

**INCREASING AND DIVERSIFYING
SMITHSONIAN AUDIENCES**

**An Overview of the 2004 Meeting
of the Smithsonian Institution Council**

October 18, 2004

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Introduction

In his opening remarks to the 2004 meeting of the Smithsonian Institution Council (SIC) on October 18, 2004, Secretary Lawrence Small laid out the issues to be explored:

Today, we are more determined than ever to make sure *all* Americans—whoever they are, wherever they may live—have access to the historic, artistic, and scientific treasures of the Smithsonian, and are motivated to take advantage of that access.

...The face of America is changing. We must appeal to new audiences where they live, literally and metaphorically. Otherwise, we will gradually become irrelevant.

...And that is where you come in. We need your help in answering such challenging questions as: What can we do with our exhibitions and outreach to attract more minorities? Are there specific ways we can appeal to Generations X and Y? How can we ensure that all members of a family of three generations can enjoy our museums and exhibitions at the same time?

Rising to the Secretary's challenge were not only the members of the Council in attendance, but five presenters with expertise in outreach and marketing:

SIC member *Paco Underhill*, a retail anthropologist and founder/managing director of EnviroSell, discussed his research on consumer behavior, emphasizing how his findings apply to institutions such as the Smithsonian.

Omar Wasow, an NBC internet analyst and founder of BlackPlanet.com, spoke on "The Rap Gap: Understanding the Generation Gap Among Ethnic Americans."

Vishakha Desai, president of the Asia Society in New York, posed the question, "Can One Size Fit All? Strategies for Engaging Asian American Audiences."

Deborah Obalil, executive director of the Alliance of Artists Communities in Providence, Rhode Island, spoke on "Reaching the NeXt Generation of Museum Users."

Katherine Wintsch, a senior strategic planner at the Martin Agency in Richmond, Virginia, talked about "Devotion to Brands: The Art of Creating Desire."

The Secretary’s opening remarks included the following observations, which suggest that the Smithsonian approaches the task of increasing and diversifying its audiences from a position of some strength:

- In a poll of visitors to Washington, DC conducted by *Newsweek* in 2001, 58 percent of respondents indicated an interest in visiting the Smithsonian on their trip—more than twice the number that mentioned the White House.¹
- A 2003 Harris Interactive poll ranked the Smithsonian first for quality among well-recognized products, companies, and institutions—ahead of the Discovery Channel, Mercedes Benz, and Waterford Crystal, among others.
- During the 2004 fiscal year, Smithsonian exhibits were visited 29 million times, while Smithsonian events on the National Mall drew an estimated 2 million visitors.²

Nevertheless, the presenters made it clear that reaching out to new audiences is an inherently difficult and long-term task—one that presents many challenges for the Smithsonian as it grapples with shifting demographics, changing expectations, and the realities of a world in which commerce and culture interact in new and unfamiliar ways.

¹ An additional 14 percent mentioned a desire to see the giant pandas at the National Zoo.

² These events were the First Americans Festival (to celebrate the opening of the National Museum of the American Indian), the National World War II Reunion, and the annual Folklife Festival.

Main Themes

In an after-dinner presentation the night before the Council meeting, Underhill laid out some of the major issues for SIC members and Smithsonian leadership to ponder. Drawing from his years of observing how people interact with products and spaces, he stressed that to succeed with its customers or audiences, an organization must understand who these people are, and how they think and behave. Based on this understanding, the organization must present itself in a way that connects with these people. Noting that many of the formats, tools, and rules that worked with people in the past are no longer appropriate in a world of changing demographics, lifestyles, and expectations, Underhill posed the humorous but challenging question, “How does a zoo compete with ‘Animal Planet’?”

There was a warning in this for Smithsonian leadership: “Our constituents are changing faster than we are.” Responding to a world where Smithsonian audiences increasingly look, think, and behave differently from traditional museum audiences will require not only getting to know these new audiences better, but having the courage to make bold changes where honest self-evaluation suggests such changes are appropriate.

In the course of the next day’s presentations and discussions, a number of important themes emerged that elaborated upon Underhill’s foundational points, and that offer guidance for thinking about outreach to new Smithsonian audiences.

