

TRUST AND RESPONSIBILITY TO COMMUNITY, PART 3: SUPPORTING CREDIBILITY AND TRUST IN MUSEUMS

A 2025 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY

These three words provoke strong emotional responses.

DISINFORMATION.

AI.

PARTISANSHIP.

These three things are also driving a great deal of public discourse as we all face a huge amount of information – information that ranges from credible and trustworthy to utter garbage. Sifting through it is *hard*.



Museums have long been held up as one of the most trustworthy sources of information (a subject we'll explore in an upcoming Data Story), but emerging concerns about credibility threaten to undermine that trust.

We addressed this issue head-first in the 2025 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, using a question style we call "poke the bear."

Let's take a look at the question itself.

In this time of disinformation, AI, and partisanship, what do you want to see museums do to help you feel information presented is credible and trustworthy?

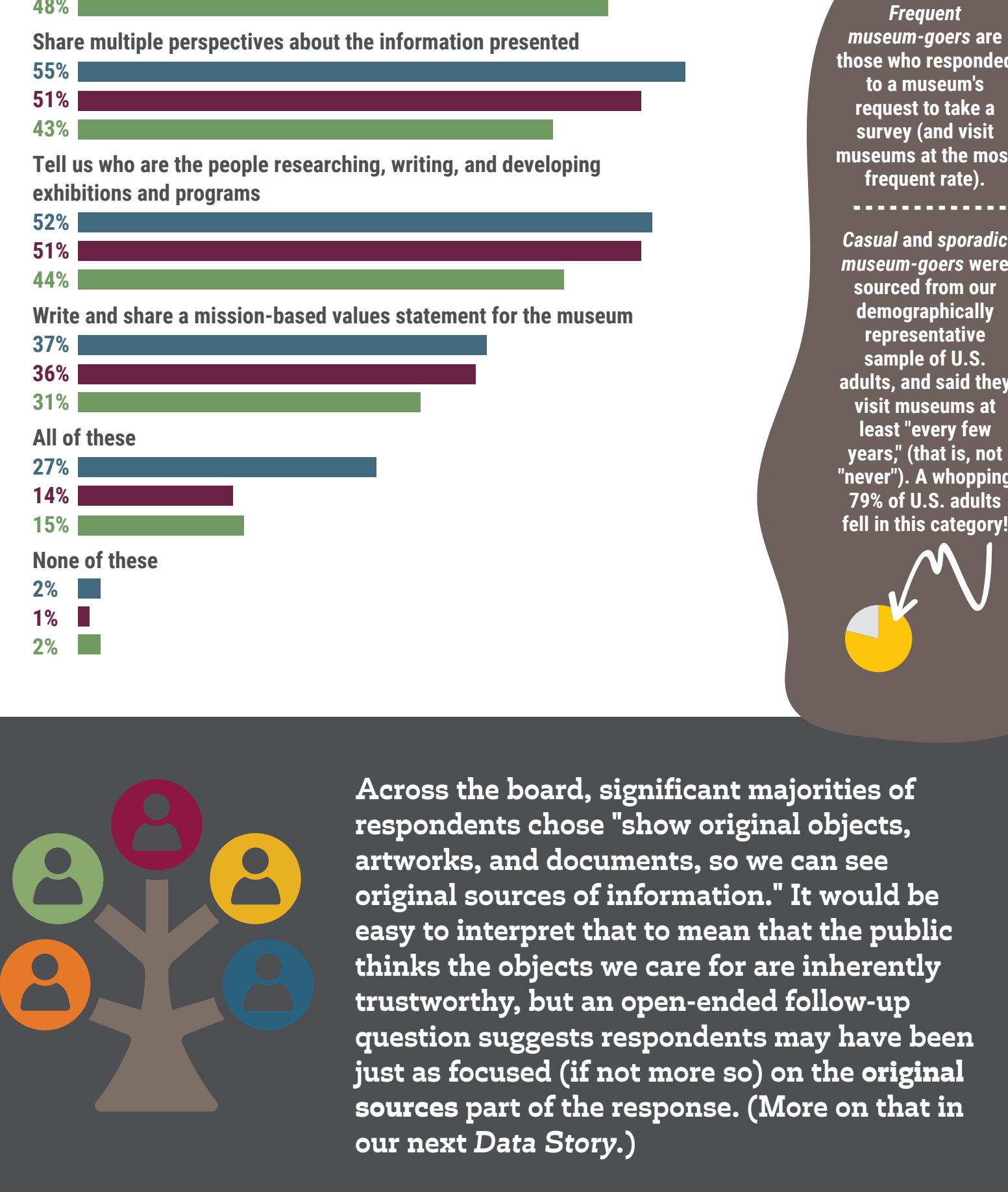
The first part of the question is the "poke the bear" part. We start off by using these words deliberately to incite an emotional response in respondents because these are things many people have strong feelings about.

