

Keeping Up with Gen Z

Six Ways Museums are Engaging Teens

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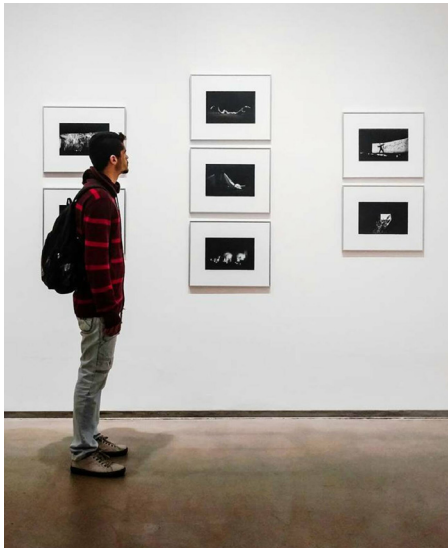
SIX WAYS MUSEUMS ARE ENGAGING TEENS

Public high schools are receiving less and less funding for experiences outside the classroom and increased pressure to perform on standardized tests; therefore, fewer of them are bringing students to museums on field trips. Museums need to find new ways to engage high schoolers as audiences. After all, there are over 20 million people in the United States between the ages of 15 and 19 – ignoring them would be a huge missed opportunity.

Teen programs in museums are successfully cultivating lifelong audiences for cultural institutions. For the report *Room to Rise*, researchers interviewed 600 adults about their experiences in intensive teen programs at three different art museums. Ninety-six percent of the interviewees visited another art museum as an adult and eighty percent visited another kind of museum as an adult. Sixty-eight percent of the interviewees classified themselves as frequent museum visitors, attending a museum five or more times per year. Compare that with the meager sixteen percent of the overall U.S. population that visits museums.

Is your museum looking to cultivate long term audiences by investing in programs for high schoolers? Here are six ways you can make sure your programs are engaging and impactful.





No. 1 | Target Specific Interest Groups

Just like adults, not all teens are the same. They have different socio-economic backgrounds, national origins, religions, political affiliations, and more. These differences influence the kinds of activities they like to engage in and the kinds of people they prefer to be around. By asking teens what they want and creating programs around their specific interests, your museum can better serve their needs.

In 2006, a museum educator at the Brooklyn Museum named Cheri Ehrlich noticed that many teens in her gallery programs used discussions about art as an opportunity to explore non-heteronormative sexuality and transgender issues. Over time, she worked with the rest of the education department to create programming that responded to the teens' interests. Today, the Brooklyn Museum offers a paid nine-month internship called *InterseXtions: Gender & Sexuality for LGBTQ+ teens*. As part of the program, teens not only analyze art, but also make art and develop programming for their peers. According to Lindsay C. Harris, the Teen Programs Manager at the Brooklyn Museum, *InterseXtions*, "supports the safety and comfortability of the teens to express themselves freely...It also provides the space for them to see themselves and their future potential in others. How can we imagine a future, if we don't see anyone who looks like us or shares our experiences?"

No. 2 | Address Issues that Actually Matter

Adults often underestimate adolescents as vapid, but teens want to grapple with real, complex material. Trust teens to think critically about real issues and you will help them become well informed, thoughtful adults.

The Illinois Holocaust Museum and Education Center hosts a biannual Student Leadership Day for high school students where exceptional students discuss issues related to the Holocaust, genocide, and human rights issue. The students hear from a keynote speaker who is making a difference in their community, engage in leadership-building activities, and are invited to explore the museum's exhibits to learn from the past. Their Leadership Day topic, *The Power of One: Choosing to Make a Difference*, corresponds with the recent reopening of the Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition. Developed in partnership with Luci Creative, the *Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition* highlights how Jews resisted their oppression and annihilation during the Holocaust, by taking up arms, preserving their stories, and continuing to practice their religion and culture. By visiting an exhibit like the *Karkomi Holocaust Exhibition* and participating in Leadership Day activities, teens increase "their self-efficacy, potential for learning, and ability to return to their communities to promote greater acceptance and understanding."



