

## Museums in a Pandemic: Impacts for Audiences & Partners

August 31, 2020

The ACM Trends Reports team is exploring the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children's museums. By mid-May, museums experimented with strategies and methods for connecting with two groups of stakeholders: audiences and institutional partners. This report describes the outcomes for museums' work with their members and visitors, as well as new and existing institutional collaborators.

The data is based on responses to a survey conducted in mid-May 2020. Overall, 109 US-based children's museums and 6 non-US museums were represented in the survey responses. The survey data shows that children's museums were assessing ways to support their audiences as they: planned to reopen facilities to visitors, produced high quality programming for both members and general audiences, and communicated with these groups. At the same time, half of participating museums also tried to find support for their own institution by developing new or enhancing existing partnerships.

This report is the fourth in an ACM Trends series exploring the early impacts of COVID-19 on the field. ACM Trends Report #4.1 provided a quick snapshot of the early impacts, Trends Report #4.2 described financial impacts, and Trends Report #4.3 explored impacts on the museum workforce. We will continue to monitor the pandemic's impacts on the field.

ACM TRENDS

#4.4

## ACM Trends #4.4

By mid-May, children's museums worked hard to engage two main groups outside of their personnel: their audiences and other organizations.

### Serving Audiences

As of mid-May, children's museums were testing multiple strategies to serve their audiences, while navigating staffing and financial impacts of the pandemic. These strategies focused on general reopening plans, members, and online offerings.

In the survey, 39% of museums reported a planned date for re-opening their buildings to visitors. Of these, most planned to reopen in summer 2020, and only one planned to reopen in 2021. Museum leaders considered a variety of tactics for operations during reopening, which included timed ticketing, member-only and member-first openings, and augmented safety procedures. However, at this point, most institutions were still in early stages of preparing for reopening and could not yet identify a date. Some directors participating in ACM Leadership Calls asserted that just because state regulations signaled they could reopen, it did not mean they *should* do so.

Museum leaders identified a range of factors that influenced plans for reopening their facilities to the public. Some cited uncertainty about finances and their capacity to meet cleaning and safety protocols. At this time, museum leaders reported seeing inconsistent guidelines from governing bodies or a lack of official instruction for reopening children's museums. Some museums surveyed

audiences to understand their concerns and interests related to reopening.

### Members

By mid-May, most children's museums were adapting membership policies and plans. Nearly all participating museums (93%) extended renewal dates for memberships. A quarter of museums also expanded the benefits offered for members, such as access to exclusive content and priority admission upon re-opening. Five museums reported providing full or partial refunds for membership dues – of these, an average of 8% of dues were refunded by each institution. Two Large museums donated memberships to essential workers for every new membership purchased.

### Online Audiences

At the same time, museums invested heavily in providing online content for both members and general audiences. In a review of children's museums' websites, we found that 101 out of 109 participating institutions presented online activities on their websites and social media platforms. Two types of programming stood out: over two-thirds of participating children's museums offered online programs focusing on STEAM, as well as arts and crafts. Just under half of the institutions provided Story Time activities. Other less common programs featured animals or nature, music, and movement or exercise.

All participating institutions offered information on online programming through their websites. Almost all (98%) provided details on their Facebook pages, about 70% presented information on Instagram and Twitter, and about 40% shared on YouTube. Resources were typically presented as either online web resources, downloadable content, or recorded programming. Fourteen of the participating museums offered live virtual programming through Facebook Live, Instagram, Periscope, and YouTube.

## ACM Trends Reports

The Association of Children's Museums (ACM) is the world's foremost professional member service organization for the children's museum field. We leverage the collective knowledge of children's museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination. ACM has partnered with Knology to create the ACM Trends Reports. Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world.

ACM Trends Reports are commissioned on behalf of our membership to help advance the work of this community. They seek to draw attention to emerging issues and opportunities for elevating the field, and help our members use data to become more accountable to their mission and fiscal responsibilities. A product of collaborative efforts to collect data, the Trends Reports are an effort to support ongoing, accessible dialogue. Our objective is for this approach to be an equitable and inclusive way for museum professionals to contextualize our work and use data to produce effective outcomes.

## Communications

Children’s museums used a variety of communication channels to connect with their members and general audiences. These channels were similar across the two groups, with some small differences that likely depended on typical ways that museums interact with these groups. For members, nearly all museums used email. About three-quarters made social media announcements, and more than half posted announcements on their websites. Meanwhile, for communications with general audiences, museums mostly relied on social media and website announcements, followed by email.

