



Overview

Seattle Art Museum (SAM) is dedicated to connecting art to life. This mission speaks to our commitment to creating a deeper connection to the community and putting the visitor at the center of all of our programs and activities. A *Deepening the Dialogue: Art and Audience* grant from the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund, www.wallacefunds.org, helped make it possible for us to implement this vision throughout the museum with a focus on the following goals:

- Enhancing the quality of the SAM experience for all visitors
- Building SAM's audience
- Diversifying SAM

Through research, visitor feedback and community dialogue, we are seeking to better understand and respond to the needs of our audience and our diverse community. Three years ago, SAM set out to transform itself internally and externally. These changes are now apparent in the exhibitions we present, the types of interactions we offer, our focus on customer service and our efforts to break down barriers to enjoying SAM, whether they be practical, perceptual or experiential. These changes are just the beginning. SAM is more committed to its visitors and the community than ever before.

The following report outlines SAM's research findings, strategic planning work, current efforts, accomplishments to date and plans for the future.

"Many years ago, in response to the question 'Why don't more minorities and inner-city folks patronize SAM and other mainstream organizations?' I responded that those organizations could and should reach out to those groups... It is wonderful to see that SAM is doing just that."

—Community Member

Research Findings Overview

We devoted more than a year to audience research in order to learn how the community perceives SAM, what visitors desire, what opportunities there are to deepen community connections and what barriers exist to museum participation. The community assisted with this research by providing us with vital input to our surveys, targeted interviews and focus groups.

Through the intensive research and evaluation process, key findings relevant to audience building and diversification were identified as a basis for museum-wide changes. The following summarizes our findings:

Make SAM more welcoming and accessible

- Community members, particularly people of color and those from disadvantaged communities, perceive SAM as unwelcoming and elitist
- Visitors feel that customer service needs improvement
- Visitors find the downtown museum's entrance confusing
- Direct invitation to the museum has a major impact on the decision to visit
- Visitors are likely to return after an initial trip

Visitors want to come in groups and with families

- Many first time visitors from the various ethnic groups expressed a preference for experiencing SAM in a group or social setting
- Families are more likely to visit the museum if the experience is educational for their children
- Family programming needs to be presented and promoted consistently and aggressively

Visitors want to make meaningful connections with the art

- Visitors want to have more personal connection and involvement with the art they experience at the museum
- Visitors want to be able to make their own connections to the art, not to be told what art they will enjoy
- Visitors desire more local and regional art exhibited at the museum
- Interactions appealing to various learning styles, including mixed-media, are important to making visitors' museum experience positive
- Cultural education and exploratory learning have a major positive impact on the museum experience

Strategic Planning Process

While we were conducting our research work, we initiated an organization-wide **strategic planning** process. This intensive process included the following components:

- Research analysis
- Development of strategic process
- Cross-divisional task teams
- All staff retreat
- Planning for implementation
- Ongoing implementation

Cross-divisional task teams that consisted of staff members from the various SAM departments at all job levels were created to investigate and evaluate action items as well as tactics already in place at SAM. The teams evaluated more than 120 recommendations generated by the community research and determined the 23 top action items based on feasibility and impact. The items were then presented at an all staff retreat where the entire SAM team had the opportunity to voice their opinions and rate the items' impact on the overall goals of the initiative. The final step, which is currently in progress, is to update the community on SAM's efforts, refine plans based upon additional community feedback and implement the final action items.

Changes at SAM

While conducting audience research, SAM has undertaken tremendous efforts in the last three years to make changes at all levels of the museum's activities. The need and effectiveness of these efforts was endorsed by the research findings and ongoing evaluation:

- Presented exhibitions representing a variety of different cultures, such as *Do Ho Suh*, *Frida Kahlo*, *Diego Rivera*, and *Mexican Modernism: The Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection*, *Art From Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* and *Over the Line: The Art and Life of Jacob Lawrence*. With each of these exhibitions SAM produced associated programs and educational events
- Made concerted efforts to use these exhibitions to open doors to audience members who have not traditionally participated in SAM
- Built community relationships through special events, which have become an important part of SAM (for example, attendance at the Day of the Dead celebration has grown from 300 to 3,000)

- Partnered with nearly 300 organizations, from **Arts Corps** to **Zimbabwe Artist Project**, as part of the Community Partnerships Program. Community Partners are encouraged to host events, housed at the museum or in the community, related to exhibitions taking place at SAM
- Created a paid internship program to provide museum work experience to emerging professionals of color, as well as internships for high school students who provide SAM staff with valuable insights into youth culture

