Medium Museums: Priorities and Opportunities for Growth

Medium museums prioritized developing and implementing diverse programming, including in school and out of school learning, collaborations with community groups, and opportunities targeted at special groups, such as underserved populations and young children. These museums participated in these activities at almost the same rate as large museums, emphasizing that museum growth is not necessarily directed towards increases in programming.

Medium museums looking to grow programming and outreach may consider expanding direct engagement with teachers through hosting training workshops and developing curricular resources or establishing childcare or preschool services on site.

Gift shops on site were a priority for museums of all sizes, however, few medium museums had online gift shops or on site eating facilities when compared to larger museums. Establishing more of these facilities may serve the dual purpose of increasing income while also solidifying the visitor base.

Some medium museums had shared educational spaces like performance theaters and outdoor facilities, but these were more likely at large museums. These differences suggest additional opportunities for medium museums looking to grow, especially as they would provide additional space for programming and visitor engagement.

Large

Small

Medium /
Large

Small /
Medium

Medium

ACM TRENDS:

#1.3

ACM Trends #1.3

Our first Trends report used data from membership surveys to identify critical proxies for children's museum size. Size likely affects many aspects of how a museum functions and separating museums by size provided a basis for further exploration into these operational details. The identified size characteristics – total operating expenses, visitor attendance, number of paid staff, and building size – allowed us to group museums into three categories (Table 1), with some museums falling in overlap zones.

Table 1. Criteria used to assign size categories.

Size Category	Total Operating Expenses	Building Size (sq ft)	Attendance	Staff
Small	Less than $435,000	Less than 12,000	Less than 50,000	Less than 13
Medium	$435,000 – $1.7 million	12,000 – 37,000	50,000 – 155,000	13 – 34
Large	More than $1.7 million	More than 37,000	More than 155,000	More than 34

This report builds on the size findings by more deeply characterizing medium children's museums' programs and facilities. We compared findings for medium museums to large museums and provided recommendations for medium museums looking to grow.

Programming

Medium museums were committed to community engagement and their efforts closely paralleled those of large museums. For example, medium museums hosted an average of 11 programs annually and large museums hosted an average of 12 programs annually. Additionally, 59% of medium museums collaborated with libraries, compared with 82% of large museums and 79% of medium museums developed programs to target underserved audiences, compared to 95% of large museums. The small differences between medium and large museums demonstrate that increases in museum size and resources does not necessarily have large impacts on programming frequency and collaborative efforts.

Most medium museums developed relationships with schools to support educational programming through field trips and school outreach (Figure 1). They also excelled at providing programs to engage children outside of school, including summer camps, camp-ins, and afterschool programs (not shown in Figure), with one-half to two-thirds of medium museums hosting these activities. These programs create opportunities for children to consistently be involved in their children's museum, and further development will strengthen relationships with families in the community.
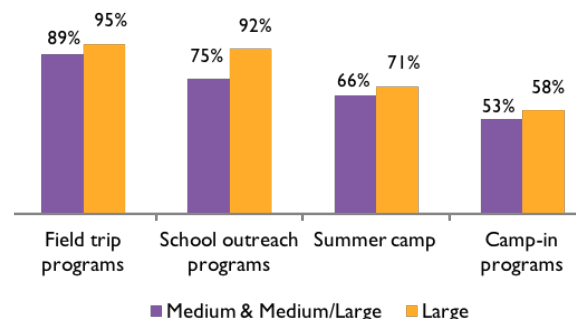

Figure 1. Children's programs.

education through early childhood areas and programming at their institutions (Figure 2). Some collaborated with Head Start programs, which promote school readiness for low-income children under 5 years old (Figure 2).
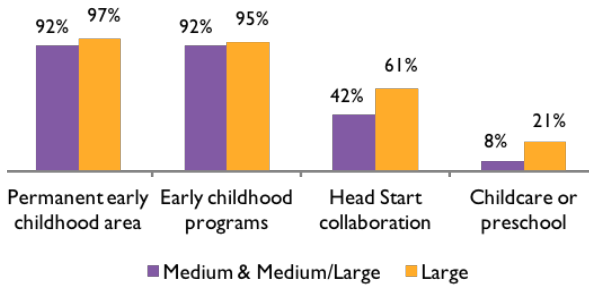
Figure 2. Early childhood resources.

A few medium museums had childcare or preschool opportunities available, but this activity was much more common among large museums (Figure 2). Medium museums looking to grow may consider asking their visitors if they would use childcare services if available at the museum. If there is enough demand and the museum can support childcare or preschool, these services may be a way to increase museum income.