1. Efforts to diversify audiences can create tensions with existing audiences.

SIC Chair Glenn Lowry noted that reaching out to demographic groups that are not already part of an organization’s base typically requires far-reaching changes in existing practices. This carries risks, as such changes can alienate current audiences who are satisfied with the *status quo*. Obalil picked up on this point, saying that “The biggest stumbling block to bringing in new audiences is often old audiences.” For example, existing audiences can (perhaps unconsciously) make new audiences feel unwelcome in

“their” institution. Conversely, core audiences can feel the organization is deserting them in its drive to cultivate new audiences. Everyone has heard stories about theater companies or orchestras that have introduced contemporary offerings in an effort to appeal to younger audiences, and have ended up decimating their subscription lists.

The Smithsonian will need to prepare its current core audiences for the changes associated with efforts to diversify audiences. It must keep core audiences informed about changes that will affect them, and why these changes are being undertaken. Indeed, so far as possible, core audiences should be consulted and brought into the process of institutional change.

2. Traditional distinctions between the world of culture and the worlds of commerce and entertainment are blurring.

Several presenters noted that the conceptual firewalls that traditionally separated the cultural and commercial spheres are crumbling, in part because of the changing expectations of younger audiences. Likewise, the distinction between cultural experiences and entertainment is becoming less pronounced than in the past.

These developments are not viewed with favor by those working in the cultural sphere, who see creeping “Disneyfication.” Nevertheless, as the relationships between high culture, commerce, and entertainment become increasingly complex, cultural institutions must be willing to learn from commercial institutions—just as commercial institutions have learned from cultural ones. (Wintsch provided several examples of firms that have successfully stolen a page from museums’ script, such as the spectacular \$30 million Prada Epicenter in New York, a retailing outlet modeled in the image of an art gallery.) Smithsonian leadership would do well to consider the extent to which ideas from the commercial and entertainment worlds can be exploited for the benefit of the Institution—without, of course, compromising its core scientific and curatorial values.

3. Segmentation exists *within* the communities targeted by cultural institutions.

Several presenters cautioned the audience to be aware of the divisions that exist *within* demographic groups commonly targeted for outreach. For example, Wasow stressed the fundamental differences that mark the pre- and post-Civil Rights generations within the African American community, as well as the similar split between first-generation immigrants and their descendents in the Latino and Asian American communities. Younger generations of African Americans, he suggested, in many ways have more in common with young people of other races than with older individuals within their own ethnic group. For instance, hip-hop is a defining cultural influence for young people across ethnic groups, but has little appeal for older generations of African Americans—thus, the “rap gap.”

Drawing on her experiences at the Asia Society, Desai reinforced the point that to be successful, outreach must appreciate the differences within broad demographic groups. Her discussion focused on the Asian American community, which is in fact a patchwork quilt of diverse communities with different cultures, values, and leisure time preferences: Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, and many more. Within each of these communities, additional distinctions exist, such as the generational rift that Wasow emphasized. Outreach that attempts to talk to all of these groups and sub-groups in a single voice is unlikely to connect effectively to any of them.

Underhill made the same point: “While traditional demographers talk about African American, Latino, and Asian, those buckets are just too simple.” Instead, savvy marketers increasingly look at “nano-segments” of the population.

4. Reaching out to new audiences is a long-term process that requires a major commitment from the top down, and a willingness to embrace fundamental organizational change.

Successful efforts to draw in new audiences require a lasting organizational commitment that starts at the highest levels. This may seem obvious, but putting it into practice

requires a willingness to embrace changes in an organization's culture, activities, and priorities that current staff may strongly resist. Some of the specific matters at issue here were highlighted in Desai's talk, and others were brought up in the concluding comments of Council members at the end of the day:

