in zoo, science and youth museum, and aquarium visitation in the next five or 10 years. Is this inevitable? Maybe not. The institution that can ascertain the needs of the public and take steps to meet those needs is more likely to hold or even increase market share. I recommend that you consider the following:

What You Can Do

■ *Know your visitors.* Standardized visitor surveys are relatively easy and inexpensive to conduct and can yield a great deal of useful information about your audiences. For example, are zoos merely "tools" in the child-rearing process, to be replaced by other forms of entertainment when the children reach a certain age? Or is visiting a museum a learned behavior? Visitor surveys over a series of years will reveal whether the audience is aging along with the general population.

■ *Know your weaknesses.* Why don't senior citizens visit your institution? It may be something simple, such as a lack of comfortable seating throughout the facility. Surveys can turn up problems as well as information.

■ *Plan ahead.* The demographic trends I've discussed are national. Each metropolitan area will have a different profile. For example, many cities in the Northeast and Midwest will lose population over the next 10 years because of people moving to new areas for new jobs. Often, those who choose to relocate are young families—those most likely to use museums and zoos. Ask city planners and local school officials what they expect.

■ *Develop marketing strategies for the new demographic profiles.* Perhaps you should redesign your membership program to be more responsive to your population base. Perhaps your special events should target certain market segments. Or perhaps your capital budget should reflect the changing needs of the education department.

I don't need to remind you that money for development or expansion is no longer readily available. Competition for leisure time is increasing, and leisure time is decreasing for the first time in many years. Finally, the explosion in visitation is flattening out. Those institutions that know their audiences, plan for changes, and adapt their facilities to meet new demands will continue to be successful. □