2026 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS: *PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY (UPDATE)*

THIS FALL, AS WE BEGIN TO SHARE RESULTS from the 2026 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, we want to back up and share the purpose and methodology of this research.

When we field audience research, typically there are three types of information we are seeking:

An understanding of *who* our audience is

This includes their attitudes, values, motivations, and demographic characteristics.

Their advice about what they want from museums writ large or your museum specifically

This can include how museums are/are not meeting needs, what exhibits or programs they are most interested in, etc.

The lay of the land

This can help us understand how different people may respond to content or initiatives that may challenge them or that, as a society, we don't have consensus on (such as inclusion/DEAI, what is "neutral," climate change, etc.). This allows us to evaluate the best approaches to sharing that content.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ANNUAL SURVEY IS COMPRISED OF THREE PARTS:

These first two parts tend to stay the same from year to year so that individual museums can track their results over time:

1. **Key benchmark questions**
   These cover attitudes, behaviors, interests, values, and motivations for visiting museums.
2. **Standard demographic questions**
   These tend to stay the same from year to year so that individual museums can track their results over time.
3. **New research theme questions**
   These are different every year, and address relevant trends and topics in the museum field.

NEW RESEARCH THEMES FOR EACH YEAR ARE CHOSEN BASED ON MULTIPLE SOURCES, INCLUDING:

- Input from previous year's Annual Survey participants
- Trends and shifts impacting the museum field
- Questions arising from previous research
- Broader societal trends and events

Once the survey is written, we are ready to collect responses. How we do this is really important. We survey two very different groups of people:

FREQUENT MUSEUM-GOERS

Each year, museums of all disciplines from around North America enroll in the Annual Survey. In exchange for a modest fee, we survey their contact lists and provide them with reports of their results (with relevant comparison data).

In **2026,** the Annual Survey included **186** museums and we had over **75,000** respondents!

We were also able to offer detailed peer group comparisons across **39** museum types and **24** geographic areas.

BROADER POPULATION

We also want to hear from casual museum-goers (who only visit museums once or twice a year, but are the majority of museum visitors), sporadic visitors (visit occasionally, but not in the last year), and non-visitors. So we field a broader population comparison sample at the same time, capturing their values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Once all the data is collected, the fun starts.

ANALYSIS!

