



Listening For What They Want

Seeing the Trends in Why Visitors Come

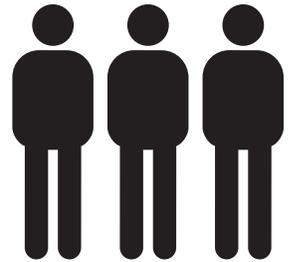
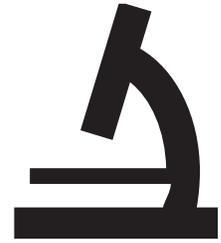
Why Do Visitors Come?

It seems like we don't know *anything* about our park's visitors. We can't survey them for information. We're afraid to ask deep questions about what they liked and didn't.

We use ourselves as proxies for visitors – we create experiences in our parks we would enjoy. We're sure that our reason for loving a place is the same as theirs.

But other organizations have been surveying visitors, gathering data on why they visit places of cultural importance, and publishing their findings.

Museum engagement expert Colleen Dilenschneider has used data on visitor interaction at cultural institutions to gather tons of wisdom on what visitors are seeking. Here's just a few key tidbits to keep your eye out for.



With Before What

Dilenschneider has found one key factor is more important than any other: the social experience in your place.

After they leave your park, visitors won't remember dates and names, facts or figures.

But they will remember and cherish the interactions—small and big—they had with the people they visited alongside. Often this is family and friends. Sometimes it's new friends met along the way. But the social element of an experiences matters far more than what they're doing.

What to Look For...

- Do they mention the people they're with by name?
- How often do they use "We"?
- Are their stories centered on the people alongside them?



That's Entertainment!

The "E-word" can feel a little dirty when building interpretation. We've even turned it into a pejorative: "interpretainment." But that's unfair.

Dilenschneider has found that visitors feeling entertained—no matter the type of place they are—is a key success factor in visitor experience.

Entertainment doesn't mean juggling or eating fire. It simply means not being boring! Entertainment means actively engaging visitors in exciting experiences where they help control the action.

What to Look For...

- What adjectives do they use to describe the visit?
- Is there something specific that specifically drew them in?
- What did they choose to do or not do?



A Value Proposition

It can be expensive to travel. There's the real costs – admission fees, parking fees, gas, food, souvenirs. Then there's the more invisible costs – time spent planning, travelling, waiting.

You don't control the parking fee. But you do control what they get in return for their investment!

Dilenschneider underscores that when visitors feel they got their money's worth, they appreciate a place more and grow to love it. Build something that seems worth the effort to get here.

What to Look For...

- Do they mention the cost? In a positive or negative way?
- Do you say they'll suggest the experience to friends?
- Was the effort to come worth it to them?

What Do Their Reviews Tell You?

Seeing the Best Practices of Interpretation in Our Visitors' Words

Visitors are telling us what they're looking for all the time! There are tons of review sites across the internet that allow visitors to *advise* others on the *trip* they had, or *yelp* at one another about what they enjoyed best.

These reviews come direct from visitors. Though details – like park names, names of visitors, and other tidbits – have been changed, the core remains almost exactly what our visitors shared. For each review, identify the words or phrases that tip you off to the trends Colleen Dilenschneider has found in her research.

Online Review for Ancient Trees National

I went here on Sunday with my family and 2 others. It was a good experience overall. My parents took me here when I was too young to remember.

Our hike was the “1-hour loop.” It was somewhat challenging, but I never broke a sweat. It was a little cold when we arrived, but warm when we left.

I was surprised at how briskly some people were walking, and I had to step to the side a few times to let some groups of people pass. A man who seemed to be walking side by side with his daughter thanked me. Parking is SO expensive, so I don't get why they rushed!

My wife's cousin led the way. At one point, he farted on the trail. My wife walked into the smell, but I didn't smell anything because I stayed back. :-)

My wife hurt her leg a little while walking and my son stubbed one of his big toes. I hurt my right ankle at the very end (it was after I went down some stairs) but I recovered quickly.

We kept seeing a young woman on a knee scooter. She stood out to us because she sort of looked like Avril Lavigne. We invited her to share a table with us at lunch.



What words or phrases told you they sought or found fellowship?



What words or phrases tell you they sought or found entertainment?



What words or phrases told you they sought or found value?

What Do Their Reviews Tell You?

Online Review for History Icon National Park

My motto is that you always need to see the historically significant sites whenever you can in a city like this one.

What an honor it was to be here! To stand where the people of the past took amazing risks... just no words! We took our 9-year-old. He was so engaged and loved seeing the building. Very, very cool stuff from a historical perspective.

Tour guide was a little stiff. I honestly wished there was more on this tour. I wish they had taken time to let us explore the place. But it is significant to be in a place where history was made. That really is something on its own, and it was free!

After we finished the tour, my son decided he wanted to take us to a few other historical places he saw on a map nearby, and we explored together.



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Now it's your park's turn!

Head out into the wild world of review sites on the internet and start reading what visitors have to say. Where do you see Dilenschneider's trends in your park's reviews? How are visitors showing they value with over what? What type of experiences do they find truly entertaining? How does the experience they get stack up to the investment they've made to visit? Capture your thoughts below—or start a whole new document to keep a running log of your findings.



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