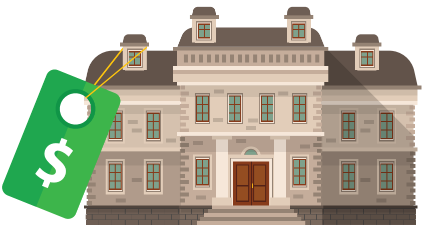
VISITOR PERSPECTIVES ON EXTRA FEES:
MUSEUM VISITORS IN UNCERTAIN TIMES, PART 2
A 2026 ANNUAL SURVEY OF MUSEUM-GOERS DATA STORY



THE COST OF A MUSEUM VISIT CAN VARY WIDELY.

Some museums are free, and don't charge extra for temporary exhibitions.

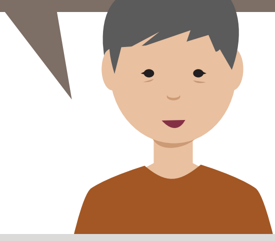
Other museums have a set admission fee, which includes all exhibitions and experiences.

And some museums have additional fees for temporary exhibitions, or giant-screen films, or other activities.

Of course, exhibitions, films, programs, and events cost money to provide. Museums rely on multiple sources of revenue to cover these costs, including fees paid by visitors for these additional experiences.

Visitors respond to additional costs in a variety of ways. When they vocalize a response, however, it is often negative. For example:

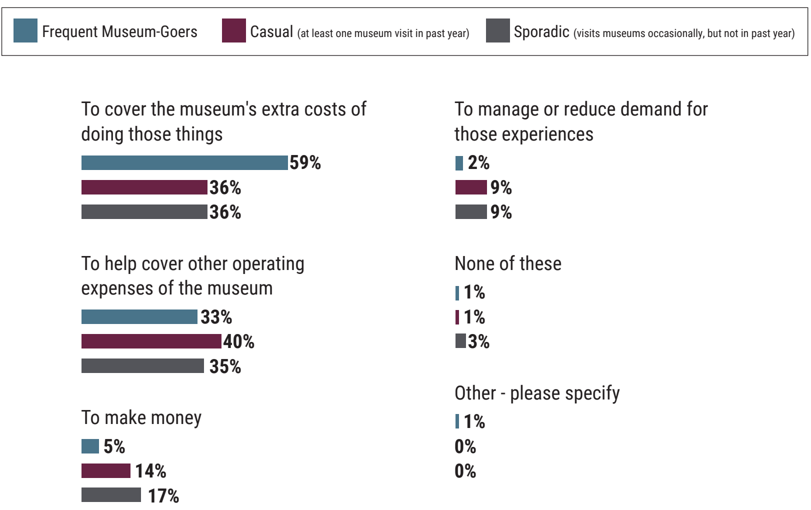
"For me I am always ok with paying admission but what drives me crazy is getting nickel-and-dimed to death."



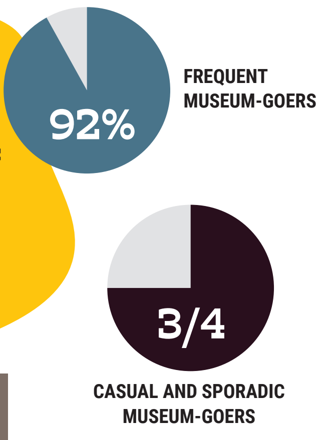
But these concerns do not necessarily represent the views of most visitors. Still, museums should consider the needs of those who are reluctant to pay more for additional experiences.

To find out what visitors thought about extra fees we asked them this question:

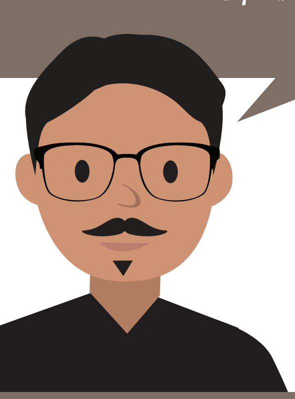
Some museums charge for general admission, and some are free. But sometimes there are "extra fees" for activities that the general admission doesn't include, such as paying for a temporary exhibition, program, special event, movie, or parking. Why do you think museums charge extra for these things? (Choose the ONE answer that you think is the most likely reason.)

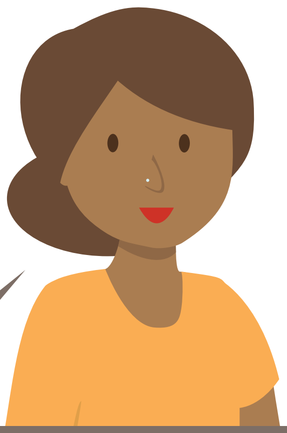


Good news! Most museum-goers understand that additional fees help cover museum expenses, whether the costs of specific activities and offerings or broader operating expenses. This varied from 92% of frequent museum-goers to about three-quarters of casual and sporadic visitors.