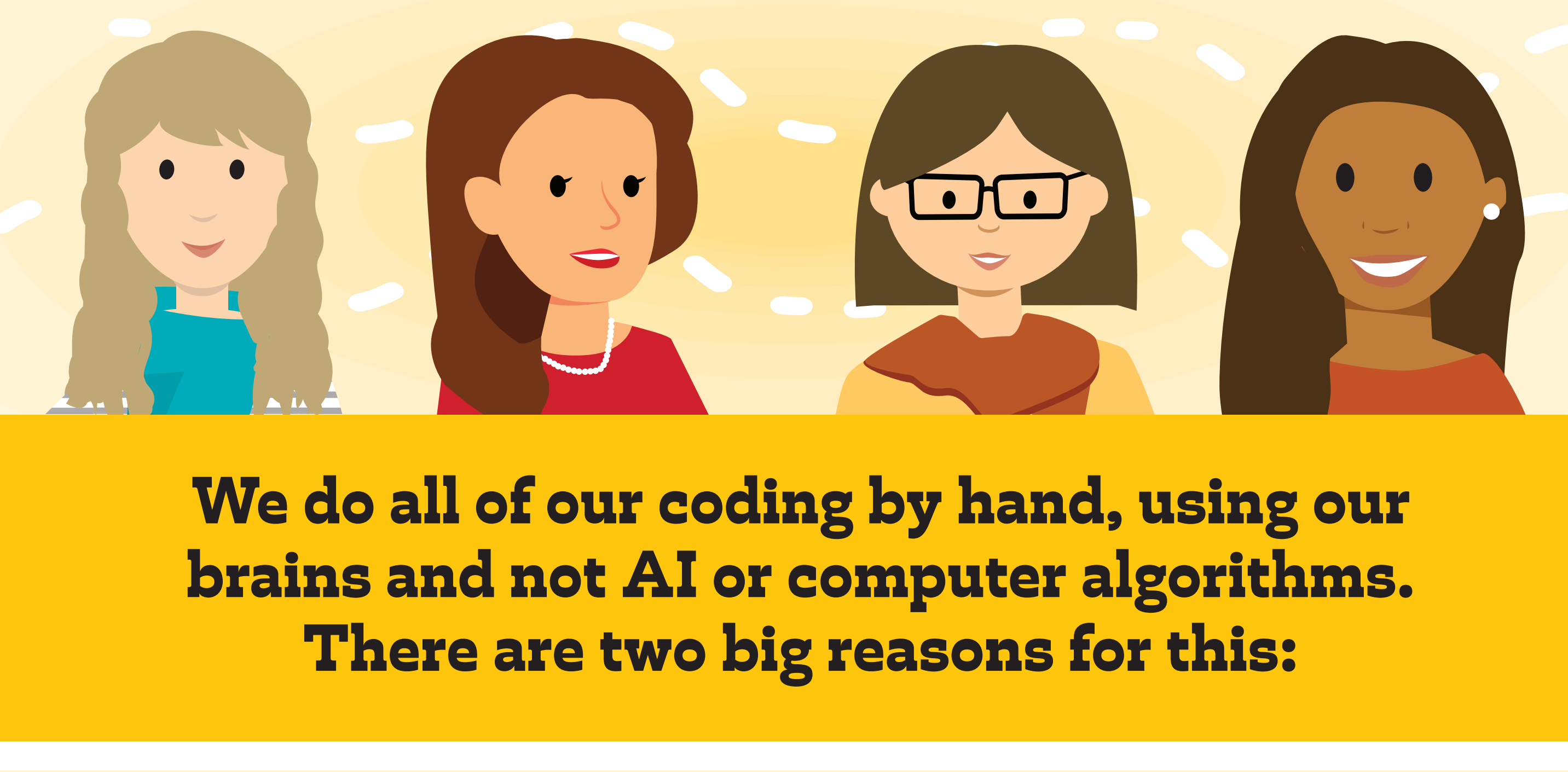
We analyze both surveys (frequent museum-goers and the broader population sample) in two key ways:

Quantitative Analysis

We start by running dozens and dozens of cross-tabs that we rigorously go through, line by line, so that we can begin to understand the patterns that are in the data. But we don't stop there. Once that first pass of analysis is done, we now know what filters to run so that we can really hone in on the different perspectives our audiences have. We often have to run filters multiple times, testing hypotheses until we get those filters just right. This is how we do things like identify how different values tend to cluster together, or develop our spectrum of inclusive attitudes.[1]

Qualitative Analysis

The Annual Survey *always* includes about three open-ended questions. And we'll be honest: we can't possibly code what can be upwards of 100,000 written-in responses. Instead, we create a coding sample that ensures we are hearing from significant numbers of randomly selected museum-goers that represent different ages and life stages, genders, races and ethnicities, and more.



We do all of our coding by hand, using our brains and not AI or computer algorithms. There are two big reasons for this:

We've never seen a computer program that comes close to understanding the nuance of responses that our human brains, with decades of museum experience, can comprehend. Responses are too complex.

By reading and analyzing thousands and thousands of individual responses, we get to know museum audiences much more intimately, including how different segments of museum visitors use language differently and how they think differently. This is extremely powerful insight into the minds of museum-goers, and it makes a dramatic difference in the quality of our work.

After all of that analysis, we're ready to share the results with the museum field. That's when we start to talk about it with Annual Survey participants (and get their feedback), and also write *Data Stories* and research presentations. All so we can share everything with the museum field … and you can become more effective at *your* museum!

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

- *2026 Annual Survey of Museum-Goers, n = 75,742; 186 museums participating*
- *2026 Broader Population Sampling, n = 2,045*
- *2017 - 2025 Annual Surveys of Museum-Goers*

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).**

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[1] See Audiences and Inclusion: A Primer for Cultivating More Inclusive Attitudes Among the Public

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

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