

**RE → MUSEUM  
PRESENTS**



**CASE STUDIES  
IN INNOVATION**

**MARKETING**

# INTRODUCTION

While it is generally accepted that attracting public interest and engagement in any product or service requires an investment in marketing, museums have expressed mixed feelings about the idea, and have generally resisted investing in marketing on par with other organizations that seek audiences for their cultural offerings.

The resistance may be grounded in a sense that the uniqueness of individual artworks and the extraordinary quality of the museum work that preserves, studies and presents them are sufficient to generate appreciation and might even be diminished by treating them like common products or services.<sup>1</sup> The tension between these two perspectives seems to have been in place for a while now. A 1990 tug-of-war between two major museums was represented first by William Luers, who led the Metropolitan Museum of Art with Philippe de Montebello and said, “[T]he use of words such as marketing . . . sets administrators against curators and develops a ‘we-versus-they’ mentality towards management. At the Metropolitan Museum, we therefore do *not* have a marketing office, a marketing individual, or a marketing committee.”<sup>2</sup> At the same time, Harold Williams, who led the Getty Museum (and Getty Trust), responded: “Now let us talk about marketing. We are doing it every day. We are going to continue doing it. We are going to do it better over time because we need to.”<sup>3</sup>

Even if museums did generally accept the idea that attracting an audience requires an investment, they invest in that work at a very low level. Remuseum’s research indicates that museums invest on average less than 3% of their operating budgets on marketing, which is a level consistent with the American mining and construction industries (which do not need individual consumers or visitors).<sup>4</sup> Other cultural offerings spend a much larger percentage of their total budgets on marketing (for the film industry, that can be as much as 50%<sup>5</sup>, and even higher for blockbusters). Even performing arts institutions (as research from SMU Data Arts will reflect later in this report) routinely spend three to four times as much on marketing than art museums.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also possible that museums have not always wanted larger audiences.

<sup>2</sup> William H. Luers. *Museum Finances. The Economics of Art Museums*, The University of Chicago Press. 1991. p. 68. <https://www.nber.org/books-and-chapters/economics-art-museums/museum-finances>

<sup>3</sup> Harold M. Williams, *General Overview. The Economics of Art Museums*, The University of Chicago Press. 1991. p. 121. <https://www.nber.org/books-and-chapters/economics-art-museums/general-overview>

<sup>4</sup> According to the 2025 CMO Survey, the mining/construction industry spends 1.5% of their overall budgets on marketing. CMO Survey. “Highlights and Insights Report”. Spring 2025. [https://cmosurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The\\_CMO\\_Survey-Highlights\\_and\\_Insights\\_Report-2025.pdf](https://cmosurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/The_CMO_Survey-Highlights_and_Insights_Report-2025.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> Nashville Film Institute. “Film Marketing: Everything You Need to Know.” <https://www.nfi.edu/film-marketing/>

This report does not argue that museums should blindly increase their financial investment in advertising, nor does it deny that other investments (such as investments in access or even in the art they exhibit) can also draw new and bigger audiences to a museum. But it seems inarguable that fulfilling the potential of museum buildings, collections, and offerings to impact the lives of more humans will require museums to consider greater investments in attracting them. Even more, it will require museums and their funders to acknowledge that the fact that their work deserves visitors does not always mean it will generate them.

In October 2024 Remuseum partnered with Art Bridges Foundation to convene museum leaders to discuss topics related to access, audience development, and marketing. Remuseum has published two “case studies in innovation” addressing access and audience development; this one, on marketing, is our third.

**RE → MUSEUM + Art Bridges**

# BEYOND BRANDING

## MOVING FROM PRESERVING CULTURE TO MAKING CULTURE

Beyond simply branding and advertising, “marketing” should incorporate all the ways that a museum can make even more people care about its work. For cultural institutions, that may begin with the idea that they don’t actually make culture; people do.

At least that is the research-based argument of Dr. Marcus Collins, a professor at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan and author of the book *For the Culture*. Dr. Collins joined our convening to discuss his work, and suggested that the key to marketing success for museums lies in understanding and avoiding confusion between preserving and presenting objects of cultural production, which is what museums do, and creating culture, which is what people do (and do together).