Next, to make productive use of those emotions, we immediately changed the tone of our question to something **proactive and positive** ... and the answer choices all reflect this shift.

In this time of disinformation, AI, and partisanship, what do you want to see museums do to help you feel information presented is credible and trustworthy? (Choose all that apply.)

I want museums to:

While we all pretty much agree that disinformation and partisanship are problematic, should AI really be in the same category? It's a fair question. We acknowledge that AI is a tool that has both pros and cons, and that a healthy skepticism might be the best approach. But we also realized including AI would evoke very strong, negative, emotional responses from a significant number of respondents. That was worth *poking*. We'll look at what they said, and follow-up research on AI and museums, in an upcoming Data Story.



Frequent museum-goers are those who responded to a museum's request to take a survey (and visit museums at the most frequent rate).

Casual and sporadic museum-goers were sourced from our demographically representative sample of U.S. adults, and said they visit museums at least "every few years", (that is, not "never"). A whopping 79% of U.S. adults fell in this category!

Across the board, significant majorities of respondents chose "show original objects, artworks, and documents, so we can see original sources of information." It would be easy to interpret that to mean that the public thinks the objects we care for are inherently trustworthy, but an open-ended follow-up question suggests respondents may have been just as focused (if not more so) on the original sources part of the response. (More on that in our next Data Story.)

Frequent museum-goers were also enthusiastic about "demonstrate and encourage a sense of curiosity to consider all evidence fairly," with nearly three-quarters choosing it. This response bears some dissection, as it is one where we strategically paired terms that resonate across the political spectrum through language balancing. We knew that the word "curiosity" has a liberal skew (liberals are significantly more likely to identify as curious than conservatively), so we balanced it with the word "fairly," a word that conservatives are more likely to use. (Liberals are more likely to use words like "equality" and "equity.")¹

The third most popular choice overall also warrants scrutiny, as it uses language we are watching carefully. For nearly a decade we've been tracking the phrase "just the facts, so we can make up our own minds" as coded language typically used by less inclusive people to privilege a narrower narrative.² We still see that. But in the past year, inclusive people are using the word "fact" much more frequently in their written-in comments, especially when talking about sharing a complete historical narrative.

We are keeping an eye on how usage of the word "fact," and coded language around it, may be shifting.

Were there political differences?

No, not really. While liberals and moderates answered pretty similarly, conservatives selected the response options at slightly lower rates. This suggests less enthusiasm rather than disagreement.

That said, among frequent museum-goers, 50% or more of conservatives selected the first four answer choices listed above, indicating they have the most bipartisan support. This also reinforces that, in many ways, most of us agree more than we disagree.³

This question was intended to give museums more concrete tools for showing evidence and being credible sources for our visitors and community members. Our takeaways here are straightforward.³

Show your work. Provide citations in exhibitions and online content, and link to a fuller bibliography for visitors who want to go deeper.

Model curiosity and fair consideration of different sources and viewpoints. This encourages visitors to do likewise while also modeling respectful listening.

Share your processes. Give clear credit to the scientists, historians, scholars, researchers, educators, and creative teams involved in exhibitions and programs. Not only does this provide transparency, but it helps visitors better understand how museum work is done.

Stick up for your values. They are not only important to museums, they are important to visitors too!⁴

While these steps will not prevent pushback from everyone, they may significantly strengthen visitor confidence that museums are working to earn and maintain public trust.

"I find that museums often contain specialized knowledge that is hard to get in any other place, and I think their continued existence is absolutely critical to assist in the development of people's perspectives on the world and understanding of things they might otherwise never encounter. I believe they stand as a bulwark against propaganda, and alongside libraries, are some of the most important socially beneficial organizations that exist."

Annual Survey of Museum-Goers Data Stories are created by Wilkening Consulting on behalf of the American Alliance of Museums. Sources include:

- 2025 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 98,904; 202 museums participating
- 2025 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,079
- 2017 - 2024 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers

¹ For more on language, see *Trust and Responsibility to Community, Part 2: Responsibility to Community*, January 15, 2026.

² See *K-12 History Education, Museums, and Perceived Curricular Gaps*, October 31, 2024.

³ See *Trust and Responsibility to Community, Part 1: Shared Community Values*, January 8, 2026.

⁴ These takeaways echo those shared in *The 10-Step Primer for Engaging Audiences in Inclusive Content*, April 6, 2021

*Data Stories share research about both frequent museum-goers (typically visit multiple museums each year) and the broader population (including casual, sporadic, and non-visitors to museums). See the Purpose and Methodology (Update) Data Story from September 11, 2025 for more information on methodology.

More Data Stories can be found at wilkeningconsulting.com/data-stories.

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