As noted earlier, staff at medium museums have experience developing and implementing educational programs for children in a variety of settings. Given this expertise, medium museums directly engaged teachers by providing workshops or developing their own curricular materials for distribution to local schools or afterschool programs. More than two-thirds of medium museums engaged in these activities, although this type of engagement remains more common ay larger museums (Figure 3).
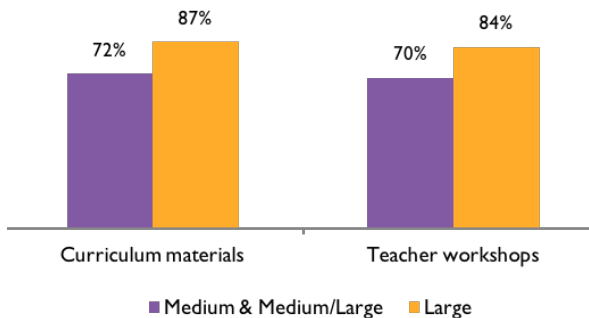

Figure 3. Educational resources.

Facilities

There were larger differences between medium and large museums in terms of facilities than programming. Almost

all medium museums had a gift shop on site (Figure 4), which would allow visitors to purchase items to remember their trip, while also serving as an additional source of income for the museum. While a physical gift shop was a priority for museums of all sizes, almost all online gift shops were at large children's museums, possibly because the larger visitor base could support the additional time and effort required to maintain the online shop. Medium museums may consider how expanding their gift shop offerings online may give them access to a new audience and increase their reach and income.
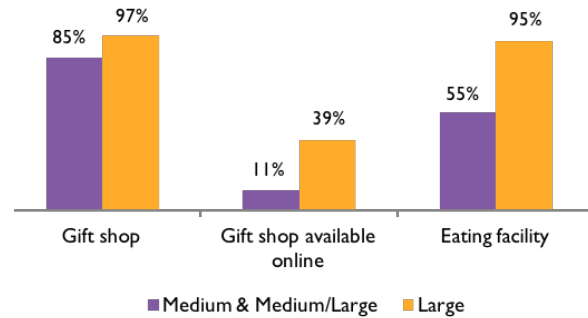

Figure 4. General facilities.

Although about half of medium museums reported that they had eating facilities, these rates are far less than large museums, almost all of which had a venue for buying food (Figure 4). Medium museums may be faced with space constraints or have other options available for food (such as a nearby food court), but if not, establishing an eating facility on site may improve the visitor experience by providing opportunities for rest and nourishment. Providing this amenity may allow visitors to spend a more time at the museum, potentially increasing engagement, and provide the museums with an additional source of revenue. This addition may represent a significant step in growing the museum facility and offerings.

Slightly less than half of medium museums had a performance theater, while two-thirds of large museums had this facility (Figure 5). Available space may place limits on the ability of a children's museum to accommodate a performance theater, however, medium museums may have high enough attendance and programming needs that this type of shared space could become an important asset. Performance theaters may accommodate a range of

events, such as concerts, plays, visiting performers or speakers, and other creative pursuits, and which can contribute to children's learning, interest, and attendance. Additionally, providing this outlet can increase the museum's presence in the community network and provide an added source of income from ticket sales.
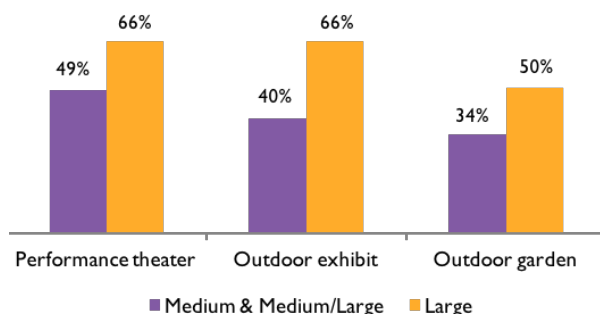

Figure 5. Educational facilities.

More than one third of medium museums provided visitors with outdoor resources such as a garden or an outdoor exhibit (Figure 5). These percentages indicate that many medium museums prioritized the additional opportunities for learning and engagement found outdoors. Outdoor resources, however, were much more common at large museums and may represent an important opportunity for growth for medium museums. These spaces may have a particularly strong impact at children's museums located in urban environments, where children visiting the museum may have less access to nature. Given children's museums' emphasis on exploring and learning through touch, direct access to local flora and fauna may provide urban children with novel sensory experiences.

About This Research

In 2016, the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) and Knology partnered to advance understanding about the roles children's museums play in their communities and beyond. Knology identified critical questions that aligned with ACM research goals and reviewed responses to over 100 surveys deployed to ACM members since 2004. This process allowed us to identify data for exploring what children's museums have accomplished to date and what they can accomplish in the future.

Medium (N = 16) and medium/large museums (N = 37) comprised 32% of ACM's member base in 2010, the most recent and robust dataset. Given the relatively small number of museum museums in the dataset, we grouped medium museums and medium/large museums to more accurately analyze characteristics of these museums as a whole (designated as "medium museums" in the text). Medium/large museums had some size characteristics that were aligned with medium museums and others that were aligned with large museums, however, 68% of the medium/large museums had more in common with medium museums than with large museums, further justifying our decision to group the two categories. The total sample of medium and medium/large museums makes up one third of the children's museums in the data set, and the children's museum field.

All comparisons were based on the sample of 53 medium and medium/large museums and 38 large museums. Identifying differences between the two groups allowed us to make conclusions about the way medium museums operate and recommendations to support growth and best practices.