

The COVES survey instrument, explained

So, we have this survey our visitors are completing, or are going to in the near future. Why are these questions the main questions we are asking of all COVES museum participants? And what are all of the questions, anyway? This document offers you a review of the entire instrument and explains the purpose of each question. Hopefully this will help you and your team answer any questions that may arise for your visitors as they are taking the survey.

Thank you for visiting [INSTITUTION NAME]. Please answer a short survey about your visit to help us improve the quality of the Museum experience. Your response is anonymous, and the survey takes only a few minutes of your time. We are glad you chose to visit today and we look forward to receiving your feedback. If you have any questions about this survey, please email info@understandingvisitors.org.

Introductory language. This gives people a basic understanding of what is to come (and also covers some of the material you should have noted in visitor recruitment per our IRB).

LOGIC: The following question (Net Promoter Score or NPS) and its open-ended follow-up are shown first to **half** of survey respondents. The other half get the next page's question (Overall Experience Rating or OER) first. Whichever one is not shown here appears **without** an open-ended follow-up after the motivation question.

On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to recommend [INSTITUTION NAME] to a friend or colleague?

This question is known as the *Net Promoter Score (NPS)*. Created in 2003 for big business by a consultant at Bain and Co., it is a single question that can get to a person's overall feeling about a company or place. The Net Promoter Score has become a very common way to measure overall customer or visitor satisfaction (have you seen this question come from your credit card company or airline?). For COVES, a visitor ranks their likelihood to recommend our museum to their friends or colleagues. Each response then falls into one of three segments: 0-6 are "Detractors," 7-8 are "Passives," and 9-10 are "Promoters."

The overall NPS is calculated by subtracting the % of Detractors from the % of Promoters. Passives are not included in the calculation, as they are regarded as people who are more ambivalent about the museum or action in question. Because of this way of calculating NPS, the range of possible scores is from -100 to 100.

What is the most important reason for the rating you gave?

Understanding why visitors responded to the NPS question as they did may be critical in helping you understand the visitor experience.

Please rate your overall experience for this visit to [INSTITUTION NAME].

Poor

Fair

Good

Excellent

Outstanding

This question is known as the *Overall Experience Rating (OER)*. It was added to the COVES survey in the fall of 2017 to distinguish truly Outstanding experiences from those that are still Excellent in nature but may not go “above and beyond” – recent research has suggested that while virtually all visitors rating their OER as Outstanding are NPS Promoters, only about 40% of NPS Promoters also rate their OER as Outstanding. This question allows us to keep the industry-recognized NPS rating for comparison while evaluating the Overall Experience Rating to see where there is room for growth.

LOGIC: If Please rate your overall experience for this visit to [INSTITUTION NAME] **Outstanding** is selected

What was particularly outstanding about your visit today?

LOGIC: If Please rate your overall experience for this visit to [INSTITUTION NAME] **Excellent** is selected

What is the most important reason for your rating?

LOGIC: If Please rate your overall experience for this visit to [INSTITUTION NAME] **Poor, Fair, or Good** are selected

What aspects of today’s visit could be improved?

In previous versions of the COVES survey, OER and NPS had the same open-ended follow-up: “What is the most important reason for your rating?” In 2023, following consultation with OER enthusiast Andy Pekarik, formerly of the Smithsonian, we adapted the OER follow-ups to encourage respondents to share more details—both positive and negative—about their experience.

COVES Science+ survey

The "motivation to visit" response options differ between the Science+ and Art surveys. Insights from research, as well as professional experience, suggested to many COVES members that people might have different reasons to visit an art museum vs. a science center. Below you will find the motivation questions for **science+ museums**.

Why did you decide to visit today? (Select up to two.)

- ☐ To spend time together as a group/family
- ☐ For an educational experience for group members/children
- ☐ For an educational experience for myself
- ☐ For fun/entertainment for group members/children
- ☐ To see a specific exhibit, program, or show
- ☐ For fun/entertainment for myself
- ☐ Something to do while visiting the area
- ☐ To support [INSTITUTION NAME]
- ☐ To relax or relieve stress

During the initial COVES survey creation process, this list of options was generated by looking at our participating science centers' existing visitor surveys. The options are broad enough to cover both very specific reasons for visiting ("I'm going to a show across the street later tonight" would fall under Something to do while visiting the area) to really broad reasons ("Just for fun" would fall under For fun/entertainment...).

