Considerations for Making Your Museum More Welcoming and Accessible for Visitors with Disabilities

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Who is about to enter your museum? Is it a person who uses a walker, wheelchair or electric scooter? Does he or she have a communication disability and speaks non-verbally through a communication device or with sign language? Can visitors with hearing aids hear well enough to understand you? Are there visually impaired people in line? Does your audience include service animals such as guide dogs for the blind or dogs for the deaf? Is your museum prepared to welcome a person who has a disability?

1. Introduction

Museum visitors are not all the same. Each person is an individual, with his or her own interests and abilities. As a museum professional, your goal is to provide a stimulating and enjoyable experience for all visitors.

Some visitors have physical, emotional or learning challenges. To anticipate some of these challenges requires advanced planning, identifying who your audience is and what their needs might be.

2. Who

Who is your audience? Do you work at a children's museum where most visitors will be between 1 and 13 years of age? Programming for this group will include hands-on participatory activities, often under the guidance of a teacher or other adult. Is your audience older students, such as those in high school or college? These students may enjoy hands-on activities and options to work together in groups, or they may learn individually. Are your visitors retired senior citizens? They may need assistance hearing a presentation, seeing an artifact or walking long distances.

3. What

What is the mission of your museum or programming? Is the environment filled with hands-on activities? Is the museum a place to learn through visual experience and reflection? Do visitors participate kinesthetically through physical movement?

4. Why

Why are some people not visiting your facility or program? Are there unseen barriers preventing their participation? Who is missing?

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5. Statistics

According to the United States Census [1], one in every five American citizens has a disability. According to Disability News [2], one in every twenty Japanese citizens has a disability. Disabilities are personalized, and individuals may use alternative techniques to achieve the same outcomes as people without disabilities. The following are some methods for providing a more welcome environment in your facility.

6. Mobility Access

Does the visitor use a walker or a wheelchair? If your museum has a thick rug or slippery floor, they may have difficulty traveling. Is the person standing on a Segway or seated on an electric scooter? The turning radii for these devices are very different, as are the viewing angles to watch programs and view exhibits.

7. Visual Access

Is vision required to enjoy a planetarium program? Helen Keller, an advocate for disability awareness who was herself both blind and deaf, visited a planetarium in 1932. Although she could not see the program directly or hear the presenter speak, she wrote of her experience, "No, I cannot see the stars you see shining up there in the velvety darkness of the heavens, but other stars just as bright are ever shining in my soul. My mind searches other heavens for their marvels." [3]

Visual impairment is a range of vision loss, from needing corrective lenses to having no vision at all. A museum visit can be very disappointing when all the exhibits are behind glass. However, strategies such as having touchable reproductions of museum objects for visitors to examine and providing pictorial descriptions of the material can help paint a picture in the visitor's mind's-eye.

8. Emotional Access

A visitor may have a disability that is not obvious. A person's learning style can affect their museum experience. For example, the autism spectrum is a wide range of abilities, including needing a quiet, low-light environment to remove distractions, not having the ability to communicate verbally, or not being able to make eye contact or control bodily movements. This is a challenge for both the museum and the visitor. Special education teachers, local organizations, family members and the visitor may be able to help with guidance on how to make the experience positive for the visitor through a non-judgmental access. Having a description and videos of your facility available in advance will allow the visitor to become more familiar with it, which can be instrumental in a positive experience.

9. Communication

Visitors who do not communicate verbally may use computer devices to speak for them. Some devices use pictures and words to construct phrases or sentences. The person may also use a computer to spell out words and combine the words into sentences. Physicist Stephen Hawking uses such a device.

Another method of communication is through sign language. People who use sign language as their primary communication mode include those who are deaf or hearing impaired, as well as people who can hear but may have a speech impediment or an inability to speak. Museums may consider having a person available who is fluent in sign language or provide sign language translations on tours and/or captioning on videos throughout the museum.

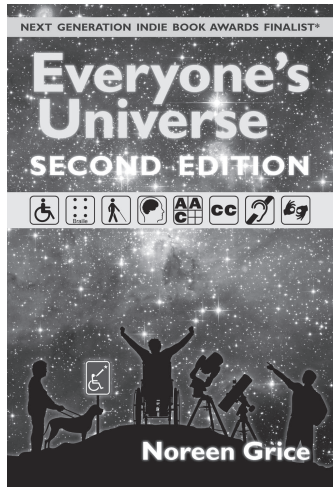

Fig. 1 Everyone's Universe book cover.

10. Service Animals

Service animals are not pets. They are animals that are trained to provide emotional comfort or to provide specifically trained services such as retrieving an item, pulling a wheelchair, guiding a person who is blind or alerting a person who is deaf.

A service animal generally wears special clothing or a leash that identifies it as a service animal. The service animal must accompany the visitor into the museum to provide the trained services.

A dog is the most common service animal, as a guide dog or dog for the deaf; however, other animals may provide services. Guide ponies have become more common as they can provide service for more than twenty years. Other animals may provide emotional support or specialty services.

11. Summary

Where can you find solutions to make your museum more welcoming and accommodating? Some museums and visitor centers may include tactile models and materials, telescopes that are accessible to a visitor in a wheel chair, programming geared toward visitors on the autism spectrum or special access for the hearing-impaired. Everyone's Universe [4] is a resource that lists suggestions for educators on how to make their facilities and programs more accessible. It also contains a list of facilities that already provide special accessibility options and how they do it. From this book, you may gain ideas that can be used in your location.

When you do make changes, don't make them in isolation. Involve people who have disabilities. Let them provide you guidance on what has been helpful for their access. Include an accessibility consultant to help you develop a more welcoming environment.

Remember, when you make materials and programs accessible for one group of people, you are making these same programs accessible for many people with different learning styles.

How will you create access-ability in your astronomy facility or program?

References

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