





RULES

for a New Demographic Ballgame

BY RON CROUCH

If you do what you have always done, you'll be where you've always been. Unfortunately, the place you've always been may not exist in the future. Determining what you are doing, what people think about it, and what you could be doing differently are important issues for museums. This article addresses two different topics: the changing demographic of the audiences museums serve and the importance of and need for evaluation and ways to do it.

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New Demographic Realities

Museums will continue to experience changes in their audiences, with growing diversity in both race and age. The United States is experiencing a demographic revolution with consequences that will reverberate throughout the nation. In the past, the country had a pyramid-shaped population structure, with each younger generation more numerous than the preceding one. But in recent years, that shape has started to change, with new generations representing a smaller number than the preceding generations.

According to the 2000 Census, the smallest population cohort in the United States in the last 50 years is the group that is 20 to 29 years of age; the largest population cohort is 35 to 44 years of age. Half the population growth took place in the group that is 45 to 54 years old, and they are not having

tion that's aging? There will be a need not only to child-proof exhibits but to "senior-enhance" exhibits. Some museums have received bequests that require that a portion of the funds be used to enlarge signage to assist older clientele. How about steps and stairs that act as barriers not just to the handicapped but also to seniors? Perhaps building plans will soon include gentle ramps in addition to stairs. Will there be a need for more seating in exhibit galleries, allowing the periodic rest stops seniors may desire?

Diversity

The country is growing more and more diverse, with each younger generation more diverse than the preceding one. Our black population is stable; our Asian, Hispanic, and other minority populations are increasing; and the non-Hispanic



To prepare for a **middle-aged population that's aging**, museums will need not only to child-proof exhibits but to "senior-enhance" them.

a lot of children. What does that mean? Will children's museums have to appeal not only to children but to adults as well? Maybe children's museums will have to change their names to: "children at heart" museums, "young minds" museums, or "museums of learning."

How many of us in our 40s and 50s feel we are that old? Now I'm not talking about 7 a.m. on Monday morning before going to work. Do baby boomers feel and act their age when they seek entertainment and education? Or do many feel and act 20 years younger? They may be a great target audience for children's museums.

The "Middle-aging" of America

The United States is now experiencing the "middle-aging" of its population, with the largest group now between 40 and 58 years old, the products of the "baby boom" that took place between 1946 and 1964. The children who overwhelmed America's schools in the 1950s and 1960s and gave us a growing young workforce in the 1970s and 1980s have now become "middle-aged" adults. Is it any wonder that luxury car sales, with wider, more comfortable seating, are going up? The baby boomers are now in their prime earning and spending years. Guess where they're headed next? Yes, that's right. They are about to get old!

How should museums prepare for a middle-aged popula-

white population is declining. The group most likely to attend a theatrical performance in the United States are non-Hispanic white women in their 40s with a college degree or above. But the 40-something, non-Hispanic white population is 30-percent larger than the 20-something, non-Hispanic white population. Non-Hispanic whites in their early 40s comprise 71.9 percent of the U.S. population, but the same group comprises only 61.6 percent of those in their early 20s. While the non-Hispanic white population in the United States is declining in the younger age groups, minority populations are stable or increasing in younger age groups. Thus there will be a declining potential audience of non-Hispanic whites and a growing potential audience of minorities.

The country is going to see a stable black population, growing Asian and Hispanic populations, and a declining non-Hispanic white population. Will museums be able to appeal to all the different groups in their communities? There are also major regional trends, with the West and Northeast experiencing major growth in immigrant populations and the Southeast seeing much of its growth in its black population. The Southeast, which experienced major African-American out-migration in the early part of the 20th century, now is seeing black people return in large numbers, with 58 percent of all black growth in the 1990s in the United States occurring in the Southeast.

The Education Divide

We are seeing a growing divide between the educated and the uneducated in the United States. Muscle-power jobs are being replaced by machines as we move to a knowledge economy, and under-educated and under-skilled workers, particularly men, are in trouble, whether they are white, black, or Hispanic. In addition, more and more women are getting college degrees and moving into the workplace. Today, 60 percent of U.S. college students are female. However, now one in three children is born to an unmarried mother, up from one in 10 births 30 years ago. These unmarried mothers are usually poorly educated women in their 20s—not teenagers—in relationships with poorly educated men. Over half of all births to high-school dropouts are out of wedlock; one-third of births to high-school graduates are to unmarried women; and only 5 percent of births to college graduates are to unmarried women.

How do museums reach the single mother, her boyfriend, and their kids? We have a growing group of at-risk women and their children.