The list of options could certainly be longer and more specific, but we would overwhelm survey takers if it were longer. (*HOT TIP:* To create an effective survey, you don't want to give more than 12 or so options.) This list offers 9 options. The bottom two options were among those added in July 2020 when museums reopened after their first COVID-19 closure, when we assumed that visitors would have new reasons for choosing to go to a museum.

Respondents are allowed to choose two reasons from the list. Often, people will say things like, "Oh, we were visiting this city for the first time and looking for something fun to do." If we were doing this as an interview or as an open-ended question, that comment would be coded into both "For fun/entertainment for group members/children" and "Something to do while visiting the area." By allowing people to select two, they can identify the main reasons that brought them to the museum without overthinking it.

COVES Art and Art Bridges surveys

The "motivation to visit" response options differ between the Science+ and Art surveys. Insights from research, as well as professional experience, suggested to many COVES members that people might have different reasons to visit an art museum vs. a science center. Below you will find the motivation questions for **art museums**.

Why did you decide to visit today? (Select up to two.)

- ☐ To deepen my areas of interest
- ☐ To learn something new
- ☐ To relax
- ☐ To find peace
- ☐ To interact with others
- ☐ To feel connected to my community
- ☐ To spend time together as a group/family
- ☐ For fun/entertainment as a group
- ☐ Something to do while visiting the area
- ☐ It was recommended to me by others
- ☐ To support my family/friends with their learning
- ☐ To discover new things as a group

Was there something at [INSTITUTION NAME] that you were specifically hoping to see or do today?

- ☐ No, I just wanted to visit in general
- ☐ Yes, there was something specific I was hoping to see

Several COVES:Art pilot sites collaborated to design this question, which was based on the Science+ question plus academic research* on motivations to visit museums. The response options fall into one of five categories: Social Enjoyment (i.e., fun with my group), Popularity (i.e., recommendation), Learning & Pursuing Interests, Relaxation & Recuperation, Social Learning (i.e., education with group), and Social Contacts (i.e., being around others). This second question is intended to draw out whether the visitor group was also motivated by a particular offering.

*Specifically, John Falk's work on visitor identity and motivation and Phelan, Bauer, and Lewalter's 2017 article in *Museum Management and Curatorship*, "Visit motivations: development of a short scale for comparison across sites."

LOGIC: The overall rating question (NPS or OER) that **did not** appear on the first page appears next.

On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to recommend [INSTITUTION NAME] to a friend or colleague? / Please rate your overall experience for this visit to [INSTITUTION NAME].

Recall that when NPS or OER appear second, they do not have the associate open-ended follow-up.

Approximately what time did you arrive at [INSTITUTION NAME] today?

[Dropdown response option with museum-specific hours from open to close in 15-minute increments]

How long do people actually spend at your museum? If you are able to watch visitors come and go AND remember when they arrived, you are a rare bird! Most museums either have staff rotations or duties for front desk staff that don't allow them to be able to monitor visitors in that way.

By asking the visit length question in this way, we are able to get an approximation of the length of their museum visit. Visitors are better able to recall generally when they arrived at the museum or the museum's parking lot than they are at estimating a length of time. Between reporting when they arrived and capturing the time that they are taking the survey and leaving the museum, we have an estimate of the length of their stay!

Which of the following did you and/or your group do at [INSTITUTION NAME] today?

- ☐ Visited the Exhibit Halls
- ☐ Visited the [featured/traveling exhibit name]
- ☐ Visited the [new permanent exhibition name]
- ☐ Went to the gift shop
- ☐ Ate in the café/restaurant
- ☐ Other, please specify _____
- ☐ None of the above

The options available in this question are based on what visitors can actually do at your museum, and items on the list can be added or removed as temporary exhibits open and close and shows rotate. This question is particularly helpful for exhibitions or venues that are not ticketed and have no mechanism for tracking visitation. However, even ticketed venues like theaters can be useful to include on this list so that you can learn more about the demographics or visitation patterns of people who buy the tickets. No matter what is listed, it is important to keep the list concise and to describe offerings in a way that is understandable to a visitor filling out the survey.

COVES Art Bridges survey only

LOGIC: If Which of the following did you and/or your group do at [INSTITUTION NAME] today?
[Featured exhibition] is selected:.

Please rate your overall experience for [featured exhibition].

Poor	Fair	Good	Excellent	Outstanding
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Not counting this exhibition, would you have access to art like this exhibition in [museum's local region]?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Unsure

When did you find out about this exhibition?