Collins' work is grounded in the research of sociologist Émile Durkheim, who "talks about culture as a system – a system of conventions and expectations that demarcate who we are and govern what people like us do. The system is anchored in our identity, who we are, in all its complexity and all its intersectionality and all of its contradiction and all of its tension. All the multiple hyphenates that make up our personhood." Rather than the "hardware" of demographics (gender, race, age and location, etc.), it is the more complex and intangible "software" of cultural attachment (behaviors, identities, beliefs, values, etc.) that truly determine how people will consume products and services and attach themselves to brands and organizations, including museums.

Says Collins, "[W]hat we buy, what we wear, what we drive, where we go to school, if we go to school, who we marry, if we marry, how we vacation, how we bury the dead, and just about every decision we make is a byproduct of our cultural subscription, and culture moves forward based on one simple question: 'Do people like me do something like this?' If the answer is 'yes,' we do it. If the answer is 'no,' we don't."<sup>6</sup>

In that context, museums would shift their sense of themselves from being primarily *preservers* of culture to being *makers* of culture, together with the public. How might museums *enter* the culture and *attach* themselves to culture to such a degree that even more people feel that visiting museums is "something people like me do"?

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<sup>6</sup> University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. "Michigan Ross Professor Marcus Collins Explores the Importance of Culture in Marketing" May 1, 2023. <https://michiganross.umich.edu/news/michigan-ross-professor-marcus-collins-explores-importance-culture-marketing>

A museum, according to Collins, must first know who it is, who it is not, and who it wants to be. No museum can become a cultural attachment for all people, so each museum must determine who already aligns with its mission, values, and offerings. (In that sense, the many museum mission statements that reference a goal of welcoming “everyone” may be worthy but distracting, at least for purposes of identifying the untapped audiences most likely to visit. While museums can be for anyone, they cannot actually be for everyone. They just have to determine who that “anyone” can realistically include.)

**While some museum leaders might say that connecting their work to the culture of everyday people is “dumbing down,” Collins describes it in a more positive and realistic manner.**

As he told the museums at our convening:

*Although you're cultural institutions, you're not a cultural practice for everyone. And what we know about marketing, the first rule of marketing is this, you cannot target everyone. So the idea is: target the people who believe and [then] activate them. And when you activate them, they'll go activate other people on your behalf. But you have to first ask yourself, who are your people? Not the boxes that we put them in, but who are the people who believe what we believe, which then requires asking yourself, who are you and what do you believe? Not what do you do, not what do you curate, but how do you see the world and what do you believe?*

Mainstream cultural attachments always start with a narrower segment of the population, on the fringe. Collins reminded us that targeting people “in the middle” of a Gaussian bell curve is not actually possible. You have to win first at the edges, in the subculture (just like many of the artists whose work eventually made it into museum collections) where cultural loyalty is created and then spread to others. As Collins said to our group: “Everything that is normal today was once fringe and weird.”

While museums can be for anyone, they cannot actually be for everyone.

Reminding us that even brands with unlimited marketing budgets can't simply impose themselves on consumers, just as product features will not ultimately drive loyalty, Collins reminded us that "we buy things not because of what they are, but because of who we are."

**Recognizing that the cultural features that museums have developed may not exactly correspond to the cultural benefits that the public values is a first step in shifting a museum's focus towards new audiences and relationships.**

Beyond that, a museum need to ask a new set of questions about how it wants to address this reality and market its work:

How does its desire for a larger audience impact its mission, values, programming, interpretation, outreach, collection, education programs, AND marketing to meet the interests and needs of those groups?

How will this work be funded long term?

Is the museum willing to make the changes that new audiences might seek in order to become culturally attached to its work?

How does a museum then turn its answers to these strategic questions into tactics?

Two museums that joined our convening shared their answers to that question.

Rather than target everyone, or even target visitors based solely on their demographic categorization, these museums applied psychographic research on both current and potential visitors to develop "personas" around which they could identify the cultural needs of key audience segments, and then build those needs into their work.

# PSYCHOGRAPHIC SEGMENTATION

## DEFINING AND TARGETING BRAND ADVOCATES THROUGH PERSONAS

If museums want to attract visitors and drive cultural connections between people, they need to understand the layers of identity, behaviors and beliefs that define their existing champions and the brand champions they hope to attract in the future.