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No. 3 | Connect Teens to Careers

Parents are eager to get their high schoolers thinking about their future and will pester them to sign them up for almost anything career-oriented. According to Steve Langerud, Director of Career Services at DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana., the best way to get teens thinking about careers is to help them uncover their talents, to ask them, “What skills do you have? What kinds of people do you like to work with? In what kind of environment?” As informal learning spaces, museums are great places to help teens mess around and discover new abilities.

The Carnegie Science Center in Pittsburgh created *Tour Your Future* to give adolescent women the opportunity to explore opportunities in STEM. The museum arranges for the young women tour professional facilities, like zoos, hospitals, and accounting firms. Female professionals guide the tours and conduct hands-on activities at the host site. The program allows the participants to see themselves as potential STEM professionals. As one young woman raved, “This past spring, I attended two *Tour Your Futures*. Both were very informational and captivating. I came away from each of them with a smile and a whole new level of knowledge. My favorite parts of the TYFs were the Q&As with the female professionals and the hands-on activities. This fall I intend to participate in *Tour Your Future* again, and further my knowledge for the future.”

No. 4 | Hire Supportive Staff

Every museum professional worth their salt knows a program is only as good as its facilitator – this is especially true for teen programs. The facilitator acts as an intermediary between the teen and the institution, advocating for their needs in language that the establishment can understand. Great facilitators mentor teens, providing them with a trusted adult who can speak to them informally and who does not claim power over them, unlike their parents or teachers.

In her qualitative study of teen programs in history museums, Kate Dugdale interviewed educators at the New-York Historical Society, Brooklyn Historical Society, and the Missouri History Museum and found that “sustained engagement with peers, staff, and the museum helps teens feel known and valued.” As one of the educators stated, “having meaningful adult mentors is a key cornerstone of good teen programming...that was the idea behind (the program), that you really need to foster a long-term relationship with them and help them grow, and so we work with them specifically on skill growth throughout their time here.”

No. 5 | Throw an Awesome Party

Teens love a good party (and don't we all?!). Organize some fun crafts, give out free food, and play live music. Keep parents out, but have museum staff in every semi-private corner. Put up flyers in the local schools. You'll be the most popular place in town!

Every six months, the Metropolitan Museum of Art hosts *Teens Take the Met!* for visitors ages 13-18. Every nook and cranny of the museum is jam-packed with activities, from bookmaking to silent dancing to launching straw rockets. The Met joins up with dozens of community partners, allowing them to split the labor of creating the activities and to increase awareness through joint marketing campaigns. Over the past six years, *Teens Take the Met!* has attracted more than 28,000 adolescents to the museum. Sandra Jackson-Dumont, The Met's Frederick P. and Sandra P. Rose Chairman of Education believes it has been so successful because it offers, “an open space for young people to be their creative and original selves.”





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No. 6 | Invite Teens to Join Your Team

How do you know that you really know something? When you can teach it! A great way to help teens learn about your museum is to invite them to teach others about your content.

The Exploratorium in San Francisco hires 130 high school students every year to run demonstrations in exhibits. Hiring teens not only allows the museum to run more experiments on the museum floor, but also significantly enriches the lives of the participants. According to High School Explainer Mey L., working at the Exploratorium, “made me more aware of all the great science that’s happening...when you learn all these intricacies about really simple everyday things, then you find yourself thinking about them when the simple everyday things happen. It’s so cool! Something that, when I’m walking in the park or something, I can say, ‘that’s growing ‘cause of photosynthesis!’”

Great programming for high schoolers not only opens your museum up to new audiences, but also literally changes lives. 55% of interviewees in the Room to Rise report stated their teen program “was one of the most important experiences I’ve had.” No matter the type of museum or its educational goals, well-facilitated teen programs will help you to attract new audiences and fulfill your mission. ●

Get in touch with us.
We'd love to work with you!

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LUCICREATIVE.COM

CHICAGO 224.233.0730

BOSTON 617.877.0211