- ☐ I found out when I arrived
- ☐ I knew about the exhibition before I arrived

Did you come specifically to see this exhibition?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If a visitor says they attended the featured exhibition at an Art Bridges partner art museum, they receive these four follow-up questions. The Art Bridges Foundation supports art museums in various ways, such as facilitating access to high-quality exhibitions for museums that might not otherwise be able to host them. The above questions are aimed at learning more about the visitor experience with these exhibitions, if they motivate visitation, and if they expand access to art.

Please rate your agreement with the following statements.

Strongly disagree 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Strongly agree 10	Not applicable
The museum provided a high quality educational experience.											
The museum provided a good value for the cost of the experience.											
The staff members were helpful.											
I was pleased with my overall café/restaurant experience.											
I was pleased with my experience in the gift shop(s).											
It was easy to find my way around.											
I felt welcomed at [INSTITUTION NAME] today.											

These statements are able to get at how satisfied survey takers were about overall aspects of the museum. In general, they show how comfortable and happy people were with their experience, some of which is broad and some of which is specific to particular areas of the museum. Ideally, all visitors will strongly agree with each statement, but we know that there are bad days at the museum... exhibits break down, prices feel too high, people don't get to do what they want to do. This set of statements will

allow you to understand how visitors, in general, feel about their visit. If your museum does not have a café/restaurant or gift shop/store, we will remove those items for you.

Optional module: Inclusion ratings

Please rate your agreement with the following statements.

Strongly disagree 0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	Strongly agree 10	Not applicable
I felt included at [INSTITUTION NAME] today.											
I feel like I belong at [INSTITUTION NAME].											
I felt welcomed at [INSTITUTION NAME] today.											

These 0-10 ratings are three different options for assessing feelings of welcoming, belonging, and inclusion at COVES museums. As of 2023, these topics are new to COVES, and we continue to explore different methods of asking about them on the COVES survey. These ratings are subject to change as we learn more.

Optional modules: Empathy and Social Connection

Please rate your agreement with the following statements. During my visit...

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I was emotionally invested in other people.				
I felt concerned for the welfare of other people.				
I was curious about other people's thoughts and feelings.				
I was interested in trying to understand people who are different from me.				

Please rate your agreement with the following statements. During my visit...

Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
I felt like I had a place in the world.				
I felt valued.				
I felt like I was a part of a community.				
I felt connected to the people around me.				
I felt a deep connection to people in my life.				

These optional modules, based on research from Dr. Katherine Cotter and the [Humanities and Human Flourishing Project](#) at the University of Pennsylvania, can help us understand the role museum visits play in fostering empathy, social connection, and feelings of inclusion. The first set of questions measures **empathy**, and the second measures **social connection**. COVES worked directly with Dr. Cotter and her colleague Sarah Sidoti to adapt the above measures from a longer survey instrument to make them more appropriate for the COVES survey.

[Institution-specific questions!]

Your institution can choose to add a few institution-specific questions to the COVES survey! Some COVES members choose to add questions about awareness of marketing, affiliation with other local museums, or more detailed questions about their unique offerings. In general, we recommend no more than 3-5 additional questions, depending on their length and complexity. The COVES team can help you with question wording and answer options. They will generally appear here on your survey, unless logic dictates that they go somewhere else.

Do you currently live in the United States?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

LOGIC: If Do you currently live in the United States? **Yes** is selected

What is your zip code?

LOGIC: If Do you currently live in the United States? **No** is selected

In what country do you currently reside?

Where are your visitors actually coming from? You might know where your *members* are coming from, since we get so much more information from them. But what about *other visitors*? This set of questions allows you to understand what your international draw is AND helps clarify what your region is for pulling in more consistent attendance (is it 10 miles? 30 miles?). It can also help identify whether you are serving a particular geographical segment of your community. Once the visitor enters their zip code, it gets automatically passed to the [GeoNames](#) database. GeoNames fills in the City, County, and State associated with that zip code and populates variables in the COVES database. Neat!

Please tell us about your group, including yourself:

- ☐ My group included locals only
- ☐ My group included locals and out-of-towners
- ☐ My group included out-of-towners only

In addition to the above questions, this helps clarify if others in the group are from further away. It could also help us better understand how our more local visitors think about the community. Is 10 miles local, or are you located at such a distance or in such a place that more people think they are from out of town? This question is particularly useful for aggregate analysis, since it is difficult to define “local” and “out-of-town” for all participating museums. In addition, visitors’ self-perception is likely to be more relevant to their museum experiences.

Prior to today's visit, when was the last time you visited?