# AGO

## ART GALLERY OF ONTARIO



In developing a strategic and tactical approach that was right for its place, Toronto's **Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO)** leaned into the changes underway in Canada's fastest-growing and most diverse city. To understand the audiences it might focus on for growth, the AGO correlated its existing member data against a number of other data sets, using several data partners) to identify five target audience/household personas:

**Urban Families**

**Cultured Matures**

**Diverse Urban Fringers**

**Young Downtown Actives**

**Suburban Multi-Generationals**

The AGO could identify the percentage of Toronto's population represented by each group together with its AGO "penetration" (the percentage of each group that were already visiting the AGO), together with motivating factors, common cultural activities, most-used common communication platforms, political attitudes, and perspectives on advertising.

Leaning into these insights, the AGO has developed a holistic approach across all areas of the museum operation to steadily help these segments feel that the AGO is something "people like them" do. From focused efforts on collecting, programming and exhibitions to new admissions fees and pathways to membership,<sup>7</sup> their inclusive and intentional strategy led to a 2024 brand refresh to help communicate and amplify what guests can expect.

<sup>7</sup> Many of these tactics were identified in the second "Case Studies in Innovation" report, on Audience Development: <https://remuseum.org/case-studies-in-innovation-audience-development/>

# P | E | M

## PEABODY ESSEX MUSEUM



The **Peabody Essex Museum (PEM)** embarked on strategic persona work during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it began to analyze its accumulated visitor data and then conducted quantitative and qualitative research on its audiences, focusing on people who had visited PEM in the previous three years.

PEM arrived at a set of three psychographic personas, which are defined based on how a hypothetical visitor relates to, engages with, and is motivated by, museums and art.

**Artsy Alex.** This persona is primarily driven by art itself. They come to the museum to see unique objects and curated exhibitions, and to support a community of artists and culture workers.

**Learner Lee** – as their name implies – seeks immersion in learning through a shared experience with friends and family. They support the preservation of cultural heritage as a source of knowledge.

**Social Sam** needs the museum to be a platform to strengthen connections with others. Social Sam comes to the museum to make memories with friends, to participate in events, and to document those experiences on social media.

For each persona, the PEM team mapped out the steps they might take to arrive, explore, engage and share their visit with others. PEM sketched out the communication platforms where those personas are most likely to respond and the messages that would appeal to the emotional experiences each would seek to fulfill. By deeply tracing each persona's museum experience from the experiential goals the visitor would seek (which also define the reasons they would share it with others), to then evaluating it through the lens of real visitor data and interview feedback, PEM was able to imagine how its own work might have to change.

"Learner Lee", for example, might need more detailed visit support about the museum's offerings including a map with pre-planned routes based on particular themes. Learner Lee values ways to deepen their experience, which could include thematic food-and-beverage offerings and mementos and fact sheets to help them commemorate and showcase their visit. This kind of detail requires the museum to functionally cater experiences all across the museum, from ticketing and communications to store and restaurant.

PEM's Chief Marketing Officer, Derek O'Brien, noted one benefit of using personas based on motivation rather than demographics: he and his wife are different personas, so marketing to them (one household) in the same way would not work. O'Brien also explained that it was hard but necessary to limit PEM's work to three personas. When some colleagues noted that visitors to PEM represent more than three defined personas (or sets of motivations), he responded that the limited number of personas allowed them to target almost unlimited demographics, which they could never achieve if they started with demographic targeting.

While PEM focuses on psychographic-based personas like "Learner Lee" in developing marketing plans, programs, experiences and messages, the museum did need to address demographic identifiers in developing specific events or buying media for advertising. For that reason, PEM has identified five demographic-based growth potential audiences ("Cultural Tourists," "Local Community," "Young Adults," "Families," and "Latinx,") that they use to quantify and achieve specific goals for museum attendance.