In addition, we have implemented the following changes that came directly from the research findings:

Make SAM more welcoming and accessible

1. Make the museum easier to navigate with various directional techniques, including signage and a welcome greeter
2. Continue education programs aimed at engaging diverse audiences
3. Extend special invites and offers to key community supporters
4. Continue to address the identified financial and transportation barriers for visitors
5. Increase the diversity of staff, board members, interns and volunteers through targeted outreach to communities of color

Encourage group and family visits

1. Continue to offer admission incentives and group rates to encourage return visits to the museum
2. Continue outreach to families through key community events (currently partnered with Seattle Center Festal events where SAM creates educational art and museum-related activities)
3. Continue to offer scheduled activities for family and youth services such as family festivals, summer art camp and family film series
4. Maintain ongoing daily programs and resources such as Please Touch Room, family guides, family audio tours and interactive guides and activities on our Web site.
5. Expand the free bus program in collaboration with youth organizations and community groups
6. Expand the **Community Partnership Program**

Help visitors want to make meaningful connections with the art

1. Develop events that link broad community issues with the arts, such as the program series with the Urban Enterprise Forum on Race
2. Open a community dialogue and engage diverse demographics in surveys, community meetings and marketing focus groups
3. Continue to involve community members on board committees
4. Send out monthly e-news to a Community Network and to community stakeholders (currently a listserv of over 2,000 people)
5. Take SAM to the community by engaging businesses, targeted communities and visitors in SAM exhibitions through the Speakers Bureau

Results to Date

Progress has already been made as a result of the actions SAM has taken to reach its goals. In addition to the new community partnerships and exhibitions, an expanded and more diverse audience is getting involved with the museum:

- *Mexican Modernism* exceeded attendance projection by 59%
- Hispanic/Latino visitorship increased from 2% to 6%
- During *Long Steps*, African American visitors increased from 2% to 12%
- Free first Saturdays at the Seattle Asian Art Museum has grown exponentially—averaging 800 to 1,000 visitors the first Saturday of each month

However, numbers cannot tell the whole story as our goals are ultimately about building relationships with organizations and the people who make them.

The real results can only come from our visitors. **Making a difference** in enriching the life of the visitor is key to the mission of SAM. Many have voiced their support of SAM's efforts and the following are just a few.

"I don't recall ever having this kind of opportunity to visit any museums as a child. And when my boys are older and much wiser and knowledgeable about art and culture, I have you to thank!!"

—Parent

"...the feeling here at SAM is so different than it was four years ago. It's palpable when you walk in the front door—in the attitudes of the other visitors and the staff people."

—Board Member

"Education is needed to lessen the walls that people are afraid to break down to talk to each other. We need to learn more about the art history of all cultures. I will make a conscious effort to visit art and cultures different from my own."

—Forum on Race participant comment

Planning for the Future

With many action items in place and the remaining items ready for implementation, SAM will continue to develop programs and ideas that address our goals of enhancing the visitor experience and building and diversifying our audience. Based on our extensive work, here are some of SAM's next steps:

- Invite visitors to “come as you are”
- Encourage staff to improve customer service; create a more diverse staff, board and volunteer pool; and create an overall positive museum culture
- Continue to pursue innovative ways to deepen visitors' understanding of art and the exhibitions, and have a more personal response to their experiences
- Develop tactics to make SAM more family-friendly
- Provide a more in-depth visitor experience using “behind-the-scenes” methods
- Increase community outreach through event promotions and collective staff efforts
- Commit to stay connected to the community and conduct ongoing research to continually improve SAM
- Continue to support the current outreach efforts of SAM

How you can help

Engaging the community is the key component to creating an inspirational, educational and enjoyable museum experience. We believe dialogue with the community needs to be ongoing and hope that you will participate in the following ways:

- Fill out a short **community survey**. We want to hear from you, and hear what you think of the changes and our plans for the future. To thank you, we are offering a free membership to the first 25 who complete the survey by July 31, 2003 and for the next 500, a 50% discounted membership at the Family, Dual or Individual level, or a free exhibition poster and two free passes.
- Spread the word and tell your friends about the changes at SAM.
- Visit our Web site at www.seattleartmuseum.org to find out more about our exhibitions and community events.
- Visit SAM and tell us about your experience.
- Share your “making a difference” story by e-mail at communityaffairs@seattleartmuseum.org. Some of the stories will be posted on our Web site.