

Fun Lessons Learned from Hospitality That Can Serve Museums

Robert C. Ford, John Bowen

“If you have fun at what you do, you’ll never work a day in your life.”

—American restaurateur Norman Brinker

Guests of Gaylord Opryland Resort & Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee, are drawn to wander its large atrium and admire the beautiful trees, plants, and flowers on display. Sometimes, while admiring this natural beauty, an unsuspecting guest will stand next to a large, dangling vine. Imagine their surprise when the vine reaches out and pats them on the head. After the initial shock, they realize that the vine is actually a person on stilts, disguised as a vine. Usually everyone laughs, including the employees watching as the scene unfolds. The point is simple but important: when guests are having fun, the employees usually are, too. The smiles on everyone’s faces shows that both those creating the fun and those watching it are having a good time.

We suggest that the opposite is also true: when employees aren’t having fun, guests won’t either. We believe that this lesson and others drawn from successful hospitality organizations can be useful to museums and exhibition makers who seek to satisfy or even “wow” their customers. We offer these lessons gained from decades of research and teaching about what makes hospitality organizations thrive. Too often, organizations providing guest experiences

forget that their guests and employees need to enjoy the experience if the organization, whether it is a hotel or a museum, wants them to return again or, better yet, become their advocates.

Guests come back to organizations that found a way to make their guest’s experience memorable by doing the things those who are widely recognized in the hospitality industry as successful do—Disney’s theme parks, Olive Garden’s chain of restaurants, The Ritz Carlton’s hotels. Since an experience only exists in the guest’s memory, memorable experiences are those that somehow strike an emotional chord. As museum practitioners Linda Norris and Rainey Tisdale put it, “if we want museum visitors to have ‘aha’ moments, we must make space for emotions.”¹ Pleasant surprises, amusement, joy, and happiness are all associated with positive emotions. Joy and happiness can be created by beautiful physical structures and creative displays, but the most fun people have is when they feel the emotional connection with the people who represent the service provider.² These employees or volunteers find ways to make the experience memorable by sharing their fun, amusement, joy and happiness. Emotions are contagious, and the people who

are hired or volunteer for the organization must not only be chosen on their ability to perform the assigned tasks but, also, be selected on their ability and willingness to make positive connections with guests. Successful hospitality organizations know the guest experience depends on an employee who naturally or through training can authentically display the positive, fun emotions that are contagious and memorable.³ Disney selects and trains its guest-contact employees to focus on the kids as they know the way to a parent's pleasant memory is through the positive emotions they feel when their child experiences delight.

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The purpose of this article is to identify some of the ways museums can encourage their staff (which we define as both paid and unpaid) to be emotionally contagious with their patrons with the goal of creating fun, and therefore memorable, experiences. If employees are having fun, are happy, joyful and smiling, the patrons are likely to mirror that sense of fun and happiness.⁴ Guests who are having fun tend to return and guests who are not having fun, do not.

In the hospitality industry, we refer to customers as guests, and we encourage readers of this article to also use this term when referring to their museum's visitors. The term is important in hospitality because

we want to constantly remind employees to treat each customer as if they were a special guest in their own home. By using the term, the relationship employees have with customers is elevated from a mere commercial transaction to having a relationship with their honored guests. How we refer to visitors is how we help define a guest-centric culture. Just as people go out of their way (and find it fun) to ensure their guests are having a good time, so too does this cultural value emphasize the level of guest satisfaction, enjoyment, and fun that makes their guests' visit memorable.

One important means for creating a memorable experience is through a guest having an emotional connection with a guest-facing staff member. Finding and training the guest-centric employees and volunteers who can make these emotional connections is a key focus of those hospitality organizations that are widely considered exemplars of customer service by both scholars and industry leaders, such as those mentioned earlier: Ritz-Carlton and Four Seasons hotels, Southwest Airlines, and Disney.⁵ These exemplars know that their guest-centric staff members are the reason they are successful. Just as Disney always starts its strategic and operational conversations with "what do our guests want and expect," every organization that has a customer should do the same. Whether the organization is a natural history museum, an art museum, or an aquarium, the guest expectations should be the starting point for every decision: from who to hire to what to display to how to best engage visitors in the exhibits. Just as no hospitality organization can survive in a marketplace with so many alternative uses of time and money, no museum can survive without a laser-like focus on its patrons, visitors, and supporters.

