

Title: Developing Products for Older Visitors to Museums

Authors: Professor Anna Leask PhD. and Professor Paul Barron PhD

Affiliation (both): Edinburgh Napier University, 219 Colinton Road, Edinburgh EH14 1DJ

Email: [a.leask@napier.ac.uk](mailto:a.leask@napier.ac.uk)

#### Abstract

With many developed nations experiencing an increasingly ageing population, an opportunity for the development of products and services to cater for their specific requirements in the museum and wider tourism destination is created. Drawing upon a recent research project conducted within Scotland, this paper considers the enablers and barriers to older (over 75) visitors to museums. The paper then considers the type and nature of products that could be developed within museums, and across destinations, to address their needs.

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# Developing Products for Older Visitors to Museums

## Introduction and objectives

There is a universal recognition and acceptance that the population in most developed nations is ageing, with generational studies identifying the long term significance and importance of this sector as the first wave of 'baby boomers' reaches retirement age. This shift in demographics has encouraged a focus on the older consumer and, increasingly, organisations are recognising the value of this emerging market through the introduction of new, or development of existing, products and services.

Focussing on the characteristics, needs and wants of the older visitor, this research has developed an understanding of the enablers and barriers to visiting museums and participating in events for older visitors. We have identified changes required to existing products in addition to the introduction of new products and services specifically designed for this group. The paper concludes with guidance regarding the development and operation of museum events to enable greater engagement with the older visitor within the museum setting.

## Research Question

What are the key enablers and barriers to older visitors accessing museum experiences and what products could be developed to meet this group's needs?

## Literature Review

As a result of a changing operating environment due to changes in core funding and increasingly diverse visitor expectations, museums have responded by becoming more commercially-focused and being more aware of the need to demonstrate their value and relevance. In particular they have recognised the potential of identifying and attracting specific generational groups, in attempting to reach non-traditional audiences and enhance their appeal to a broader range of visitors (Leask, 2016; Barron & Leask, 2017). Generational research has identified several cohorts within the population, generally guided by year of birth, who consequently demonstrate characteristics and needs that are distinct to their generation. These are often guided by life events and experiences, such as the development of technology or financial crises. Previous research indicates that 'older' people are most commonly associated within cohorts described as the 'Oldest Old' (pre-WW2) and 'Baby Boomer' (post-war), though other cited terms include 'Traditionalists', 'Silver visitors', and 'Seniors' (Zsarnoczky, 2015; Glover & Prideaux, 2008). Whichever term is used, Smiraglia's research (2016 p. 39) states that 'elderly visitors have characteristics and needs that are often distinct from those of other visitors'. It is also worth noting that older people are also valuable stakeholders in museums in great variety of roles – as visitors, volunteers, workers and donors (Hamblin & Harper, 2016; Museums Association, 2016; Kam, Lub & Hom, 2016).

Sheng and Chen's (2012) research into museum visitor experiences analysed visitor preferences for museum visitors, identifying that factors such as easiness, fun and historical reminiscence are important to all visitors, regardless of group format. Engagement with museums and galleries as visitors is seen to be beneficial for older people in terms of promoting social engagement, health and wellbeing, and reducing isolation (Hamblin & Harper, 2016), with recognition of the broad benefits of engagement with arts and culture (Arts Council England, 2016). However, little research has been conducted on the accessibility and availability of programmes and activities specifically designed for the older visitor (Smiraglia, 2016; Falk & Dierking, 2000), though several papers consider accessibility issues or specific health conditions such as dementia (Leask, 2018; Page, Innes & Cutler, 2014; Smiraglia, 2016).

While some questions exist regarding the morality of the heritage sector in targetting the older population for commercial activities, as well as social and learning activities, (Hansen & Zipsane, 2014), the lack of data and knowledge of the specific market needs and interests inhibits greater engagement in the variety of opportunities available between older people and museums. Research is needed into identification of the barriers and enablers to engagement and that these are then taken into consideration when designing and providing engagement opportunities within the museum setting. Therefore, the development of products and services for the older generation (over 75s) appears to present an opportunity to assist in the achievement of museum objectives, for example, to work across wider policy and social agendas.

## Methods

In addition to an extensive literature review of academic sources in the relevant areas of museum visitor experiences; generational studies; and ageing populations, the researchers also reviewed relevant industry and museum sector publications to provide the context for the research. The decision was taken to gather data from both managers and visitors to identify where similarities and differences exist, likewise a variety of methods were used to enhance the opportunities to explore a broader range of experiences and issues. Methods deemed most suitable for gaining a deeper understanding of the individual experiences were semi-structured interviews, with questions drawn from the findings from the literature review, though subsequently adapted for each individual interviewee.

The sample of visitor respondents for this research were initially sourced from Age Scotland and the UK University of the Third Age. A snowballing selection and recruitment approach (Bryman & Bell, 2015) was adopted thereafter as a means of utilising initial participants' contacts and thus increasing the total number of older (over 75 years old) visitors that were willing to be involved in the study. This sampling approach resulted in the identification of 12 participants who were over 75, from various social groups and from a range of locations across Scotland. Initial recruitment of manager respondents started at an academic – industry collaborative event, with further requests for volunteers sent by the Association of Scottish Visitor Attractions, resulting in the recruitment of twelve managers across Scotland. The data collected were transcribed and, based on the themes identified in the Audience Experience Model developed by Leask, Fyall and Barron (2013), a thematic analysis was undertaken.

