Defining, Planning and Measuring a Life-Enhancing Experience

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Introduction and background

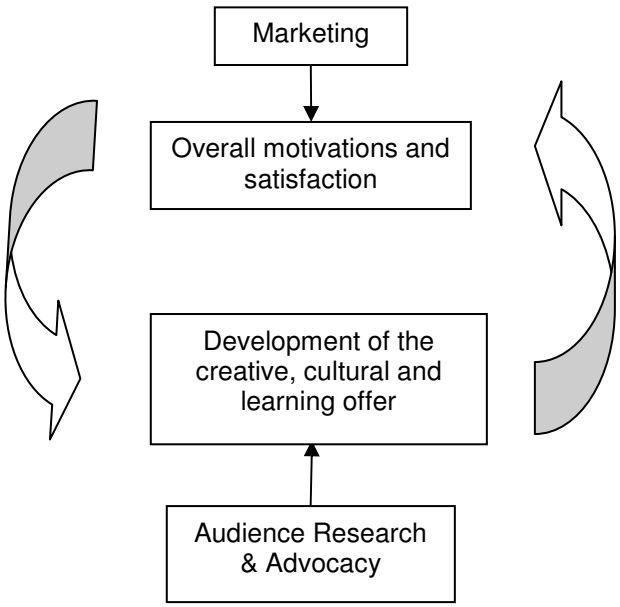
The National Museum of Science & Industry (NMSI) comprises three museums: Science Museum (London), National Railway Museum (York) and National Media Museum (Bradford). One of NMSI's objectives is to deliver life-enhancing experiences. In 2009, NMSI identified how it will measure its performance in delivering life-enhancing experiences, in order to continually develop and improve its offer. This document outlines what is meant by a life-enhancing experience for the audience, how such experiences are planned for and how they will be measured.

In 2008, Brian McMaster published his review 'Supporting Excellence in the Arts – from measurement to judgement', which aimed to address three issues:

- How the system of public-sector support for the arts can encourage excellence, risk-taking and innovation
- How artistic excellence can encourage wider and deeper engagement with the arts by audiences
- How to establish a light touch and non-bureaucratic methods to judge the quality of the arts in the future.

NMSI has put its audiences at the core of its business and aims to provide them with life-enhancing experiences. By measuring performance in the delivery of life-enhancing experiences and seeking to continually improve, NMSI is responding to the challenges raised by McMaster.

There are two groups within NMSI who work to understand visitors, their needs, motivations and experiences. These two groups are the Marketing Department, which seeks to understand why visitors are visiting and their overall satisfaction with the experience, and the Audience Research & Advocacy group, which seeks to understand visitors' needs in relation to the cultural product in order to develop engaging, accessible and inspiring exhibitions, websites and programmes. The work of these two groups is complementary (see diagram below) and will be used to plan, implement and measure life-enhancing experiences. In order to provide life-enhancing experiences NMSI will have to draw upon all its resources: its collections, staff and expertise in interpretation and communication.



A definition of life-enhancing experiences at NMSI

A life-enhancing experience at NMSI will have learning at its heart. Learning can be defined as the process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.[1]

The different outcomes of learning can be broadly grouped into the following five categories:[2]

- Knowledge and understanding
- Skills
- Attitudes and values
- Enjoyment, inspiration and creativity
- Action, behaviour and progression.

Learning does not just happen in relation to subject matter, but also in relation to:

- The self and others – e.g. visitors feel more confident
- The experience – e.g. visitors see a unique object
- Learning – e.g. visitors learning how to learn
- The institution(s) – e.g. visitors feel that museums are a place for them.

For a learning experience to be a life-enhancing experience then these experiences should also be engaging, memorable and inspiring, lasting longer than the visit itself.

Put quite simply:

- Learning couldn't be life-enhancing if it wasn't engaging
- Learning couldn't be life-enhancing if it wasn't memorable
- Learning couldn't be life-enhancing if it wasn't inspiring.

[1] Adapted from the Campaign for Learning definition.
[2] As defined by the Museums Libraries and Archives Council's 'Inspiring Learning for All' framework.

Planning for life-enhancing experiences
To deliver life-enhancing experiences we must draw on the unique strengths that museums have in the learning sector, build upon current models of success and look to exploit creative opportunities in order to compete successfully in the marketplace.

When developing new cultural products, the Learning Unit's Audience Research & Advocacy (ARA) group will ensure that life-enhancing experiences are embedded from the very beginning of key projects through:

1. Working with project teams to ensure that engaging, inspiring and memorable learning experiences are planned for and supported. This will be done through researching and advocating for audience needs, through the articulation of a learning strategy and through influencing the interpretation and vision.

