

Policy Issues Facing ASTC CEOs in 2014

Prepared for an ASTC 2014 Session ID 2814: "CEO Debate 2"

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Based on our phone calls with ASTC museum CEO's (see list at end) and our discussions with other science center leaders, the main debates currently front-of-mind for science center leaders are:

1. What are our primary purposes and obligations?
2. What are the ideal ways to define our audiences and their reasons for participation?
3. What activities (exhibits, theaters and programs) do we offer the public?
4. How is the museum's world changing, internally and externally, and how do we respond?
5. How do our revenue sources affect our purposes, audiences, activities and ability to change?

Each of these theme questions has under it a thicket of thorny issues to be dealt with, and at that sub-question level, in the weeds and brambles, the debates get interesting.

1 Purposes and Obligations: What are our primary purposes and obligations? Who determines them (Board, management, staff or funders/customers)? Who pays for them?

- A** As science centers, do we have an obligation to handle Millennium Compact issues in science, like climate change and infectious disease?
- B** As community museums, do we have an obligation to handle local social issues like cultural divisions, economic development and inequality of access and housing?
- C** As progressive institutions, do we have an obligation to take leadership positions on green sustainability, universal design, free admissions/access, diversity, and LGBT inclusion?
- D** As educational institutions, do we have an obligation to handle the basic principles of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics to tie into our local curriculum and/or inspire and engage people of all ages with science?
- E** As family centers, do we have an obligation to provide fun, engaging, hands-on experiences, quality time, and personally relevant learning resources?
- F** As catalysts for economic development, do we have an obligation to build tourism, enable tomorrow's workforce, promote local industries, raise neighborhood values, and create meaningful jobs?
- G** As science museums, do we have an obligation to use our intellectual and collection resources to add original research to public knowledge and scholarship?
- H** As public platforms for science, do we have an obligation to engage the public in current research and public policy in STEM?

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- I** As part of the infrastructure, do we have an obligation to workforce development and to engage and inspire youth to choose STEM careers? Or just to be comfortable with STEM in any life pursuit?
- 2 Audiences:** What are the ideal ways to define or describe our audiences and their reasons for participation?
- A** How important is the total head count?
- B** What is the relationship between total attendance and revenue generation?
- C** Our prime audience (largest share of walk-up, paying visitors) is: Science buffs; science neutral; or science averse?
- D** How do we deal with the various changing demographics both within our community and within the broader visitorship (tourists, broader geography)?
- E** Which audience segments are most important to us:
- Adults Visiting with Young Children (0 - 6)
 - Adults Visiting with Older Children (6 - 12)
 - School and Youth Groups
 - Adults 34+ Visiting With Adults
 - Young Adults 18-34 without Children
 - Teens 13-18
 - Solo Visitors 18-75+
- Do our activities reflect these priorities?
- F** Should we focus on specific audiences, such as the underserved, gifted children, home school children, students, or educators?
- G** Do our operating policies (admissions process/costs; opening hours, staffing, etc) affect who decides to engage with us?
- i** Do we adjust our operating hours and programs to be accessible to new or particularly valuable audiences? Can we close when audiences are not available, like Tuesday afternoons or September?
- H** Do we place as much emphasis on outreach as on on-site visitors?
- 3 Activities:** What activities (exhibits, theaters and programs) do we offer the public? Who decides? Who pays for them (both start-up and operating)?
- A** Do we focus on a core product (e.g., the exhibits) adding only complementary programs (e.g., camp-ins in the exhibit halls)? Or, Do we diversify our product/menu to leverage our brand and resources?
- B** Do we embrace virtual and/or off-site engagements, moving beyond the box-with-stuff limits of "old" museums?
- C** Do we convene people in a public space or impact people online?
- D** How do we do different activities for different audiences in the same spaces at different times?

4 Change: How is the museum's world changing, internally and externally, and how do we respond?

A Who drives change? Outside pressures? Board? Staff? You? Budget issues? Partners?

B Does our Board support changes we want to make, or demand changes we don't want to make? Is our Board good enough?

C How do we adjust the array of visitor experiences to fit their changing needs?

D How often do we need to change the content of our activities? Or is that not enough and we need to add new kinds of activities?

E How do we respond to changing community demographics – economics, race, etc.?

F What are the new forms of competition for our programs and activities?

G Does the museum's community role change with economic and demographic changes?

H Do elections and political climate affect our position and budget?

5 Revenues: How do our revenue sources affect our purposes, audiences, activities and ability to change?

A How do revenue sources shape science centers? Are government, university and earned revenue-funded science centers fundamentally different in character and purposes?

B Have we maxed out the visitor experience revenues, and if so, should we turn our attention to program revenues?

C Which is the better dominant revenue sector: earned revenue or support revenue? Easier? Less risky?

i Do additional dollars invested in our marketing department's budget have a higher ROI than in our development department?

D Are some revenue sectors more demanding than their revenue share? Are some more difficult than others? More influential?

E Are all our revenue sources elective, and therefore in need constant sales and value-for-money services, or are they fixed yearly amounts, giving us latitude to pursue our purposes within the funding source's broad guidelines?

F Do we focus on providing good value back to our revenue sources, or on using their funds to provide good value to others?

G Which revenue sectors are growing and shrinking? Do we focus on plugging leaks or riding the waves?

i Is it worth trying to reverse the decline in public support, or is it better to accept the trend and focus on growing private support?

H Do our community partnerships steal effort from revenues and services or add to them?

These issues were discussed interactively in "The CEO Debate 2: Museum leaders consider current issues," a 120 minute extended session held from 2:45 - 4:45 p.m. on Sunday, October 19, 2014. Moderators John W. Jacobsen and Robert "Mac" West posed the five strategic policy/practice questions to these eight CEOs:

- Kirsten Ellenbogen, Great Lakes Science Center, Cleveland, OH
- Sarah George, Natural History Museum of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT
- Chevy Humphrey, Arizona Science Center, Phoenix, AZ
- Guy Labine, Science North, Sudbury, ON, Canada
- Neville Petrie, ScienceAlive!, Christchurch, New Zealand
- Tim Ritchie, The Tech Museum of Innovation, San Jose, CA
- Gillian Thomas, Miami Science Museum, Miami, FL
- Charlie Trautmann, Sciencenter, Ithaca, NY

Several CEOs addressed each question, with varied approaches and ramifications, followed by group discussion and audience participation. Session evaluation was very positive and estimated attendance at 120.