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- ◆ CULTURAL TOURISTS
- ◆ LOCAL COMMUNITY
- ◆ YOUNG ADULTS
- ◆ FAMILIES
- ◆ LATINX

Some audiences are prioritized because PEM under-indexes in them. For example, using the cloud-based data and analytics software TruTrade,<sup>8</sup> PEM accessed anonymized cellphone data to learn that the museum under-indexed in visits from Young Adults (aged 18-24) and a LatinX Community that makes up 20% of Salem's population. While Young Adults closely correspond to the "Social Sam" persona, the LatinX Community is divided between all three personas; it would not work to target them with one message.

To deepen its understanding and evaluation of these practices, PEM developed a unique "Neuroscience Initiative" to define a theory of engagement and impact (tracked through a combination of attention, emotion, memory and behavior) that the museum could evaluate over time. By using a range of digital, biometric, wayfinding, social media, anonymized cell-signal tracking and self-reported data, PEM seeks to estimate and continually refine the visitor experience.

<sup>8</sup> Another museum has told Remuseum it works with the Morey Group to gather similar anonymized cellphone data on visitors. Technology will quickly supplement or even replace some time- and labor-intensive practices for visitor research.

The kinds of segmentation, persona and profiling work that the Peabody Essex Museum and the Art Gallery of Ontario have developed require incremental resources, expert talent, third-party support and new technology and software tools. Many museums believe they simply cannot afford this level of investment.

But there are options for every museum to more quickly and cost effectively begin to consider the profiles and segments that may be represented (or not) in their museum. Any museum team can leverage existing visitor and member data and free tools like the U.S. Census and Metropolitan Statistical Area reports to get a quick estimate of how its visitors compare in age, gender or ethnicity to the local, state or national population. Short visitor surveys in person or through affordable online survey tools might be sufficient to provide directional trends about the motivations and behaviors of visitors. Museums can then compare institutional and regional data with other publicly available visitor information. Two leading and current examples come from COVES and the Annual Survey of Museum-Goers.<sup>9</sup>

### Any museum can then follow a few lessons from the examples in this report:

Develop target audience personas that are based more on motivations, psychographics, needs and interests than on demographics. Among other things, this will help you avoid subjective assumptions based on your own identity and think about what cultural interests (in the sense that Marcus Collins uses the word) might attract people to your museum and then how to engage them.

Do not try to target more than 3-5 personas (the fewer the better).

Explore new technologies that can help you understand who is visiting your museum (and who isn't).

And finally, a lesson from both the AGO and PEM: don't worry about rebranding until you've done the hard work of understanding your audience, learning how to integrate that learning into your work, and seeing the results. A brand/logo should reflect the identity you have created with your community, not lead it.

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<sup>9</sup> The [COVES Study of the Arts](#) is an initiative by the Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES) that focuses specifically on visitor data in art museums; it is housed and supported by Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. COVES began with science and children's museums and later expanded to include art museums and other cultural institutions. The program enables participating museums to systematically collect, analyze, and compare visitor data to improve their practices. A public dashboard of aggregate insights is shared annually. Their [most recent aggregate report, "Understanding Our Visitors,"](#) launched in September 2025.

The [Annual Survey of Museum-Goers](#) is a national research project by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and Wilkening Consulting to understand the values, attitudes, and behaviors of museum visitors. The survey helps museums gather data on their audiences to improve strategic planning, brand messaging, and community engagement. Individual museums pay to participate, receiving data specific to their visitors and contributing to a larger national dataset that provides valuable insights for the entire museum field. Findings from the 2025 Annual Survey, in the form of [national "data stories"](#), are available to the public at no cost, most recently in November 2025.

Museums can also access still-relevant information from [Culture Track](#), a research initiative created by LaPlaca Cohen (later done in partnership with Slover Linett Audience Research and Yancey Consulting) that tracked perceptions, motivations, and barriers to cultural participation of the general public and cultural audiences. The most recent year of data collection [was 2021](#) with studies every few years going back to 2001. Culture Track reports stopped with the closure of LaPlaca Cohen.

# MARKETING SPEND

## **MUSEUMS UNDERFUND MARKETING WHEN THEY NEED NEW AUDIENCES MORE THAN EVER**

American museums have undergone a long period of expansion, but almost no American museum is anywhere near “capacity,” meaning it can accommodate many more visitors, and needs to accommodate many more visitors to gain the support required to fund its operations. Yet most American museums also underfund their investment in marketing, the method most likely to attract more visitors (and more repeat visitors) to their extraordinary collections and exhibitions.