2. Evaluation against the qualities which support life-enhancing experiences, and advocacy for the needs of the audiences during the research and development stages, thus removing barriers to use, enjoyment and learning during the development stages.

ARA is the self-critical process by which this institution improves and achieves excellence. Using this process we can ensure that as new products are developed they support the Museums' aims to create life-enhancing experiences.

Measuring life-enhancing experiences
Measuring life-enhancing experiences can be looked at in two ways:
1. Visitors' experience of a specific product *v.* their overall Museum experience
2. Indicators *v.* barriers to life-enhancing experiences.

These are represented in the table below, together with who will be conducting the assessment.

	Indicators for…	**Barriers to…**
Specific product	Summative evaluations (ARA)	Summative evaluations (ARA)
Overall Museum experience	Monthly exit survey (Marketing)	Monthly exit survey (Marketing)

Data gathered by Marketing will provide continuous measurement, whilst data gathered by ARA will provide periodic in-depth assessment of whether we are delivering life-enhancing experiences for our audiences.

Specific products* v. *overall Museum visit
Ascertaining whether visitors have life-enhancing experiences can be done in relation to specific products and in relation to a Museum-wide experience.

We propose that Learning's Audience Research & Advocacy group focuses on specific products through summative evaluations whilst Marketing focuses on the overall Museum experience through the monthly exit surveys.

These two routes will provide complementary information which will allow us to build up an accurate reflection of how NMSI is performing.

In addition, since ARA will be advocating during the research and development stages so that life-enhancing experiences are embedded in key cultural products, then the measurement will also include a report on the consultation undertaken with audiences during these stages.

Indicators* v. *barriers

Life-enhancing experiences can be measured both in terms of the extent to which they are supported and the extent to which barriers to them have been removed (for the audience).

Key cultural products

Regarding key cultural products, we can say that for them to be life-enhancing customers need to be able to use them, feel motivated to use them, feel that they are appropriate for them, and feel that they have had an enjoyable learning experience which has been inspiring and engaging.

This will be identified by ARA in the summative evaluations through:

- Identifying whether specific products are engaging, memorable and inspiring
- Looking for indicators of learning
- Identifying barriers to engagement and learning.

ARA will report on the breadth of learning happening, which should be planned for during development.

Overall Museum experience

Regarding the overall Museum experience, we can say that for it to be life-enhancing then customers' basic needs must be met, they must feel welcomed and respected, and they should have a fun and educational visit, which is inspiring and engaging. This has been drawn from the Customer Charter (see Appendix 1).

Marketing will use monthly exit surveys to determine the extent to which the above is being achieved or not achieved.

This will be done through existing questions on the monthly exit survey which look at:

- Overall satisfaction
- Overall responses to the galleries and exhibits
- Practical information, staff, cleanliness and queuing
- Likelihood of recommending
- Likelihood of visiting again.

An additional question will also be added. This will ask visitors the extent to which they agree or disagree with the following statements:

- Our visit today was enjoyable
- I feel the Science Museum/National Media Museum/National Railway Museum is a place for me
- Our visit today was interesting
- This visit brought science and technology/media/the story of railways alive for me
- I have learnt something new today
- This visit made me want to learn more about science and technology/media/some of the things covered here
- During our visit we talked to each other about what we were looking at and what we were doing.

Through this combination of questions it should be possible to ascertain whether barriers to an overall life-enhancing experience are being removed and the foundations for a life-enhancing experience laid down.

The ratings-scale style of the questions allows us to fulfil two roles:

1. Reporting on performance
2. Identifying areas for improvement.

The full list of questions is outlined in Appendix 2.

Results

Evidence gathered by ARA and Marketing will be used to:

- Ascertain whether NMSI is providing life-enhancing experiences for its visitors
- Strengthen knowledge of our customers and products with the result that NMSI continues to improve its offer and remains competitive.

Appendix 1

The NMSI Customer Charter

To ensure that visitors are at the heart of NMSI's practice, we have agreed a ten-point Customer Charter that aims to deliver world-class customer service and a life-enhancing experience for all our visitors. We recognise that our visitors have choices about where they go and how they spend their time. We will actively seek to understand and address their needs so we may successfully engage large and diverse audiences in our offer. This charter applies to all our customers – general admissions visitors, booked education groups and corporate hire – whether to our Museums or our websites.

This customer charter governs the behaviour of all NMSI staff. Everyone has a role to play in putting our audiences at the heart of what we do.

