

# A GUIDE TO MAKING THE MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

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PLAY



ANDREA GALLAGHER NALLS

## COME, STAY, LEARN, PLAY

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**American  
Alliance of  
Museums**

# **COME, STAY, LEARN, PLAY**

## **A Guide to Making the Museum Experience**

**Andrea Gallagher Nalls**

**ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD**

*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

Published by Rowman & Littlefield

An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.

4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706

[www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com)

6 Tinworth Street, London SE11 5AL, United Kingdom

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Nalls, Andrea Gallagher, author. | American Alliance of Museums.

Title: Come, stay, learn, play : a guide to making the museum experience /  
Andrea Gallagher Nalls.

Description: Lanham : Rowman & Littlefield, [2021] | Includes bibliographical  
references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021018665 (print) | LCCN 2021018666 (ebook) | ISBN

9781538146620 (cloth) | ISBN 9781538146637 (paperback) | ISBN

9781538146644 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Museums—Management. | Museum visitors. | Museums—Social  
aspects. | Museums—Educational aspects.

Classification: LCC AM121 .N35 2021 (print) | LCC AM121 (ebook) | DDC  
069/.1—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021018665>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021018666>

For Sean, Cam, and Andie.

With enormous thanks to C. J. Roberts, Maria Steijlen, Lisa Richardson, Manny Leto, Malerie Dorman, Rodney and Krissy Kite-Powell, Nicole Conner, Brad Massey, Julie Matus, Susan Rimensnyder, Colleen Fernandez, Mr. Tom Touchton, and the staff of the Tampa Bay History Center. I am grateful to have learned from you.

In appreciation of the tremendous patience held by my editors, Charles Harmon and Erinn Slanina.

And lastly, to my entire visitor services family, it's you who makes the museum experience magic.

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## Foreword

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**I**N THIS TIME OF CONSTANT CHANGE, forced nimbleness, and quick response, I can only think of how those in visitor-facing roles have been demonstrating these traits for decades. We have been forced to reimagine our day-to-day tasks, experiences, services, and operations in a variety of ways during the 2020 pandemic—but in reality, it's nothing new for those working with visitors. Our niche has a long history of adjusting plans and elevating them to meet everyday realities. When constantly faced with the unexpected, visitor experience staff find ways to mold unpredictable situations into meaningful experiences with grace, humor, and professionalism.

In the past decade, the importance of visitor experience has heightened and been shown more understanding at all levels of institutions. After all, what are museums without visitors and their staff? They'd cease being museums and become beautiful storage buildings. So, we challenge everyone who is passionate about cultural institutions to continue to recognize and promote the importance of the visitor experience in their own circles. To continue to model that quality service, combined with meaningful and attentive engagement, leads to exceptional experiences for visitors and staff. Those exceptional services can lead to healthier work cultures, visitor satisfaction, and revenue. This work must be inclusive and people-first. Institutions are nothing without the people whose work propels and upholds the mission.

Throughout this book, we hope you engage (or re-engage) with the importance of this work and the larger museum field, especially in these challenging times. We hope you continue to display grace, humor, and



professionalism—and to break barriers. Visitor experience should be the fundamental priority of any cultural organization, and I am excited about the future of you and this incredible community.

Nicole Krom  
Founder and Chairperson, Visitor Experience Group;  
Membership and Outreach Manager,  
Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania

## Introduction

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**I**N 2011, PETER SHANKMAN, an author and entrepreneur, boarded a flight to Newark after a long day of back-to-back meetings. Shankman had left his home in New Jersey at 3:30 a.m. that morning to catch a 7 a.m. flight and was now returning on the 5 p.m.

Just before take-off, Shankman realized that he hadn't eaten since lunch and he wouldn't be able to eat until after the flight landed, so he jokingly tweeted:

Hey @Mortons—can you meet me at Newark airport with a porterhouse when I land in two hours? K, thanks.<sup>1</sup>

He then shut his phone off for the two-and-a-half-hour flight back home.

When Shankman arrived in Newark, he was surprised to find a tuxedoed man holding a bag. The man, named Alex, was from Morton's The Steakhouse in Hackensack, New Jersey, which was about twenty-four miles away from the airport. Alex went on to give Shankman a 24 oz. porterhouse and an order of shrimp, potatoes, bread, and, of course, silverware.

We live in a time where a person's experience with an organization or brand dictates whether or not that organization or brand obtains customer loyalty and affection. These days, everyone is a discerning experience critic. With online evaluation platforms like TripAdvisor and Yelp, it's easy to whip out your phone and either notate or even take a picture of the experience, good or bad, and share it in real-time with everyone you know.

A good experience at your museum comes down to this same idea of producing world-class moments and letting those moments be a motivating factor for your visitor to return. Consider this: Who would you trust more? An advertisement or a reliable friend telling you what a fantastic time they had somewhere? Shankman's experience with Morton's The Steakhouse has been shared countless times. It's one of those apocryphal stories to which organizations aspire.

A person can get a steak at countless restaurants, but it's the experience that will keep them brand-loyal; likewise, museums can be siloed and stuffy with a "no-touch" policy or they can be warm and welcoming places of comfort.