- ☐ Within the past three months
- ☐ 3-6 months ago
- ☐ 6 months to within the last year
- ☐ 1-2 years ago
- ☐ 2-5 years ago
- ☐ 5-10 years ago
- ☐ More than 10 years ago
- ☐ Never
- ☐ Not sure

When was the last time, if ever, that people came to your museum? This question provides that info. Those answering "Never" are also called first-time visitors.

Optional follow-up: Number of visits in past 12 months

LOGIC: If Prior to today's visit, when was the last time you visited? **Within the past three months, 3-6 months ago, or 6 months to within the last year** is selected

Prior to this visit, how many times in the past 12 months have you visited [INSTITUTION NAME]?

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2
- ☐ 3-5
- ☐ 6-10
- ☐ 10 or more

If the respondent indicated in the previous question that they had visited within the last year, this question asks them to specify how many times. This information can show you the range of repeat visitation patterns. If you opt in to this question, you can also choose to include a text entry box for visitors who select more than 10.

Are you a member of [INSTITUTION NAME]?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Members are a key group to understand when thinking about your audience as a whole. They tend to visit more often, give higher rating scores, and generally feel stronger affinity toward your museum. If they raise issues or concerns about the visitor experience, it's worth paying close attention!

How many adults (18 years or older) including yourself were in your group?

[Dropdown response option from 1 to "10 or more"]

How many children or adolescents (younger than 18) were in your group?

[Dropdown response option from 0 to “10 or more”]

These two questions set up display logic later in the survey for questions about the ages and genders of other group members.

We ask for you and your group’s demographic information in order to better understand our audiences and your museum experience.

We preface the COVES demographic questions with the above language to help respondents understand that we collect this information for a reason--this is the short version of our reasoning. Visitors are sometimes reluctant to share answers to these questions, and understandably so! While we hope visitors feel comfortable providing this information, they can still skip or select “Prefer not to say” for any question. We ask demographic questions for a few reasons: to gain an overall understanding of our visitor population, to make comparisons with Census data, and to enable us to *disaggregate* the data. Disaggregating enables us to investigate patterns among subgroups--do visitors with disabilities give similar Overall Experience Ratings as those without disabilities? How do LGBT+ visitors rate their feelings of belonging at the museum? Without demographic data, we would have no way of answering these questions.

With which racial or ethnic group(s) do you identify? Please answer only for yourself, not for others in your group. (Select all that apply.)

- ☐ American Indian or Alaska Native
- ☐ Asian or Asian American
- ☐ Black or African American
- ☐ Hispanic or Latino/a/x
- ☐ Middle Eastern or North African
- ☐ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- ☐ White
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

There are so many ways to think about race and ethnicity. For this study, we use categories that were developed based on a combination of Census categories and those used by some of our long term member institutions on other surveys. People can select as many categories as apply to them, so we can get to detail or to broad categories as is appropriate for each organization and community. Asking about race and ethnicity enables COVES museums to understand how their visitor population compares to local demographics or to look for data differences across different racial/ethnic categories.

What is your age?

- ☐ Under 18
- ☐ 18-24
- ☐ 25-34
- ☐ 35-44
- ☐ 45-54
- ☐ 55-64
- ☐ 65+
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Though the survey used to ask for respondent age as an open text entry, we found that in the vast majority of cases, we were reporting this age in buckets. This is especially true when combining with group age data, which is only available in bucketed categories. Selecting a category enables us to add a “Prefer not to say” option consistent with other demographic questions and slightly lessen the overall burden that results from switching between text entry and multiple choice selection. The “Under 18” category exists to allow us to continue to filter out anyone under 18 who mistakenly takes the survey.

Which of the following categories best represents your highest level of education? Please answer only for yourself, not for others in your group.

- ☐ Some high school
- ☐ High school degree/GED equivalent
- ☐ Some college
- ☐ Associate’s degree
- ☐ Bachelor’s degree
- ☐ Graduate degree
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

This question runs a bit askew of the Census data questions, but it is detailed enough for us to know, generally, what the education levels of our visitors are. And, the Census ranges will roll up into these categories. Why ask about education levels? In addition to the reasons for asking any demographic question, we want to ensure that our museums are accessible to all, regardless of formal education level. This is especially important when you consider that education is at the core of the missions of many museums and informal learning institutions.

What is your gender identity?