This has never been more important, especially with the ubiquity of online reviews. Guests use ratings by former guests on the popular travel platform TripAdvisor and social media sites to determine if they will visit a museum and add this information

to their own memorable experiences to decide if a return visit is worth their time.⁶ Making each guest's visit memorable, then, should be a critical focus for every museum leader. As a simple equation, staff who are having fun and showing it in their behaviors, voices, and smiling faces are likely to see that fun mirrored by guests and visitors who then tend to remember the experience in a positive way, tell their friends, and come back again.

Managing the Guest in Co-Producing the Experience

One of the key learnings from the extensive work done in service marketing on how to make guest experiences memorable is that the guest in any experience has a role to play in co-producing that experience.⁷ Examples range from the simple act of ordering a bottle of wine to pair with food to the complex challenge of helping one's grandchildren find all the clues to open the vault at the *Mindbender Mansion*, an exhibition at the Terry Lee Wells Nevada Discovery Museum in Reno. This job or role to perform is the guest's part of the co-production of the experience and it needs to be fun. The other part is the responsibility of the experience provider, and is played by the both the design of the experience and the staff members. Everyone the guest encounters or who is observing the guest – from security to maintenance to customer service – needs to pay attention, looking for clues that a patron is not enjoying the exhibit, having a problem, or is lost. They play a critical role: they both manage the guest's performance of their part of the co-production and make up for any gaps between what each guest can do in performing their role and what must be done to have a memorable experience. For example, not all guests are comfortable using the technology found in some museum exhibits. Some are not willing to read the text panels with explanations and directions. All staff members should be trained and expected to notice and approach with a smile any guest in need of assistance, having a problem, or just looking

unhappy. Staff should know that they can make the difference in a visitor gaining the full experience from the exhibit by simply offering to help.

Once the idea that the guest must be managed in co-producing the experience is realized, the guest-centric organization whose mission is to provide a successful experience will look at the experience differently. It will need to train all staff members, including those who are not specifically on the front lines, to identify gaps in guest capabilities (if a guest looks frustrated, lost, or angry, then they should proactively ask how to help), and create systematic solutions to anticipated gaps. In other words, guest-centric organizations study their guests and identify and seek to compensate, especially in training their personnel, for anything that might be a gap for the intended patrons. Staffs should be ready, willing, and able to turn an "ow" into a "wow" by filling the gap between what the guest must do in the experience and what guests can or will do. When employees or volunteers make the experience memorable, they have the fun of making the difference while ensuring the guest is having fun, too.

Disney receives many complimentary letters on how a "cast member" (their term for employee) saved the day and made the experience memorable by seeing a guest with a problem and proactively solving it. From the kid who had his dropped ice cream replaced for free by a thoughtful cast member trained to deliver on the Disney promise of fun, to the child who got a personal apology note from Tinker Bell after being disappointed by Captain Hook, who had to leave a photo opportunity before the child's turn, Disney employees are taught to find opportunities to ask guests how their experience is going and to find ways to turn disappointments into magical moments. This is managing the guest experience by teaching the employees to mind the gaps, and it makes the job fun. Employees of Disney World rated their job as high on happiness in a recent survey by Indeed.com, the largest job search engine.

If You Want the Patrons to Have Fun, Then Employees Must Have Fun, Too

Once the museum or hospitality organization accepts its role for managing guests in their co-producing roles, it becomes important to make sure the employees are ready, willing, and able to find and fix problems and to compensate for any co-production performance gaps in ways that project the fun and enjoyment the patron expected to have by attending the museum. Thus, management should be focused on recruiting, selecting, training, and reinforcing staff members, both paid and unpaid, to make sure they can and will make positive and memorable emotional connections.