## Findings

The research established that the key barriers to the older visitor accessing museums are a combination of issues surrounding cognitive and physical accessibility; a lack of market intelligence regarding older visitor needs; and a series of misconceptions regarding their specific needs. Seen as a 'hard to reach' audience group by managers, there was a view that increased direct promotion to this group (e.g. in the form of photographic images of older visitors in promotional material) might discourage other groups. The lack of available market intelligence as regards specific interests for this group was also considered to lead to situations where museum staff made assumptions about what groups might want, rather than arriving at informed decisions and targeted product development.

From the perspectives of the visitors, many of whom had a life-time habit of visiting museums, there was a perception that they were an 'invisible' group and that they were overlooked in museum product design. Several very individuals also had health considerations that impacted on their ability to visit, either personally or in their role as carers. One example given was the limited opportunity to travel to a museum as the main family driver was no longer able to drive and there was no alternative transport available. Available time and inclination to visit were also stated, with specific regards to multiple commitments such as caring for grandchildren and other caring responsibilities. Several respondents cited concerns in respect of practical issues of transport to and from museums, the availability of facilities (toilets and lifts) and that inclement weather would discourage them from visiting.

The key enablers were identified as being recognition of the value of this group and the creation of specific products or strong programmes (including education) appropriate to this group. The benefit of such developments were seen to achieve the remit of the organisations and to be of mutual benefit to museums and older visitors. Additionally it was reported that museum managers could use more inclusive design of the whole visitor experience – for physical and intellectual accessibility; the development of appropriate food and beverage services; and relevant marketing and communication. Cooperation between several museum and destination organisations was viewed as providing opportunities for the development of products (e.g. a series of regular events held across several museums), particularly where transport could be incorporated into the schedule. The involvement of employees and volunteers in the planning, delivery and governance of the products developed for this group was considered to be crucial.

## Discussion

The project team established that older visitors do, as identified by Smiraglia (2016) and Hansen and Zipsane (2014), have specific needs and characteristics in relation to museum visiting. The main barriers for the older visitors were due to accessibility - physical, intellectual, attitude, habit of visiting and financial. In order to encourage older visitor museums could develop a range of events/experiences specific to the group, though with

opportunities for inter-generational engagement. The actual practice of visiting could be encouraged by offering carer support, greater information on access and more informed staff training relating to awareness of needs. In addition the development (and subsequent communication) of facilities such as easily accessible toilets, quiet social spaces and seating would be welcome. Using the Audience Experience Model developed by Leask, Fyall and Barron (2013), it is observed that by addressing a combination of consumer factors (such as social space and degree of involvement) and organisation factors (such as relevant product development and specific servicescape adjustments), museums could successfully develop engaging consumer experiences for the older visitors. In developing products specifically aimed at older visitors, it would appear that events and experience products should be developed and held on a regular basis; involve exhibition visits and associated activities; and the opportunity to socialise with a variety of people. For example, the involvement of schoolchildren or young people to engage the visitors and provide the opportunity to interact across age groups would be appropriate, as would the involvement of expert speakers and craftspeople, or the use of reminiscence boxes (Smiraglia, 2016; Museums Association, 2016). Greater awareness on the part of museum staff might overcome some of the barriers identified by the respondents and contribute to the desired 'easiness' of visits for this group (Sheng & Chen, 2012) and enhancement of broader social benefits across a broad range of visitors (Museums Association, 2016).

## Conclusions

This scoping project has identified that there is an appetite for products to enhance the engagement of older visitors at museums, and that the involvement of older representatives in the design would assist museum managers in the development of appropriate products to overcome the barrier and enable greater engagement. The skills and opinions of the older visitors themselves would be influential in the development of sustainable products that recognise and utilise existing skills, knowledge and enthusiasm amongst this market.

## Limitations

This scoping project only involved a small sample of visitors, managers and museums across Scotland. The individual nature of the respondent's views and the specific nature of the museums recruited to be involved in this research mean that, therefore, the findings are not generalizable. That said, the individuals and museums involved all exhibited aspects and characteristics of the Scottish population and museum provision and may, therefore, still be relevant to other individual locations.

## Further Research

A broader study of a greater number of museums and other types of visitor attractions, alongside a larger study group that included representatives from a broader demographic group of the population would be relevant. This could enable greater depth and range of knowledge to inform future museum development and enhance older peoples' engagement with museums.

## Managerial Implications

This research has provided a great insight into how museums might develop products and experiences aimed specifically at this older visitor group. The key barriers and enablers have been identified, along with suggestions for future product development. It is suggested that museums conduct visitor experience reviews by involving members from this group in visits to identify barriers and enablers, subsequently followed by the development of specifically designed products. Suggested product development for museums would include development of a regular events aimed at this group, comprising an exhibition visit, activity and opportunity for social interaction with the rest of the group.

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