- ☐ Woman
- ☐ Man
- ☐ Non-binary
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

This question seeks to be all-encompassing without being overwhelming. Man and woman are the two standard, “normalized” genders. Non-binary gender identity is arguably the most common umbrella term for a gender outside the man-woman binary. However, people may prefer different words than non-binary, or they may identify as a man or a woman but choose to add more nuance to their answer. Without trying to anticipate the many other possibilities, we include “Prefer to self-describe.” It is important to note that some transgender people may choose to simply identify themselves as men or women without disclosing their transgender status. We don’t consider it essential to know anyone’s sex assigned at birth for COVES purposes, unless someone chooses to share it.

Do you identify as LGBTQ+? (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, +)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not sure or questioning
- ☐ Prefer not to say

Asking about LGBTQ+ identity may not be a common demographic question, but we ask about it on the COVES survey because social inclusion is one of our core values. In addition, the LGBTQ+ community is growing in many areas of the country, and we should all seek to understand our local LGBTQ+ community’s museum visitation patterns, improve the museum experience for them, and/or create programming that interests them. This question sometimes causes confusion or elicits negative reactions from survey respondents, so it is wise to prepare all data collectors with an understanding of why we ask (see above!) and to remind them that visitors can always select “Prefer not to say.”

What is your yearly household income?

- ☐ Under \$25,000
- ☐ \$25,000 - \$49,999
- ☐ \$50,000 - \$74,999
- ☐ \$75,000 - \$99,999
- ☐ \$100,000 - \$149,999
- ☐ \$150,000 - \$199,999
- ☐ More than \$200,000
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Prefer not to say

This set of ranges is based on a combination of Census categories and those used by some of our long term member institutions on other surveys. It will work for comparing your visitors’ income with your

local or statewide income ratings. Historically, this question receives the largest proportion of “Prefer not to say” responses of all the demographic questions. Why do we ask about household income? Despite it being an often-skipped question, the data are valuable for understanding visitors’ demographic profiles. For example, you may find that your institution is attracting a racially diverse audience, but not an economically diverse one (or vice versa). Insights like these can help you more specifically target outreach efforts.

Do you, or does anyone you visited with, have a permanent or temporary disability?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

LOGIC: If Do you, or does anyone you visited with, have a permanent or temporary disability? **Yes** is selected

How would you describe the disability? (Please select all that apply.)

- ☐ Mobility
- ☐ Visual
- ☐ Auditory
- ☐ Learning
- ☐ Cognitive
- ☐ Prefer to self-describe: _____
- ☐ Prefer not to say

These are five common categories used to describe types of disabilities, and respondents can select as many as apply to them or their group member(s). Universal design, accessibility, and inclusion are high priorities for many COVES members, and knowing about visitors' disabilities helps to inform this work.

Please tell us about the other adults in your group, to the best of your knowledge.

[NOTE: the table below has a dynamic number of rows based on the number of adults reported]

[illegible]

LOGIC: If How many adults (18 years or older) including yourself were in your group? **10 or more** is selected

In the text box below, please enter the genders and ages of the rest of the adults in your group:

Because the COVES survey is administered to just one adult in a group, there are a couple of places where we ask for information about the full group. We would love to know the full demographic profile of all group members, but this would be onerous for the responding visitor and would not necessarily provide accurate information. In discussions with our founding COVES members, we agreed that asking for age and gender information about the full group was a reasonable ask for the respondent as well as useful for institutional decision-making.

Please tell us about the children/adolescents in your group, to the best of your knowledge.

[NOTE: the table below has a dynamic number of rows based on the number of children/adolescents reported]

	Age						Gender			
	0-3	4-7	8-12	13-17	Prefer not to say	Don't know	Boy	Girl	Non-binary	Prefer not to say
Child/ Adolescent										

LOGIC: If How many children or adolescents (younger than 18) were in your group? **10 or more** is selected

In the text box below, please enter the genders and ages of the rest of the children and/or adolescents in your group:

The same reasoning from above applies to this question about child age and gender, with an additional factor: the COVES survey is only for those age 18 and over, so we have limited information about the children in the group. For many COVES sites, children are a key demographic considered in programming and exhibition design, so understanding their demographics is very important. Understanding child ages is important for child developmental considerations in exhibition design, and science-focused museums in particular are often concerned with ensuring equitable access to science for women, girls, and non-binary people, all of whom continue to face gender-based obstacles when engaging with science.

Is there anything else you would like to add? Please enter any comments in the box below.

Good survey design includes at least one open-ended response option for guests to voice any other aspects of their visit to the museum that were not included in specific questioning. These comments are not collected to be coded and compared across institutions, but are provided both on the dashboard and in the raw data for each institution to make use of as necessary.