- *The demographic make-up of an organization's leadership matters.* Not only is there symbolic importance in placing members of groups targeted for outreach in leadership positions, but members of a demographic group may be uniquely situated to understand the issues that resonate with that group.
- *Drawing in younger audiences will require a willingness to place young people in positions with real authority to affect programs and outreach.* Council member Claudine Brown noted, "Bringing in younger audiences will mean hiring 'tipping-point' people from those generations to get the job done. The people in this room are not the ones who will be able to create the programs that bring these people in."
- *Outreach to new audiences must be a cooperative, two-way process.* Wasow and Desai both asserted that Smithsonian leaders must be willing to *listen* to members of demographic groups they wish to reach, and to allow what they hear to influence how programs are developed. As Desai stressed, "It is not simply a case of going to a community and saying, 'Here's my program—how I can get you to come?'"
- *Pandering must be avoided.* Desai warned that people know when you are not taking them seriously. The traditional model of approaching minority outreach as unilateral charity is outdated and patronizing. Cultural institutions must recognize what these communities can *contribute*—in the sense of helping to develop programs and exhibitions, participating in the organization, bringing in friends through positive word of mouth, volunteering, and, in the long run, contributing financially.

5. Younger audiences think in fundamentally different ways than do the older generations who form the core of the Smithsonian’s current visitorship and leadership.

Obalil’s presentation was devoted to exploring how Generations X and Y think and behave, and what this means for cultural institutions such as the Smithsonian. Her message was that successfully marketing the Institution to these generational cohorts requires an understanding of the shared values and experiences of their members. The challenge of seeing the cultural world from the perspective of a “typical” 18-, 25-, or even 35-year-old pervaded the audience’s questions and comments. Some of the main points that emerged were the following:

- A defining characteristic of Generation X is a jaded pragmatism that sometimes borders on cynicism. This is the generation that brought the slogan “been there, done that” into common usage throughout the nation.
- By contrast, Generation Y is marked by a unique mixture of idealism and traditionalism—“Eisenhower with a pierced eyebrow,” according to Obalil.
- Both generations are inured to the ways of marketing—they know empty hype when they see it, and will reflexively reject a “hard sell.”
- Younger people look for experiential, participatory experiences—a characteristic shaped by their lifelong exposure to influences such as the Internet, video games, cell phones, and commercial brands. To succeed in reaching out to them, museums must think of audiences as active participants rather than passive consumers of information.

Given the important differences in generational values and ways of thinking, there is a danger of outreach efforts running aground on the shoals of “generational myopia”

among an organization's staff. Older staff may bridle at the efforts of younger employees to move an organization in unfamiliar directions—"What do these kids know?" At the same time, younger staff may think, "Why don't they step aside and let us do what will work with our peers?" This divide reinforces the point that diversifying audiences must be a whole-organization effort that has been accepted by staff and other stakeholders.

6. Successful outreach to younger audiences will require new marketing strategies.

Obalil and Wintsch offered a number of specific suggestions for reaching younger audiences:

- *Social events pitched at young people may get them through the door.* Obalil suggested that one promising strategy for drawing in Generations X and Y is to hold social events targeted at young adults: singles nights, jazz performances, informal receptions, and so on. She pointed to the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, which has incorporated such events into its regular calendar ("First Fridays," "Summer Solstice," and "Tuesdays on the Terrace"). These have proven successful in attracting young adults, and getting many of them to sign up as members.
- *Marketing to households with young children is likely to be ineffective.* According to Obalil, the bulk of consumer research indicates that households with children under six "might as well have fallen off the planet" as far as participation in cultural institutions goes. This holds even for households that were avid participants before having children. Institutions must be aware of this gap in a household's life cycle and work around it. Underhill also stressed the importance of keeping life cycle factors in mind in marketing and outreach.
- *Collaboration with firms and organizations that have caché with younger generations should be considered.* Obalil, Wintsch, and Underhill noted that

some organizations—for example, firms such as Nike, BlackPlanet.com, and Apple, as well as some arts and cultural organizations founded by young people—have enjoyed great success in connecting with Generations X and Y. If such organizations could be brought to the Mall as the Smithsonian’s partners for specific exhibitions, programs, or events, they would bring a young audience with them. Underhill stressed that many of these organizations would jump at the opportunity; it is therefore largely a question of what Smithsonian leadership finds appropriate.

- *Do not expect to reach younger generations through newspaper advertising; the Internet is where they get their information.* Many members of Generations X and Y do not read newspapers—at least not in hard copy. Instead, they naturally gravitate to the Internet as their first source of information. In the case of Generation Y, this may be the *only* source consulted; according to Obalil, “With these people, if you are not on the Web, you do not exist.”