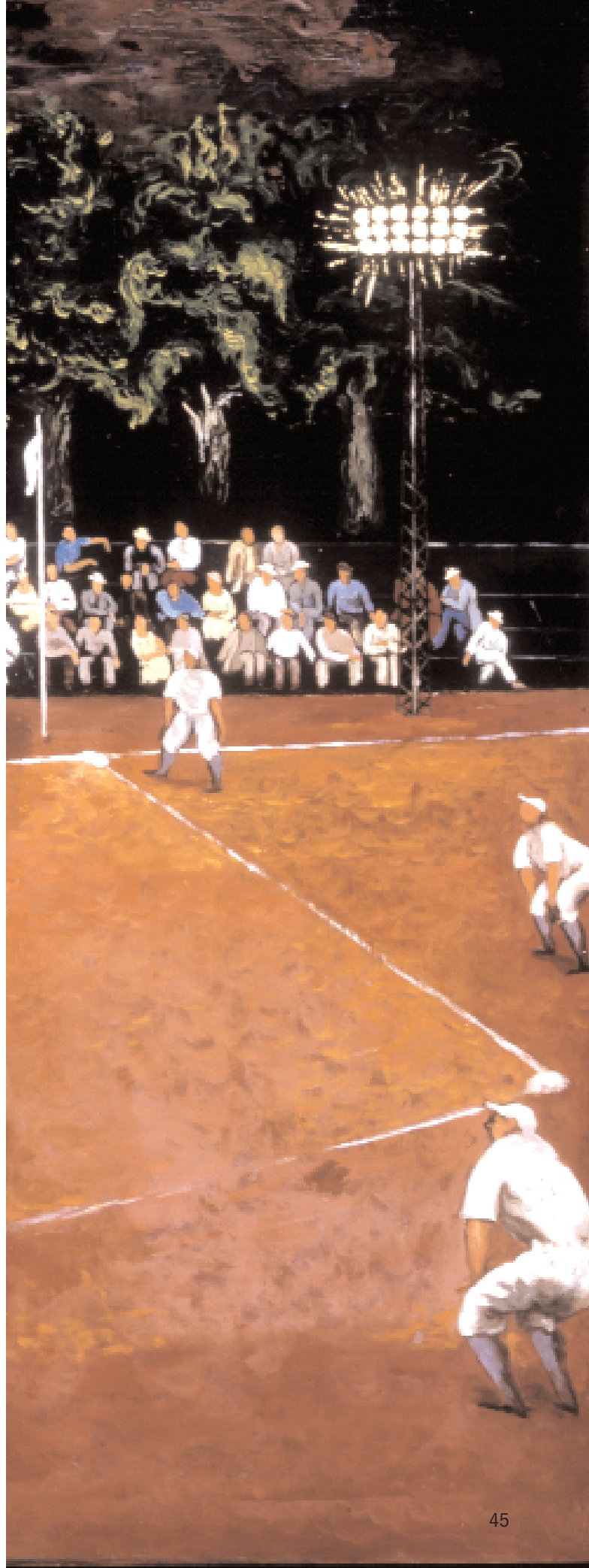
Rules for Data Analysis and Outcome Evaluation

As museums try to evaluate their effectiveness, they must have the right tools, such as the ability to gather data and conduct research. Museums that already have baselines indicating who their audience is by age, race, education, interest, etc., have a good head start. Those that don't should start to collect that information. A baseline of data helps a museum monitor changes in its audience and that audience's interests. Who comes to different exhibits? Which do they look at or experience the most? What do they like and dislike? What else would they like to see? Boards, funding organizations, government officials, and community groups all want to know whom museums are serving and how well.

This information can be gathered from observation by staff, focus groups, and surveys. But no matter which method you use, you'll need some time to record and analyze results. Gathering information without using it serves no purpose and museums need to ensure that their observations, focus groups, or surveys are representative of the audiences they serve. If your visitors represent a variety of age groups, you don't want to observe only teenagers. If you serve a variety of educational levels, you don't want to convene a single focus group of college-educated individuals. If you do otherwise, your results will be biased toward a particular age, or educational level, or race, or gender. You also may want to observe or survey your visitors at different times of day, on different days, or in different months.

It is also important to measure the right things. If you conduct focus groups or surveys, make sure the questions address what you want to measure. For example, asking the question "were staff friendly and did you enjoy the exhibits?" is really asking two questions. Which one did respondents answer? If they answered "no," did they mean that the staff

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wasn't friendly or that the exhibit was not interesting? The wording of both questions and response choices is important. What if your survey asked if people "enjoyed," "liked," "did not like," or "did not enjoy" an exhibit? How would you differentiate between enjoy and like? Open-ended questions collect more in-depth information but they also require staff to spend more time evaluating the responses. If you have 1,000 surveys, such a time crunch could cause a problem, but 50 surveys might not.

There are four criteria I would apply when analyzing data: critical thinking, trends, magnitude, and the big picture. To understand the past, be aware of the present, and look into the future, we must develop a framework for analysis that these four criteria help provide.