1. We will give our customers a warm welcome
When people choose to visit us, we will make it clear we are pleased. We will show we care. All members of NMSI staff, whatever their role, will smile and be friendly, courteous and knowledgeable. NMSI staff will be identifiable and approachable, and will offer their help.

2. We will meet the basic needs of all our customers
In our Museums, customers will have easy access to clean toilets, baby-changing facilities, drinking fountains, sufficient and reliable lifts, buggy parks and cloakrooms. We will provide comfortable environmental conditions, a clean and litter-free building, and a safe, secure and accessible experience. There will be places to sit, rest and reflect. Cafés, restaurants and shops will be good value for money and offer an appropriate range. Our offer will set high standards in service, quality and value. On the Web, we will provide sites that are easy to use.

3. We will make it easy for our visitors to find their way around
In our Museums and on the web, visitors will find well-planned spaces and pages, clear signage and maps, and gallery names that make sense. Information about how to get the best out of a visit will be readily available.

4. We will encourage customer feedback, listen to it and act on it
We will provide opportunities for customers to express their points of view. We will use our customer feedback to improve the service we deliver, and practise continuous improvement.

5. We will give our audiences access to our collections and exhibitions
We know that it is the nation's collections we have in our care. We will give people access to this, their heritage. We will design our offer, whether in our Museums or on the web, so that we welcome people of all generations and backgrounds. No-one will feel excluded. Our audiences will see themselves represented in our exhibits and programmes and on the staff; they will feel that they belong.

6. We will be accurate, reliable and clear
The information we provide in the Museums, on our websites, in our publications and in other products will be accurate, reliable and understandable. If we are offering an opinion, we will make this clear.

7. We will make sure that our Museums are places where you can have a good time and learn something too
We will work to make sure that there are no barriers to a good experience, whether in our Museums or on the web. Exhibits and galleries will be well designed and well lit. Labels will make sense and be relevant; interactives will work. Our galleries and exhibitions will be designed for a social experience, in which visitors can talk, interact and share. People learn in different ways and we will recognise this in the way we develop and deliver our cultural offer.

8. We will respect all our audiences for who they are and what they know
We will not patronise or baffle them. In everything we do, such as exhibits, labels, staff interactions or websites, we accept that people have different levels of knowledge and interest and we will design what we do to make our offer as accessible as possible. We will ask visitors regularly about their experiences with us and we will apply what we have learned to our work.

9. We will give our visitors choice and control
Visitors need to have some choice on how they navigate through the Museum, and in how they choose to experience an exhibition. We might suggest particular routes, but recognise that some people might want to do things their way.

10. We want all our audiences to have a life-enhancing experience with us
We would like visitors to take away more than memories of an enjoyable visit. We aim to give them a 'light bulb' moment, a sense of awe and wonder, a learning experience that is out of the ordinary and that they refer back to, an insight that helps them make sense of their world and enhances their lives.

Appendix 2

	Monthly exit survey questions	**Measure**
Q. 17	Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied were you with today's visit?	Five-point ratings scale: very satisfied – very dissatisfied
Q. 18	Thinking now about the Museum's galleries and exhibits, how would you rate: • The overall content of the galleries and exhibits? • Information to explain features and exhibits? • Their ability to engage your emotions? • Their ability to engage your mind?	Five-point ratings scale: excellent – very poor
Q. 19	How do you rate the Museum for: • Information to help find your way around? • The ease of finding staff to help you, if needed? • The helpfulness of staff? • The friendliness of staff? • Cleanliness here generally? • The length of time you have to queue for anything?	Five-point ratings scale: excellent – very poor
Q. 22	Would you recommend a visit to the Museum to friends and family?	Five-point ratings scale: definitely – definitely not
Q. 23	How likely are you to visit again in the future?	Five-point ratings scale: definitely – definitely not
New Q. 20	To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? • Our visit today was enjoyable • I feel the Science Museum/National Media Museum/National Railway Museum is a place for me • Our visit today was interesting • This visit brought science and technology/media/the story of railways alive for me • I have learnt something new today • This visit made me want to learn more about science and technology/media/some of the things covered here • During our visit we talked to each other about what we were looking at and what we were doing	Five-point ratings scale: agree strongly – disagree strongly

Through the above questions it should be possible to report whether the foundations of a life-enhancing experience have been laid.

For the visitor	Type of information from monthly exit survey
Basic needs are being met	Overall satisfaction, practical information
Visitors feel welcomed and respected	Overall satisfaction, practical information, new question
Visitors have a fun and educational visit	Overall responses to galleries and response to statements about the Museum
The experience is engaging and inspiring	Overall responses to galleries and response to statements about the Museum