
MuseumsEtc: 10 Must Reads

Learning, Engaging, Enriching



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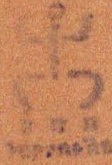
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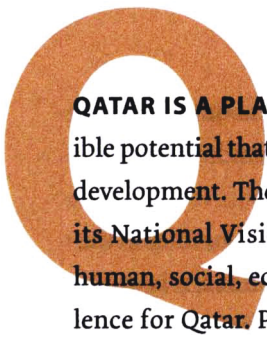
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CHAPTER 1

SIX THINGS WE DIDN'T KNOW: RESEARCHING THE NEEDS OF FAMILY AUDIENCES

JOHN BULL &
SHAIKHA HAMAD AL THANI



QATAR IS A PLACE OF RICH heritage and incredible potential that is going through a period of rapid development. The State is swiftly moving to deliver its National Vision 2030 (QNV), a plan to achieve human, social, economic and environmental excellence for Qatar. Projects in the fields of education, culture, sustainable development and sports (to name but a few) are underway and there will be many more.

The nation is using its riches strategically and is quickly laying the foundations to become a knowledge-based society. It has succeeded in carving out a high-quality education sector, partly through the extensive work of the Qatar Foundation, under the patronage of the Emir H.H. Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani and the vision of H.H. Sheikha Moza bint Nasser. Qatar's education sector is now competing with the best of the world as Qatar Foundation houses a growing number of international universities and research facilities.

Through its achievements, Qatar is proving to its own communities and the world at large that it has a grand vision that goes far beyond petrochemicals. What is particularly refreshing for those of us in the museum sector is the centrality of culture to that vision. Qatar, alongside other countries in the Arabian Gulf, is working hard to preserve its heritage

in order to educate new generations about their past and to ensure that culture is not discarded or undermined in favour of development.

As Qatar plays increasingly significant roles in the modern worlds of economics and politics, it is working hard to ensure it carries its culture and heritage along with it. Qatar stands with other Gulf nations who see investment in culture as a significant priority. The National Vision outlines the need for museums when it states the desire to have “effective public institutions and strong and active civil society organizations that preserve Qatar’s national heritage and enhance Arab and Islamic values and identity” (General Secretariat for Development Planning 2008: 22). This cultural prioritization has been noticed internationally; talking about the architecture of the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Nicolai Ouroussoff from the *New York Times* explains that, “the building’s austere almost primitive forms and the dazzling collections it houses underscore the seriousness of the country’s cultural ambition” (2008, online).

Qatar is therefore not *just* building museums it is using them to fulfil its long-term national responsibilities to the 2030 Vision. It is working to build generations of museum visitors and art lovers. Robust and locally orientated institutions that foster culture are

seen as a step towards social development as they work to broaden experiences and perspectives. Cultural organisations are beginning to work collaboratively, as they share the goals of QNV, and largely are controlled by the government; recent examples include Qatar Museums Authority (QMA) exhibitions and artworks hosted at *Katara valley of cultures*.

QMA is “proposing national policies to build a vibrant museum, art and heritage sector” (Qatar Museums Authority nd., online). QMA, the government funded national body for museums, led by H.E. Sheikha Al Mayassa bint Hamad Al Thani, is ensuring that “what has been achieved in the past must be transformed into the living future” (Qatar Museums Authority nd., online).

Qatar has been home to museums for a reasonable length of time, marked most notably by the National Museum of Qatar which first opened its doors in 1975 and is due to reopen in the near future. QMA aspires to enthuse and excite local people with museums that are both of the highest global standards for education and enjoyment, and responsive to the needs of local audiences. As part of this desire to build museums that respond to the needs and aspirations of local people, QMA has undertaken a range of research; the project under discussion here investigated

family needs in relation to museums.

The research

The process for developing any audience/customer-facing product (museums no exception) begins with understanding your target audience, exploring their needs and wants. To this end our team at QMA began an extraordinary programme of audience research with families. This work has been both broad and deep, gaining an overview of family behaviour in the country and also the specifics of individual family values and practices. Research originally started in September 2010, has so far consisted of two major phases of activity and is currently (August 2012) ongoing.

The most extensive element of the research, which became the bedrock of all that was to follow was, what we believe to be, the largest family survey ever undertaken in Qatar. A survey distributed via schools received 1,700 responses (in Arabic and English) from families representing over 4,500 children.

Focus groups and in-depth interviews further developed our understanding of family behaviour, customs and values. They explored reactions to topics such as local heritage, environmentalism, creativity and modernisation. Over the past year and a half

through the survey and focussed sessions, we have spoken to around 3.5% of the total family population in the country with children under the age of eleven. All participants were resident in Qatar (rather than tourists), approximately one-third of participating families have been Qatari, a third from other Arab countries, and a third comprising other nationalities.

We also observed Qatari and Emirati families on visits to cultural and entertainment venues in Qatar and the UAE. We were flies on the wall as 63 families paid a visit to museums and “fun centres” in shopping malls. We paid close attention to the roles played by adults and children throughout their visits to these sites, but particularly at exhibits.

QMA is committed to audience-focussed practice, and to developing museums that truly respond to local needs. Without that commitment it would not have been possible to achieve the insights we have gained. That support carried us over some seemingly (at times) insurmountable challenges to conducting meaningful and accurate research.

An issue that has impacted the project throughout has been the lack of a history of audience research in the country. With notable exceptions, such as the National Census, very little market research has been conducted in Qatar. Organisationally this gave us

problems when looking for local partners experienced in delivering focus groups, telephone interviews, etc. It also raised barriers between us and the people we wanted to speak to who were naturally surprised and (sometimes) suspicious of our questions about their families.

Having worked around these roadblocks into our audience's lives, we needed to ensure that we were able to squeeze out delicate information whilst respecting our audience partners. This proved more difficult than it may have done in Europe and North America. In order to achieve this we worked with two British-based, cultural and museum organisations, Cultural Innovations and Morris Hargreaves McIntyre.

As a generalisation, it is correct to say that people in Qatar are incredibly polite, kind and respectful of others. Unfortunately when conducting research you need people who are prepared to be brutally honest with complete strangers. In Europe and North America people are perhaps more used to the rules of market research (having spared "just a minute" of our time for endless questions about favourite washing powders or preferred election candidates) and enjoy talking about the things that are liked, but especially moaning about the things that are not!

Qatari people have thankfully (by and large) been

spared this experience and are often more reluctant to let you know that your ideas might leave a little to be desired. As with research conducted anywhere in the world it is important to be aware of any social desirability bias clouding findings. This proved particularly true for children, who gave very different answers to the same questions depending upon whether their parents were present. For example with parents present their future profession was likely to be doctor, without parents they were more likely to want to be astronauts!

We needed to employ skilled interviewers to help us minimize this bias. Therefore, for example, we carefully phrased introductions to make it clear that the interviewer was from outside the QMA team, and therefore was not an authority figure that needed reassurance rather than critical feedback. The team working on this research project have decades of experience of delivering successful museums, in the Gulf and the West. Throughout the project we have worked hard to avoid any assumptions that “we know best”. This kind of attitude can easily lead to short-cuts and inaccurate guesswork concerning visitor behaviour.

This chapter is not designed to deliver a series of rules for the development of museum projects, nor is



Research exploring the needs of mothers with young children.