

A decorative graphic in the top left corner consisting of several overlapping circles in various colors: blue, red, green, and purple. The circles are of different sizes and are arranged in a way that they appear to be floating or overlapping each other.

## ACM LEADERSHIP CALL NOTES

### **Investigating the Economy's Continued Impact on Pricing in Children's Museums Tuesday, April 27, 2010, 1:30 p.m. ET**

**Moderator:** Andy Ackerman, Executive Director, Children's Museum of Manhattan (NY)

#### **I. Welcome & Introduction**

Korie Twiggs, ACM Program Officer, Education, introduced the call, which is a follow-up to the January 2009 call on pricing in the economic downturn. Following today's call, moderator Andy Ackerman has offered to continue the conversation in person at InterActivity in St. Paul.

#### **II. Admissions & Membership**

Ackerman recognized that there are places in the country where the economy is beginning to recover and other areas where it is still facing challenges. He shared his observations about attendance and memberships going up, but government and corporate giving declining. He has seen that individual giving is starting to go back up, which may be positive for museums.

##### **A. Admissions Trends**

- Debbie Spiegelman said that Miami Children's Museum (FL) has seen a significant increase in admissions, but the museum has been spending more money on advertising, particularly on hotel ads to attract out of town visitors. Ackerman asked about the benchmarks being used to evaluate the effectiveness of the advertising. Spiegelman said that they compare 2010 attendance against the last three years.
- Ackerman asked what people are seeing in terms of tourism. Jennifer Alexander of Kidcity Children's Museum (Middletown, CT) has observed that people are not taking longer out-of-town vacations but are taking more day trips. However, her museum has not done anything specifically to attract this audience of stay-cationers/day trippers.

##### **B. Partnering with Other Organizations**

- Bill Schlageter said that the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh (PA), working through the Convention Visitors Bureau (CVB), is teaming up with other family attractions to offer joint advertising. They participate in a fuel program through local supermarkets, whereby shoppers get a free tank of gas and discounted admission coupons for area attractions. Schlageter said that the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh has been trying to partner with the local zoo to welcome zoo members to the children's museum during the winter or rainy days in the summer. They had another partnership with a ski resort, where on Sundays the ski resort offered a half-price lift ticket to children's museum members, and on Mondays ski resort members could take advantage of discounted admission to the museum. The museum received a note from one of their member families thanking them, because they have children of mixed ages, and with the joint membership they could take advantage of activities that appealed to different age levels.

- Michelle Winner said that Port Discovery Children's Museum (Baltimore, MD) teamed up with the Maryland Zoo, which is closed January and February, to offer zoo members free admission during those months. In return, the zoo offered children's museum members free admission to the zoo when the children's museum is closed.
- Laura Halad said that Imagine It! The Children's Museum of Atlanta (GA) participates in a "Swaptember" partnership, in which members of participating organizations can use their membership to get a discount on admission or gift shop purchases at other sites that participate. In 2009, the local zoo, aquarium and public garden participated.
- Another member mentioned the opportunity for several sites to participate in cross-promotion, which helps reduce advertising expenses. In exchange for promotion on partner Web sites and in joint press releases, dance and performance groups received increased exposure from the museum and were willing to perform there for free.

### C. Membership Trends

- Spiegelman said that Miami Children's Museum has run special membership promotions in honor of Dr. Seuss's birthday or through a birthday party host. In Miami there is a museum affiliate group that they collectively pushes for membership during the month of May.
- Halad reported that Imagine It! The Children's Museum of Atlanta had strong membership sales from Fall 2009 through the holiday season. They had a record-breaking January in terms of memberships, which was probably weather related, but since then membership sales have leveled off. The museum is offering a lot of value-added promotions (for example, extra months) but is not raising the cost of the membership.
- Mandy Jo Euresti from Children's Museum of Brownsville (TX) said that her museum has seen a small decrease in membership but an increase in admissions. She relates some of this growth to an advertising campaign of billboards across the Rio Grande Valley.
- Janice O'Donnell said that at Providence Children's Museum (RI), they have seen an increase in the number of memberships purchased online. In 2009 the museum had a record number of visitors and memberships. Attendance has been up for the first half of this year, but the bigger percentage of the visitors are members, so admission revenue is down. Families are trying to maximize the value of their memberships.
- Alexander said that Kidcity Children's Museum recently raised admission prices from \$7-\$8. As a result, they experienced an increase in membership (which stayed the same price), because people are seeing the increased value of membership.