In 2024, Colleen Dilenschneider’s IMPACTS Experience project report recommended that to achieve 90% or more of their market potential, museums should invest between 13.9% and 18.7% of annual revenues on audience expansion activity, defined as: paid media advertising; social media; community and public relations; and marketing, design and agency commissions and fees.<sup>10</sup>

If the IMPACTS data is even close to setting marketing benchmarks for museums, SMU DataArts provides a reality-check on where museum marketing investments currently stand. Between 2019 and 2022, SMU DataArts found that museums spent on average only 3% to 7% of annual revenues on marketing and related personnel, based on tracking a cohort of 75 small, medium and large museums. These mean marketing spends were skewed by outliers within each group and median marketing spends were far lower in each size category, suggesting that the typical museum spends an even lower percentage of its revenue on marketing than the 3-7% cited by SMU DataArts.<sup>11</sup>

Remuseum’s own database of over 150 major American art museums, using publicly available data, shows that museums spend, on average, only 2% of their total budgets on advertising (as reported on IRS Form 990).

In addition to spending well below recommended levels, museums also traditionally spend well below performing arts organizations. According to SMU DataArts, museum marketing spends per attendee were about one-third the level spent by non-profit theaters and symphonies and one-fourth the level spent by opera companies.<sup>12</sup>

**3-7%** AVERAGE MARKETING SPEND FOR ART MUSEUMS

<sup>10</sup> This represented a significant increase over Dilenschneider’s 2015 recommendations, due to the rising cost of media and fragmented communications market reducing media efficiency. Colleen Dilenschneider. “How Much Should You Spend on Marketing to Maximize Attendance? (DATA)”. March 2024. <https://www.colleendilen.com/2024/03/27/marketing-spend-maximize-attendance/>

<sup>11</sup> This conclusion is also confirmed by comparing the IMPACTS targets cited above, which *exclude* essential marketing costs like staff salaries and baseline communications platforms such as websites and paid subscription tools. These costs are included in SMU’s numbers, meaning that they represent an even lower percentage when measured against IMPACT’s benchmarks of 14-18%.

<sup>12</sup> National Center for Arts Research. “NCAR Report: Volume 2”. April 2015. <https://www2.americansforthearts.org/publications/national-center-arts-research-volume-two-report>

# CONCLUSION

American art museums are in a tight bind. While visitation remains below pre-COVID (which themselves reflected a historical decline), museum expenses have risen dramatically. Investing to attract new visitors represents both a requirement for most museums and a cost that they don't believe they afford. The tension between these two positions cannot be left to marketing departments fighting for a greater share of the museum's annual budget. It must be elevated to senior leadership and board-level conversations.

Marcus Collins tells us that we cannot attract new audiences without learning what motivates and connects them first. The Peabody Essex and Art Gallery of Ontario show us two ways to do just that. And SMU DataArts (along with many others) remind us that doing this work costs money.

Expanding museum audiences does not result from intent alone, nor can it result solely from great art and exhibitions. Museums (some of which may still harbor the Met's 40-year-old fear that marketing engenders an "us-versus-them" mentality within the institution itself) need to recognize that their platforms as preservers and presenters of culture will not succeed unless the public they serve feels that they are making culture together.

To deliver on this lofty goal, museums must ramp up investments in research, segmentation, marketing activities and experiential tools and personnel that can make that possible.

## As museum leaders and boards embark on annual budgeting and long-range strategic planning, they must begin asking new questions to secure funding for marketing:

What KPIs and performance indicators could be used to justify and evaluate that investment?

Which donors may resonate with funding data and insight work, whether because it expands access or earned income?

Can corporate partners support marketing with in-kind support (for marketing tools, research, advisors, or media)?

Does the museum have unrestricted funds it can apply to marketing?

Does the museum's budget itself represent the right balance between objects (acquisition, storage, preservation, and research) and people?

Within museums, individual departments may think an increased investment in marketing takes something away from them. But decades of declining attendance and rising budgets should focus all museum leaders (directors, departmental leaders, and trustees) on the benefits from increased attendance and/or repeat visitation.