A Macabre Tale: eliciting negative emotions through exhibit design

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Eliciting Negative Emotions through Exhibit Design

A Macabre Tale: How does a viewer’s emotional response to an exhibit impact the likelihood that they will return?

Introduction
In our exhibit displaying medical books from the 16th & 17th centuries, the design of the text and displays were intended to create a somewhat dark and macabre atmosphere. We were interested in how eliciting emotions, particularly negative emotions, impacted patrons’ reception of the exhibit.

Methods
An exit survey asked visitors to identify and rate the intensity of the emotions they felt while viewing the exhibit. (See emotion wheel below) These emotions were coded as either positive or negative. The survey also posed questions designed to assess the visitor’s likelihood of returning to view the exhibit again.

Discussion
As expected, there was a direct correlation between the intensity of a visitor’s positive emotions and their likelihood of returning to the exhibit. But more interestingly, our statistical analysis indicated a significant correlation between negative emotions and visitor behavior:

Visitors who recorded feeling negative emotions while viewing the exhibit, were significantly more likely to visit multiple times than those who did not.

In general, as the intensity of negative emotions increased, visitor response increased. At a certain point, however, this correlation reversed. Those that recorded the highest levels of negative emotion became increasingly less likely to return.

One exception was those visitors who recorded experiencing high levels of both negative and positive emotion. These individuals were the most likely of any group to return.

As in other forms of entertainment that tell a story, such as movies and video games, we believe that many individuals enjoy feeling some degree of negative emotion. As long as those emotions are accompanied by positive emotions and/or do not exceed an individual’s comfort level, they can increase viewer interest in an exhibit.

Results
Visitors who felt negative emotions were more likely to visit the exhibit multiple times

Number of Responses to Each Emotion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Responses to Each Emotion</th>
<th>POSITIVE EMOTIONS</th>
<th>NEGATIVE EMOTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>Sadness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusement</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Admiration</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Disappointment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Shame</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relief</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Contempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleasure</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Anger</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contentment</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Regret</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Hate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusions
This research may be of benefit to exhibit curators and designers. Creating exhibits that deliberately elicit, not only positive, but also negative emotions can enhance visitor interest and increase viewership.

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