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The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s New Misguided Admissions Policy

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, January 10th, 2018

New York’s Metropolitan Museum, one of the world’s greatest art museum, a private institution in a New York City-owned building, just announced a change in its nearly fifty year-old “pay as you wish” admissions policy. Below, are the new conditions:

> • *Current pay-as-you-wish policy will continue for all New York State residents and students from Connecticut and New Jersey*
>
> • *Revised policy will charge a mandatory $25 admission fee for visitors from outside New York State*
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> • *All full-priced admissions tickets will be honored for three locations (The Fifth Avenue Met, The Breuer Met and The Cloisters)*

Over fifty years ago, admission to most American art museums, whether private or public, was free and unrestricted. Before 1970, The Met had a variety of admissions policies, including mandatory admission for all visitors on certain days and charging fees for specific temporary exhibitions.

In 1970, the Board of Trustees invented and implemented the “pay as you wish” admissions policy. In his book, *Making The Mummies Dance*, Tom Hoving, director of The Met from the late 1960s through the 1970s, described the origins of this policy.

“To cope with a then looming budget deficit, the trustees wanted to institute an admission charge. One proposed a dollar. Another made an imaginative suggestion; have a purely voluntary admission…He called it *pay what you wish* but you must pay something.”

When this new pay as you wish admissions policy was implemented, there was a “suggested admission” emblazoned above the ticket desks. It began at $10 and over the years it increased. For myself, I was quite comfortable with this procedure because it gave me the opportunity to balance my wallet with my assessment of the value of the experience. Sometimes my visits were brief; other times, they were extended and I paid accordingly.

View of 14th century Italian paintings gallery, in foreground Duccio di Buoninsegna, Mother and Child, Sienese circa 1300. Acquired 2004

This system appeared to be satisfactory until a new financial crisis loomed in 2017. Respected museum director Thomas P. Campbell, who virtually doubled attendance during his tenure, was dismissed because of looming budget deficits. As a consequence, the Board has initiated a broad series of budget reduction measures and investigations of income sources. Admission fees became a subject of examination and a new admissions policy was approved by the Board of Trustees. It was announced on January 4, 2018.

According to The Met, "The new mandatory admissions policy will affect approximately 31 percent of the Museum's visitors. Of those visitors, The Met's internal research indicates that four of five will be tourists from outside the tri-state area or from overseas who spend an average of $1,200 per person on their trips to New York. Furthermore, 41 percent of visitors pay no admission when they visit The Met because they are Met Museum members or are with groups or are children under 12. 14 percent enter on discounted passes. Thirty percent of Met visitors are from New York City, and 6 percent are from New York State areas outside the City."

Why revise a fifty-year old policy that seemed to be working? According to The Met, "In recent years, the Museum has experienced a significant decline in revenue generated per visitor under the pay-as-you-wish policy. In 2004, 63 percent of visitors contributed the full suggested admission. Today, only 17 percent of adults pay the full amount, a 73 per cent decline. The average per person contribution has also fallen to $9."

Despite what appear to be logical explanations from The Met, art critics in New York and Washington have expressed vehement disdain. In *The New York Times,* art critic Roberta Smith said, "Someone should be able to figure this without putting it on the public's shoulders. The projected annual increases in admissions revenue – from $42 to $50 million – seems minuscule, and they say that it is going to affect 31 percent of overall visitors. So why not find the money somewhere else and affect zero percent?"

Andrea Schwartz in *The New Yorker* asks "Could the Met afford to keep admission at its suggested price for everyone if it shifted its priorities?" She questions the cost of the recently constructed David H. Koch Plaza at the Fifth Avenue entrance. "The cost was sixty-five million dollars, an amount that makes the six million-dollar anticipated increases from ticket sales seem puny… What can be said, definitively, is that the Met's change of policy diminishes the cultural life of New York…

The wonder of The Met is that it is as open to the public as Central Park. You can walk in without a penny in your pocket and glade up the grand staircase from the lobby to the European wing feeling like the richest person in the world… or even. like my mother, to use the bathroom …"

Phillip Kennicott of *The Washington Post* said, "… going from a museum that was free to all to a museum with a mandatory admission for nearly a third of its visitors is the nuclear option for raising revenue. It's hard to believe that there were no other solutions to the fiscal crisis, given that the museum estimates that the new admission policy "will increase admissions revenue as a percentage of The Met's overall budget by 2 to 3 percent."