Selecting is important because emotions are contagious, both happy and unhappy. Guest-facing jobs require staff to naturally and authentically display warmth, approachability, and inner happiness. If a staff member who interfaces with a guest cannot smile while “on stage,” then the obvious solution is to not put that person on stage. It is important to ensure that those people who are “the museum” represent it well. Not only do those who are customer-facing need to know and be enthusiastic about the museum’s mission and purpose, they also must know and be happily enthusiastic about engaging patrons in that mission and purpose. While an enthusiastic smile is contagious, so is a condescending frown. Employee selection, placement, and training are all critical. It is not enough to be proficient in the content of the job, but it is at least as important to be able to build the emotional bond that connects visitors with the mission and makes the experience memorable. While exhibitions and programs are the reason visitors come, it is the staff that makes them come back. People make the place so choose wisely.

Strategies to Create and Sustain a Fun Work Culture

The most important way to promote a fun work environment is to create and sustain

a culture that believes having fun at work is valued. Cultures are ways of acting, thinking, and speaking that reflect a group’s shared beliefs, values, and expected behaviors. Typically, organizations define their cultures by starting with a mission statement that defines what they do, why they do it, and who they do it for. The guest focus that creates a customer-centric culture is anchored in the mission. Once members of an organization accept that they are part of a group dedicated to helping visitors have fun in their experiences in that organization, everything can be tied to that mission.⁸

Using examples to make the intangible tangible. While the challenge in delivering an intangible guest experience is that it is intangible, training staff members on how to have fun creating fun for their guests can be taught through telling stories with specific examples. For example, the animated vine experience can be used to show new trainees what having fun with guests looks like. So can guest reviews on social media, which reflect what guests enjoy. And, sharing these examples with staff can lead to a discussion wherein employees come up with their own examples.

Successful service organizations are all noted for their statement of values and their expectation that they will be seen in everyone’s daily behaviors. Ritz-Carlton has its “Gold Standard,” Southwest Airlines its “Southwest Way,” and Disney its “Four Keys” and “Disney Service Basics” to provide guidelines for its employees on how to treat guests.

At team meetings at Marriott’s Gaylord Palms Resort and Convention Center in Orlando, Florida, every team member is expected to participate at least once a month in a discussion of the company’s core service values. Gaylord believes that the way to make the mission real is to tell stories about what it means to deliver flawless service. Its emphasis on this storytelling not only allows each employee to see the mission in terms that are specifically relevant to his

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or her own department, but also reminds the company's leaders of the importance of taking these seriously.⁹ At Ritz-Carlton hotels, there is no confusion about what service standards are for employees; each staff person carries a pocket card that simply states, "We are ladies and gentlemen serving ladies and gentlemen."

Modeling behavior. It is hard to have fun on any job when the supervisor is not fun to work for. In our research, we identified managerial behaviors that make a workplace fun for employees.¹⁰ Not only do these include such important supervisory practices as being fair, setting clear goals, rewarding the performing of job-related behaviors, publicly recognizing and celebrating employee excellence, and giving each person the opportunity to grow and develop in doing what they do best (and were hired to do), but, also, in being ebullient and spreading good cheer while performing these supervisory tasks. Supervisors spread good cheer by doing the small things that show respect and appreciation for their employees and their contributions to the organization's success – greeting employees they pass, using a cheerful tone of voice – as well as creating events that celebrate personal milestones and group milestones, arranging after work events.

Good supervisors are also known for putting employees at ease by having fun themselves. Herb Kelleher, former CEO of Southwest

Airlines, would dress up as the legendary performer Elvis Presley at employee parties, and take the time to interact with flight attendants and guests by greeting passengers as they boarded the plane. These fun actions can range from simply asking people how they are doing to promoting fun by wearing a silly costume (who doesn't remember Patch Adams, the doctor who dressed up as a clown to amuse children and inspired a worldwide group of doctors to do the same?) or telling a funny story. In other words, just as the guests are the customers for the customer-facing employees, the customer-facing employees are the customers for the supervisor. People find it fun to work for a supervisor who cares about them and respects their professional achievements, who recognizes their contributions with sincere appreciation, and who promotes a positive work environment. A smile is not only contagious from employee to guest but also from supervisor to employee.