### D. Free Admission Programs

Ackerman asked if anyone was seeing a correlation between the bad economy and attendance during the free admission times that many museums offer, whereby people prefer to attend the free times than invest in admission.

- Winner said that Port Discovery's new \$2 night, sponsored by Target, is attracting low-income families. Winner does not see the Target nights affecting general admission or memberships, because they are drawing a different audience.
- Jennifer Farrington said that Chicago Children's Museum (IL) has seen an increase in attendance on their free nights sponsored by Target and Kraft.
- Halad said that Imagine It! staff has tried to talk to their membership base that free days offer a different visitor experience compared to what they are getting out of a visit through membership. This communication seemed to help decrease attendance at Target free times during the second year the program was offered.

## III. Fee-Based Programs & Rentals

### A. Birthday Parties

- Spiegelman said Miami Children's Museum has seen an increase in birthday parties. They introduced a new birthday theme to correspond with the museum's *Wizard of Oz* traveling

exhibit. Additional marketing and advertising has helped boost party bookings. Staff have been calling families that previously have held birthday parties at the museum to book more parties, have maintained one-and-one contact with members and have reached out to a family/parenting magazine in the community. Additionally, facility rentals have just started to go back up.

- Schlageter asked Spiegelman how her museum has been marketing building rentals. Spiegelman said they have work with the Chamber of Commerce and send staff to Chamber meetings (the museum is a member of the Chamber). They have also sent blast emails to HR directors and meeting planners at different companies. Working through the CVB, they notify upcoming convention visitors that the children's museum is a fun venue option. The museum offers rental discounts to other chamber members.
- Ed Glisson said that Mid-Hudson Children's Museum (Poughkeepsie, NY) has seen a big increase in evening event rentals. The museum charges \$300 for a two-hour rental of the 8,000 sq. ft. space. The next step is to start marketing the rentals more actively. The museum has been giving away birthday party coupons when asked for raffle donations, as they see this as an opportunity to boost awareness of the venue and as a way to add families attending the parties to the museum's database.
- Kelly White O'Neill of Santa Maria Valley Discovery Museum (CA) also has seen an increase in their birthday parties. She assumes that this is the effect of blanketing the community with birthday party passes at the basic level, knowing that most birthday party hosts purchase upgrades to basic package.

## **B. Facility Rentals**

- Andrea Stark said that, in addition to birthday parties, Maine Discovery Museum (Bangor) has seen an increase in overnights. The staff decided to cancel a recent free Friday night program because they had the opportunity to host an overnight that would bring in significant revenue. They have always had Cub Scout and Girl Scout overnight groups, but this year they are getting more school groups. For the overnights, they offer some programming (badge programs for the scouts), lots of free choice play, a snack and breakfast.
- Ackerman asked about corporate rentals. Winner said that Port Discovery Children's Museum is looking into requests from community organizations to rent the museum on the weekend during times when the museum is not open to the public.
- Staff from DuPage Children's Museum (Naperville, IL) shared that their museum closed on a weekend day for a company to use the facility. The company has rebooked for this year. The museum staff tries to schedule these closings on days and times when they have lower attendance. They announce the closing on the museum's Web site.
- Schlageter asked for ideas on how else staff can let people know that the museum will not be open because of a special event, especially when visitors come from a multi-state area.
- Euresti responded that the Children's Museum of Brownsville markets closures on its Web site and through Twitter. The museum reserves nights for rentals to parent support groups and kindergarten graduations. If the museum closes for a private group on a Sunday (when attendance usually is high), then the rental is a higher fee. The availability of the museum to rent for kindergarten graduations is promoted through local school districts and private schools via a flyer. Many of the kindergarten graduation bookings result from word-of-mouth advertising.