Being familiar with art museums on five continents, The Met is my all-time favorite. Over decades, I have had professional associations with The Met as: graduate student observer, researcher, guest curator, conference organizer (Computers and Their Potential Applications in Museums,1968), consultant, overseer of hundreds of thousands of dollars of New York State funds, and non-professionally as: gallery visitor, cafe and bookstore patron. Like Andrea Schwartz's mother, our kids used the bathrooms when we went to the Fifth Avenue East 86th Street Central Park playground.

Having had an extensive career involving programmatic innovation in art museums, I look at The Met today and see a department store in the age of Amazon. Its management philosophy can only incur more debt. The new admission policy is hardly a band-aid! It solves nothing and engenders negative public relations. Although this might appear to be heresy, I would recommend examining both the philosophy and operations of Disneyland as a visitor management, economic and marketing model to be emulated.

Currently, The Met has an audience of seven million visitors. That audience is being managed as though a smart phone never existed. This audience of 7,00,000 is potentially more valuable than its $17,000,000 endowment.

My solution to The Met's fiscal woes is to create "The Met Experience" as a merchandisable commodity. Consequently, my mantra is "Monetize The Met." It is such a vast and complex repository that it hosts many marketing potentials. How can these marketing potentials be refined and exploited? Lets start with the approximately seven million people who now visit there annually. To the best of my knowledge, there has been no systematic recording of these visitors with the possible exception of Met museum members and school groups. Having purchased admission many times, it is a straight cash or credit card transaction. I have never been aware of an attempt to record my identity along with contact information, express my reason for visiting The Met and my areas of interest.

Here's how I would monetize The Met.

Museum admissions would be purchased online. This online purchase would provide a data base to be exploited. At museum entrances there would be terminals like those at airports where you obtain your boarding pass. You would use your cell phone screen to enter the museum and later to enter specific galleries.

Let's take Arms and Armor. It's a winner with kids and people of all ages.

If The Met were to collaborate with a toy manufacturer or with art schools like Parsons, Pratt and SVA, together they could produce a Met Arms & Armor kit that includes models of castles to be constructed, warrior paraphernalia to be assembled, a video and documentary texts. Together, all of these elements would supplement a museum visitor experience with authentic educational materials which, incidentally, would be sold and generate revenue. People are more likely to purchase such visitor enhancements following their visits rather than having to search through a museum store, make a purchase and transport the item home – especially if you live a long distance from The Museum.

Now, lets go to the 14th century Italian paintings galleries where the Duccio illustrated above would be found. Visitors would pass through an electronic barrier with their smart phones; their visits to this particular gallery would be registered. While in the gallery, if available, they would use their smart phones with earphones to learn about the works on display. On leaving this gallery and entering others, their entrances would be registered. As a consequence of recording visits to specific galleries, The Met would acquire a data base of identifiable customer preferences which could be monetized at a later date.

For example, they could be offered post cards or other materials and objects associated with the galleries that they had visited. Beyond this, it would be possible to create new experiences available for purchase. Utilizing augmented reality technology purchasers would be able to obtain a virtual reality configuration of a gallery that they had visited which they could examine at home. If so desired, with augmented reality technology, they could insert an image of themselves or of others into the virtual reality Met gallery space. *The New York Times* has already demonstrated an interest in making virtual reality technology available to its subscribers. Perhaps a cooperative arrangement could be developed?

The Met already has an extensive product line with an accompanying catalogue; however, its circulation has never been expanded to the millions of visitors for which there is now no record. Given how much data could be obtained from visitor profiles, customized offerings could be transmitted and sold.

Will "Monetize The Met" solve The Musem's financial woes and allow it to reconstitute its "pay-as-you-wish" admissions policy? I hope so.

Image: View of 14th century Italian paintings gallery, in foreground Duccio di Buoninsegna, Mother and Child, Sienese circa 1300. Acquired 2004

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