Creating team-building activities. Finally, the organization and the supervisor can initiate actions that promote having fun at work. There is fun in the workplace when an organization and its managers intentionally encourage, initiate, and support a variety of enjoyable and pleasurable activities for employees.¹¹ Fun activities are typically (but not always) organized by management and are intended to foster a sense of enjoyment and commitment among employees. Many include food, as sharing food seems to be a universal part of activities where people are having fun. Activities mentioned by human resource managers include off-site outings, team-building activities such as volunteering, special dress-up days, friendly competitions, athletic leagues, bring-your-child-to-work days, and public celebrations of professional achievements and personal milestones (again, often with food supplied).¹²

While activities help create a fun workplace, management policies can also be important in encouraging employees to have fun, by including fun components in their job responsibilities. Fun job responsibilities are those tasks that are personally enjoyable,

rewarding, meaningful, and a good fit with the employee's interests.¹³ One thing we have learned in the hospitality industry is that while many jobs include substantial routine that feel as monotonous, repetitive, and as boring as an assembly line, when management encourages and trains employees to add fun interactions with guests, the boring jobs become fun and the guest experience becomes memorable. When employees experience workplace fun, they enjoy performing their job duties and increase employee job satisfaction and staff retention.¹⁴

A Fun Work Environment Yields Benefits for Employees, Guests, and the Organization

A memorable high-quality service experience is at least partly contingent upon high-quality interpersonal relationships between employees and customers. Fun in the workplace is important because it promotes positive moods and emotions and employee engagement in their jobs and the organization's mission. When service employees experience and display more positive emotions, customers are more apt to perceive the service encounter more favorably. Customers perceive the service experience more favorably not only because employees are having fun delivering a quality service, but also because customers "catch" the fun due to emotional contagion. Moreover, when employees experience positive emotions, they are more likely to be helpful and altruistic in their interactions with customers. This employee behavior is known as the feeling-good-doing-good effect.¹⁵ This is the result of acting like good organizational citizens instead of clock watching indifferent staff members, showing more enthusiasm and engagement in their jobs, and sticking around longer instead of quitting. A fun work environment is strongly associated with work engagement.¹⁶

Other studies investigating the relationship of having fun at work to organizational citizenship behavior – for example, behaviors

displayed by employees going above and beyond their job requirements—have shown that fun is positively related to such citizenship behaviors as well as building increased levels of trust between coworkers. Hospitality researcher Michael J. Tews and his colleagues concluded from their study of servers in a casual dining restaurant chain in the United States that fun at work promotes friendships among employees and improves retention, as few want to leave jobs where their friends are.¹⁷ In sum, a fun work environment not only leads to a fun experience for museum guests but also yields benefits for an organization.

In Summary

If guest experiences are fun, not only will guests of a museum, zoo, or exhibition have a more memorable experience, those who work in such a fun workplace also benefit. The lessons learned in hospitality can easily migrate to the museum field (and specifically exhibitions) as both seek to engage their guests and visitors in experiences that are memorable. A museum's culture that supports fun in the workplace not only creates more enjoyable experiences for the guests but also more satisfied and engaged employees. Employees and volunteers get enjoyment serving guests who are having a good experience and guests enjoy being served by happy employees. Fun experiences not only make guests come back but also turn them into advocates as they tell others about their experience. This creates a beneficial spiral for guests, employees, and museums. All this happens while everyone is having fun. Given the evidence from hospitality, it might be worthwhile to find ways to bring more fun into your organization.

Robert C. Ford, PhD is Professor of Management Emeritus, College of Business Administration, University of Central Florida, Orlando, Florida. rford@bus.ucf.edu

John Bowen, PhD is Professor of Hospitality Marketing Emeritus, Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, University of Houston, Texas. jtbowen@central.uh.edu

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