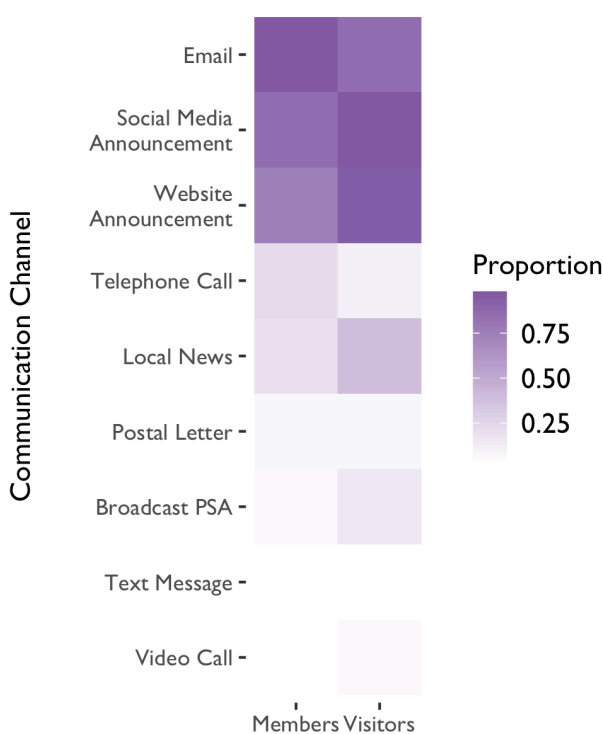


Figure 1. Proportion of communication methods used by museums for members and general visitors / audiences.

Note.  $n = 109$  for members and visitors.

## New & Existing Partnerships

Children’s museums invested in new or updated institutional collaborations to navigate the pandemic. Just over half of participating museums ( $n = 57$ ) reported establishing new or expanding existing collaborations. Of these, half of the museums partnered on the local level.

Far fewer were state-level or nationally focused, and many didn’t specify the scale of their collaborations.

Museum leaders developed new collaborations or adapted existing ones with the ultimate goal of supporting the institutions as they navigated the crisis. They used several different strategies to accomplish this goal. About a third of participating museums, across all size categories, pursued partnerships to share resources and information, including general best practices, planning, and funding. A quarter of museums focused collaborations on planning specifically related to the pandemic, particularly facility reopening procedures. Another quarter collaborated with goals related to content development, including designing curriculum and program implementation. Other less common objectives included cross-promotions and outreach, advocacy and work around local issues, and collaborative fundraising.

Most frequently, museums of all sizes collaborated with other museums in their cities and towns. They also partnered with other types of organizations, like economic development agencies, local attractions, and other non-profits. Less common collaborations were with schools or education departments, as well as local governments.

## Opportunities

During a mass crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be tempting to narrow an institution’s focus on the “basics” that might seem more easily manageable. However, the definition of children’s museums’ basic services needs to be reexamined. Moreover, the “who” involved in these services should be considered as well.

Museums do not need to weather the pandemic alone. Research across many sectors shows that collaboration strengthens partner organizations and benefits their audiences. As museum leaders examine new ways to pursue their mission of supporting children and families, they should consider themselves as part of the ecosystem of services that meet community needs. This ecosystem will function better when the various parts are coordinating their actions and supporting each other’s work.

## The Takeaway

The pandemic will continue to unfold, and effects will ripple across the world for years to come. During this process, each community's needs will evolve.

This crisis has underscored the need for children's museums to think of themselves as closely linked to other children's services and programs. Attending to community needs and aspirations can be a shared effort with, for example, schools and other social services groups. Programming can be designed as a complement or extension of offerings that others are providing in their communities. Leaders can ask: What are children's museums suited to address that schools might struggle to provide? What other new roles might children's museums fill during this crisis and beyond? Who is in need of support that can be met by the resources of a children's museum? To answer these questions and more, museum leaders can join or create a collaborative working group to analyze gaps and opportunities in local public education systems and community services. This work not only enhances services for children and families across the community, but also reduces overlap in different organizations' work.

In a similar vein, this crisis can help children's museums identify new partnerships with organizations that have historically gone their own way. Public libraries and soup kitchens in particular might be effective partners for museums to pursue their mission of supporting children and families. These partnerships can also help museums make strong appeals to funders.

When museums are able to invest in partnerships, consider how to approach communications with new and existing audiences. It may be that social media, email, and website announcements don't work well for new

audiences, particularly if they lack consistent access to internet. Collaborations may also be a good opportunity for sharing communication responsibilities across organizations. Partners may have different communication strengths and preferences, which museums can tap into as they offer their own preferred methods.

## About This Research

Data for this report was collected by an online survey distributed by ACM through an email invitation to children's museums worldwide. The survey was open between May 7 and 18, 2020. Overall, 109 US-based children's museums and 6 non-US museums contributed to the dataset. All participating US museums were currently ACM member institutions, representing 36% of membership. Participating museums were roughly representative of all size categories.

The information about types of online programming was collected in a manual review of websites and social media for the children's museums that participated in the survey. ACM staff coded the types of programs based on common themes and refined the themes into meaningful categories. ACM staff also provided information about museum leaders' considerations related to reopening facilities to the public

Figure 1 shows average responses to questions about methods used to communicate with members and visitors. Responses were consistent across size categories, unless otherwise noted.

A researcher reviewed open-ended responses from the survey and coded themes in an iterative process to summarize information on partnerships. The initial coding process produced a large number of codes, and subsequent coding led to aggregated and more meaningful themes.

Started in 1962, the Association of Children's Museums (ACM) is the world's foremost professional member service organization for the children's museum field. With more than 460 members in 50 states and 19 countries, we leverage the collective knowledge of children's museums through convening, sharing, and dissemination.

Knology is a nonprofit that produces practical social science for a better world. Since 2012, the collective of scientists, writers, and educators has been dedicated to studying and untangling complex social issues.



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