Critical Thinking

Today, we are bombarded with more and more information and data in both our personal and work lives. A new reality means not getting just more information but the right kinds. Computers must be seen as tools, not masters. Many young people have excellent computer skills but are missing critical-thinking skills. They can get the data but they lack the ability to interpret the data.

Computers should be in museums not to think for us but to teach us to think for ourselves. I'm not sure I want children, youth, or adults to experience every aspect of life in front of a computer. Yes, computers should be part of our lives, but only part. We cannot disregard life experience as a valuable teaching tool for addressing the challenges we face.

Trends

We are a news-addicted society; what happened today is our usual frame of reference. But it is important to analyze trends over time to determine if some-

thing is getting better or worse. Sociologists have found that our perceptions often don't change at the same time as reality. What museums help us do is see and understand the past, present, and future, often simultaneously.

Museums may think of their primary audience as families with children. Yet today, only one in three households has children under age 18. Have you seen that commercial in which a senior citizen tells her grown son he cannot go with her and her husband to Disney World? She says his wife and children would not appreciate it. Do you think Disney is trying to appeal to a new audience, one that's more mature and doesn't have kids? Do you think the company is tracking demographic trends and seeing a different kind of future for itself?

A few years ago, I was speaking to a group of 100 parents and their teenage daughters about teen births in a Kentucky county and, to my surprise, the parents became upset with my presentation. Like *Dragnet's* Sergeant Friday, I'd given them "Just the facts, ma'am." I'd looked out at the mothers, fathers, and their daughters and stated that the teenagers were more responsible than their mothers had been at the same age. In the 1970s, the teenage birth rate in the county was 72 births per 1,000 teenage girls; by the mid-1990s, it had fallen to 58 births per 1,000 teenage girls. Both rates were high, but it was clear that teen births were declining. In fact, the latest (1999) numbers from the National Center for Health Statistics indicate teen birth rates are the lowest ever recorded in the United States and far below record rates of the mid 1950s.

We must have the correct information about trends before we make decisions based on what we think is happening. Do you know the difference between perception and reality? What does it mean when perceptions don't match reality? What happens when

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what we know just isn't so anymore?

Magnitude

We need to look at the magnitude of the numbers and not look at them out of context. We hear so many news reports about young people being killed by their classmates. Some parents may even be afraid to send their children to school because schools are such violent places. However, when you look at the deaths of young people across the nation, the reality is far from the perception. In 1998, 14 children were killed at school by classmates. Each death was certainly tragic. But in 1998, at least 2,000 children were killed by their own parents or primary caregivers, and 8,000 young people were killed in car accidents. Is a child safer at school, at home, or in the family car? Schools are very safe places when the numbers are put in context. This is one case where we underestimate the probability of a common event and overestimate the probability of a rare event.

When testifying before a state school board, I raised the question of whether more kids' lives would be saved

by putting metal detectors in schools or returning driver's education to the curriculum. Many schools have dropped driver's education, but they are very concerned about school violence. Our perceptions often don't match our realities.

The Big Picture

We must see "the big picture." On a regular basis, every institution, museums, included, should conduct a SWOT analysis that looks at its Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Strengths and weaknesses are internal to the organization; opportunities and threats are external forces.

The United States is undergoing dramatic changes. The 2000 Census indicates that our population is growing in urban areas and along the inter-



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state highway system. Urban areas are benefiting from the presence of good roads, and the more isolated rural areas are being left behind. In addition, major population shifts are taking place across the country. In the last 10 years, domestic migration among U.S. citizens has been primarily to the Southeast and the interior West. California and the Northeast have both experienced major out-migration of their domestic populations with more than three million citizens in each area leaving between 1990 and 2000. The significant growth in California and the small growth in the Northeast are due to foreign immigration. Yet, even with increased foreign immigration, New York and Pennsylvania each lost two congressional seats after the 2000 Census, and Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio each lost one congressional seat. Almost all of the population growth in the United States is occurring in the Southeast, due to increasing domestic migration, and the West, due to foreign immigration.

Summary

These trends should not be seen as good or bad but as changes museums must understand and adapt to. How will museums accommodate older individuals, engage minority groups, and get their poorly educated constituents in their doors? How will museums deal with the time crunch, with more women in the workforce and more single parents, who feel they just don't have enough time to attend museums? Could changing your hours of operation, particularly during weekend and evening hours, encourage visitation? Are your facilities senior-friendly in their seating, steps, and signage?

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Museums need to evaluate what they are doing. They need to ensure that they know and understand their audiences. They need to continue what they do well and also determine what they need to do differently. These are just some of the questions and concerns museums will have to consider as they think about their changing audiences and their evolving needs. **M**