In 2011, a woman in North Carolina lost the diamond from her wedding ring while trying on clothes at a Nordstrom store. A store security worker saw her crawling on the sales floor under the racks. Once he realized what she was looking for, he joined the search.<sup>2</sup>

They couldn't locate the stone, so the employee asked two building-services workers for help. They opened up the store's vacuum cleaner bags, where they found the diamond from the ring. It was neither the ingenuity of Nordstrom's marketing department that elevated the woman's experience from terrible to terrific that day, nor was it the strategic brilliance of Nordstrom's top executives; it was the genuine care and concern of the security officer and facilities staff—all frontline, front-of-house employees—that created this experience. This is a classic example of their "Nordstrom Way," a customer service culture so revered it's studied as a model and hinges on their salespeople putting themselves in the shoes of their customers.<sup>3</sup>

I first became interested in making the museum experience twelve years ago as a frontline museum staff person. I recognized that no matter how robust our collection or high-quality our programming was, we as a museum would fail without successful delivery. Museums have the opportunity to inspire, educate, and bring people together, but in a moment—with just one small negative interaction—that possibility can be threatened.

Research by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) has shown that museums are essential. As economic engines, museums support more than 726,000 American jobs and contribute \$50 billion to the US economy each year. They are anchors of community and quality of life. More people visited an art museum, science center, historic house/site, zoo, or aquarium in 2018 than attended a professional sporting event. As digital educators, museums receive millions of online visits to their websites each year from diverse online communities, including teachers, parents, and students (also including those who are home-schooled). From a social service perspective, museums provide programs for children on the autism spectrum, English as a Second Language classes, and programs for adults with Alzheimer's or other cognitive

impairments. From a formal education standpoint, museums spend more than \$2 billion each year on education activities; the typical museum devotes three-quarters of its education budget to K–12 students and receives approximately fifty-five million visits each year from students in school groups. Children who visited a museum during kindergarten had higher achievement scores in reading, mathematics, and science in third grade than children who did not. Children who are most at risk for deficits and delays in achievement also see this benefit.

Museums are committed to ensuring that people of all backgrounds have access to high-quality experiences in their institutions. In 2012, 37 percent of museums were free or had suggested admission fees only; nearly all others offered discounts or free admission days. Since 2014, more than five hundred museums nationwide have facilitated more than two and a half million museum visits for low-income Americans through the Museums for All program. About 26 percent of museums are located in rural areas; other museums reach these communities with traveling vans, portable exhibits, and robust online resources.

And from a public-trust perspective, the American public considers museums the most trustworthy source of information in America, rated higher than local papers, nonprofit researchers, the US government, and academic researchers. Museums preserve and protect more than a billion objects. Museums are considered a more reliable source of historical information than books, teachers, or even personal accounts by relatives.

Ninety-seven percent of Americans believe that museums are educational assets for their communities, and 89 percent believe that museums contribute essential economic benefits to their community.<sup>4</sup>

Museums add value to people's lives, and as the people running those museums, we have a responsibility to be sharply focused on how to make museum-goers happy, how to teach them, how to make our museums safe and welcoming places for them, and how to make them want to come back.

I was reminded of the passion and tenacity of museum frontline employees when I realized that those I was interviewing (on ways they created successful museum experiences) were all monumentally talented and could have taken their sharp minds and excellent ideas to a different sector, where they might have (actually, definitely would have) made more money. Many came from an education, marketing, or curatorial background, but they made a promise to themselves and the museum field somewhere along their career trajectory. They committed their talents to the success of museums by dedicating their expertise to museum experience.

In 2019, I submitted a session proposal to the AAM to speak at that year's annual conference in New Orleans, Louisiana, on converting onetime visitors

into lifelong friends. What began as an inquest into why people would want to come back more than once to a museum, turned into a realization that it was through positive interactions with museum workers that visitors were most likely to form a bond. So, we presented ways to connect with visitors to create lasting memorable moments and win their favor. The response from the Alliance audience was overwhelmingly positive. In a standing-room-only session, we talked about how building personal relationships builds organizational success.

When the decision was made to write this book, I turned to that audience, and others like them—those talented, dedicated, frontline museum people who are committed to endearing their guests. As a result of these conversations, fantastic ideas emerged, and a more specific definition of “museum experience” was refined:

The museum experience is the emotion or reaction a visitor feels due to the organization’s efforts during visitor/museum interaction.

To be a successful museum experience professional, you must harbor sincere love for your institution and your mission, because that devotion is what will propel you to do better, even on the most challenging days. Making a museum experience isn’t simple, and it’s not for the faint of heart. But it is possible. And in this text, we will explore how.

This book is divided into various experience tracks such as hiring and training the right experience curators, breaking down silos, the importance of diversity, accessibility, inclusion, and equality for visitor comfort, visitor-to-member conversion, and visitor engagement—among other topics that will show you how to support a positive museum experience.

You will find that there is much reference to for-profit organizations. This is not to suggest cultural institutions have the resources that for-profits do—quite the contrary, actually—but synthesizing research conducted within the for-profit sector is advantageous to us for that exact reason. Museums do not have the resources that many for-profits do, so let’s allow them to hire the consultants, have entire departments conjure up new and exciting experience ideas, and spend the time and money fine-tuning what makes for an excellent experience. Then, let’s learn from them.

By the end of our time together, I am hopeful you will find that making museum experience requires the prioritization of people—staff and visitors—over all else within a museum; yes, that even includes the exhibits and collection. It was not always true, but today, most museums exist to attract and serve visitors.<sup>5</sup> Especially in today’s world.

The consumer marketplace has recently been through a catastrophic time, fraught with uncertainty and stress. We need museums to re-form our sense

of community and to reassure us that what's always been, will continue to be. The COVID-19 pandemic upended the way we all live. There is a requisite yearning for comfort, familiarity, consistency, and—honestly—distraction now more than ever.

Good museums serve their visitors well, and their front-line museum staff have an incredible opportunity to affect that success. Let's unpack how.

## Notes

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