Wasow also offered some thoughts on reaching younger audiences. He noted that many young people today need to be educated not only about what is *in* a particular museum, but about what a museum *is*. He emphasized that getting people in the door is only the first step; museums also need to think hard about what to do with young visitors once they are there—that is, how to give them an experience that will make them want to come back, and how to initiate an ongoing relationship with those who might have an interest in one. He stressed the importance of cultivating opinion leaders and niche groups within target populations, to get them to buy into the museum and spread the word among their peers. Finally, Wasow strongly concurred with the other presenters that the Internet is the main channel for reaching younger audiences: “To hook young people, you need to reach them where they ‘live,’ which is very much online.”

7. Having a lot to offer young audiences is *necessary* but not *sufficient* to draw them in; the other part of the equation is articulating what the Smithsonian has in a way these audiences find compelling.

Underhill, Lowry, and Wintsch emphasized the highly competitive milieu in which the Smithsonian operates. It competes for time and attention not only with other museums and cultural institutions, but with all manner of leisure time activities, educational offerings, and consumption choices. Having a lot to offer young people is not enough; the Smithsonian must also find ways to be noticed among the clutter of consumption choices and marketing messages that barrage young people. As Wintsch put it, “Getting on their radar screen is more than half the battle.”

Wintsch explained that in a world with 500 television channels, 30,000 products on supermarket shelves, and other symptoms of “the claustrophobia of abundance,” people tend to cling to brands they know and like. Further, the brands that succeed are not necessarily substantively different, but rather are those that offer a compelling and well-articulated story that resonates with the intended audience. As an example, Wintsch noted that Evian has succeeded in selling water for roughly ten times the per-gallon price of gasoline by creating an appealing story. Her point: “If a product as bland as *water* can tell an epic, inspiring, and compelling story, *clearly* the Smithsonian can.”

Wintsch offered some thoughts about marketing strategies for a Smithsonian “brand,” and suggested the logical place to start would be with a re-think of the literature that the various Smithsonian units already print in massive quantities for public distribution. She suggested that much of this literature conspicuously fails to leverage the Smithsonian name, with its connotations of quality and value, placing greater emphasis instead on an individual museum, exhibition, or program that does not enjoy broad name recognition.

Conclusions

Diversifying Smithsonian audiences is a long-run endeavor. Indeed, in the long run, it is a necessity. Young America is increasingly ethnically diverse, at least in certain key metropolitan areas, states, and regions. A conservative estimate is that by no later than 2050, half of the US population will be from “minority” groups. The Latino and Asian communities are growing at a particularly rapid clip, and the wealth controlled by minority communities is expanding at a staggering rate. At the same time, the tastes associated with Generation X and, even more so, the immense Generation Y cohort (which is larger than the Baby Boom generation) will soon dominate US society in both its commercial and cultural manifestations. Institutions that cling to the models and approaches that appealed to the World War II and Baby Boom generations will be left behind.

But as Underhill pointed out, even if the overall project is an ongoing, long-run endeavor, some elements of that project can be implemented in the short and medium terms. For example, the Internet is a key outreach tool to younger audiences, and a thorough re-thinking of the Smithsonian’s approach to using the Web for outreach can start *right now*, working within available resources. Seeking ways to use existing communications tools in a more integrated fashion is a project for the medium term.

Lowry ended the meeting with some words of caution. First, the Smithsonian cannot effectively market something that does not exist. Successfully “branding” the Smithsonian as a whole is not a realistic option if the Institution is not woven together as a whole. This suggests the need for careful re-assessment of the relationship between the parts of the Institution and the center before proceeding with ambitious marketing efforts.

Second and even more fundamental, in any undertaking that involves basic change and ongoing re-adjustment to new circumstances, the issue of organizational nimbleness arises. In an organization of the Smithsonian’s size, diversity among units, and entrenched culture—not to mention the constraints that come with federal funding—the

threat of institutional inertia looms large and may thwart even a genuine commitment from top management. In Lowry's words:

With the scale of the Smithsonian's operations and its many constituencies, the issue of *velocity*—the speed at which you can process information, shape programs, get them out to the public, react to the public's reaction, and recast those programs— is a major concern. The institutions that can do this well are those that will resonate with Generation X and Generation Y. Those that cannot will struggle mightily.