## **IV. School Groups and Teacher Professional Development**

- Farrington said that Chicago Children's Museum has seen a change in school teacher needs: teachers are coming to the museum more for professional development and less for class-by-class school group registrations.
- Ackerman proposed that if children's museums spend more resources in professional development, then museums will reach more students than they just host a school group, as the teacher will go on to teach multiple classes of children. Professional development is a shift in how we see the use of facilities. Children's Museum of Manhattan (CMOM) offers

teacher professional development, a subsequent school visit and an invitation for individual students to return with his or her family. CMOM has finished the third year of a joint certificate program with the City University of New York for educators of low-income children under age 5. The program attracted the interest of funders as a clear example of training a hard-to-reach population. The certificate makes the at-home care providers eligible for a pay raise once they complete the program.

- In response to a question how educators are recruited for the certificate program, Ackerman said that CMOM uses the university's existing network of early childhood providers. The museum tries to avoid having a one-by-one database of individuals but instead maintain connections with partners that have those networks. [See the *Hand to Hand* archive in the Members Only section of ACM's Web site for CMOM's article, "Learning that Play is Learning" in the Fall 2009 issue.]

## V. Gift Shops and Food Service

- Glisson said that Mid-Hudson Children's Museum closed its gift shop following a significant decline in sales, particularly among members. The former gift shop space is now used for a new exhibit.
- Children's Museum and Theater of Maine also closed its gift shop after experiencing declining sales. They transitioned a temporary exhibit to become a permanent exhibit in that space, and opened kiosks near the admission desk.
- Alexander reported that Kidcity Children's Museum doubled the size of its gift shop. She feels that a gift shop is part of what people expect when they visit the museum. The museum has expanded its 50-sq.-ft. shop that sold children's books (a low cost item that does not take up much space) to 100 sq. ft.
- O'Neill said the Santa Maria Valley Discovery Museum board sees adding a store as a major priority.
- Stark reported that Maine Discovery Museum closed its store. From the front desk, staff continue to sell the most popular items from the former store and to offer items related to a particular exhibit.
- Ackerman said that companies may consider discounting the purchase price for items if they are purchased in bulk by the children's museum field. ACM Executive Director Janet Rice Elman said that if museums tell ACM which items that they buy, then ACM can try to negotiate an affinity partnership. Target was one store suggested for an affinity relationship.
- George Brzezinski said that the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh operates its own store, which earns a modest profit. The staff is planning an expansion of the gift shop space. Additionally, they have found success offering gift bags as an added feature for birthday party packages. The museum operates a café, and staff have plans to redesign the café space in the early fall.
- Alexander said that Kidcity does not sell food but converted a birthday party room into a snack area. This decision resulted from an increase in brown bagging by visitors. Even though it is not a revenue builder, the couple of hundred square feet reserved for families to eat has helped develop good will with visitors.

## VI. Making Projections for the Months Ahead

### A. Admissions Pricing & Attendance

- O'Donnell said that Providence Children's Museum is raising admission fees \$1 in June when the museum opens a new exhibit space. They hope that the exhibit will increase attendance for six months, but staff is being conservative in their projections. Membership has been very high and is beginning to cut into admission revenue. O'Donnell predicts membership will flag at the end of the year. She anticipates raising the extra person fee for membership will also go up a little.
- Glisson said that at Mid-Hudson Children's Museum, staff is projecting a decrease in school group attendance, so they are doing outreach to educators and are increasing programming.

- Euresti is optimistic about attendance at the Children's Museum of Brownsville through the summer. Her museum is promoting a full summer schedule of events on its Web site and in the member e-newsletter.

## **B. Staffing**

Ackerman feels that it is hard to be predictive. Projections in income also relate to projections for staffing. He asked whether museums are reducing, maintaining or building staff back up.

- Imagine It! The Children's Museum of Atlanta is being cautious around staffing, but they plan to hire a manager of individual giving, which they see as an area of growth.
- Alexander of Kidcity is seeing that a number of the corporate day cares will have cutbacks in school field trips, so she expects that the museum will take a revenue hit on school group revenue. However, this relieves pressure on staff who had to come to the museum specially for those visits.
- Schlageter of Children's Museum of Pittsburgh would like to hear more about outreach. Ackerman added that that it is an investment to train staff to work in the building or outside the building, to increase the versatility of museum programming.
- Ackerman suggested that it may be good for the children's museum field to get professional development around scenario planning, to learn how to make contingency plans based on varying environmental demands. He suggested scenario planning as a topic for a future call, moderated by a consultant with expertise in this area.

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