> *"Because everyone needs money to be able to provide things for the public."*

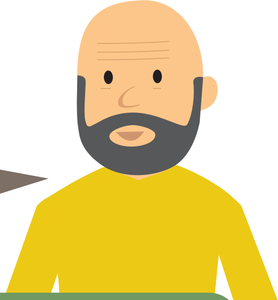




> *"These fees pay living wages to museum staff, etc. as well as maintain existing museum spaces and materials."*

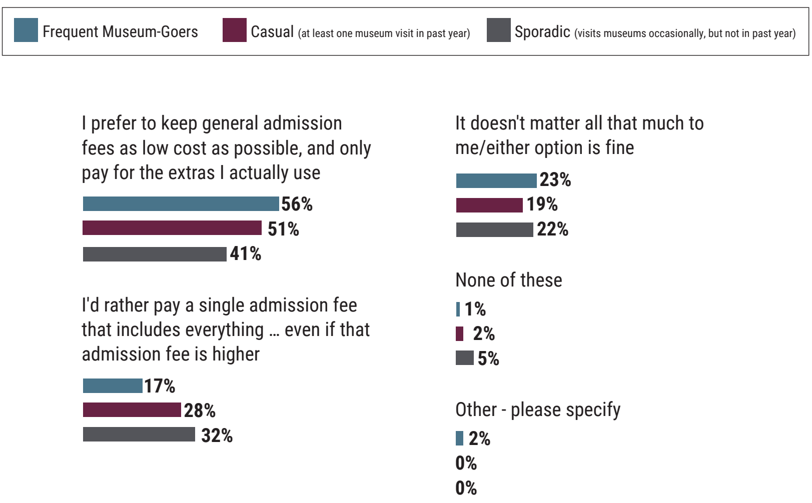
There is, however, a small but significant segment of visitors, particularly among less frequent visitors, who think museums charge extra fees to "make money;" indeed, one in six sporadic visitors think that is the case.

> *"Do not nickel-and-dime for everything; everything feels like a money grab."*



Knowing that some respondents would be sensitive to the subject of extra fees *before* we fielded the survey, we were prepared with a follow-up question:

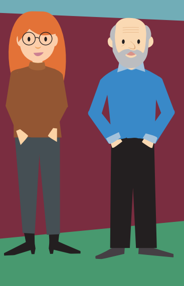
? Thinking of those extra fees during a museum visit, which of the following best describes your preference?



Overall, the most popular response was a lower general admission fee, with additional fees only for the extras people actually use. But there was no overwhelming consensus.

Instead, frequent museum-goers were more likely to want a lower general admission fee, while those who visit less frequently were somewhat more open to an all-inclusive ticket.

There were, however, differences by life stage. As we have noted before, younger adults (especially those under 40 with no children and parents and guardians with young children) are more likely to be *cost-sensitive,* while adults 60 and older are more likely to be *cost-resilient.*[1]

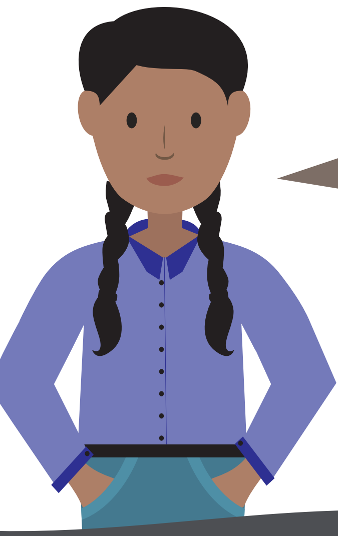


We found that to be true on this question as well. Younger adults were more likely to want the general admission fees to be kept lower, and to only pay for extras they actually use.

And adults over 60 were more likely to say, well, that it didn't really matter to them, and that either pricing option was okay.

Some respondents wrote in an additional suggestion: do both.

"Options. A la carte or inclusive."



"I think to keep everyone happy as best can be done, both options would need to be available. No one wants to pay extra for stuff they don't want, but some want to experience everything about a place especially if they aren't local and the visit is a one-time thing."

What are our takeaways? The data suggests:

- There are some audiences that are extremely cost-sensitive, and every expense is being watched carefully. Being mindful of these visitors when setting and communicating fees is important, as is assisting these visitors with grace and tact.
- Be transparent! Messaging the why behind extra fees is extremely helpful.
  - Tell visitors that the extra fees pay for the exhibition, movie, or program.
  - And that this system helps keep general admission prices lower for all visitors.
- If you work at a larger museum that provides multiple offerings during a visit, with each incurring an extra fee, consider a "buy what you use" option, as well as an "all-inclusive" option.

There were also quite a few comments about how membership status should affect these fees. We'll explore visitor perspectives about membership, including this feedback, later in this series of *Data Stories.*

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*

[1] Cost of Admissions and Museum Visitation, October 3, 2024 and Paying for Extras: Museum Visitors in Uncertain Times, part 1, October 29, 2026

Because of rounding, some results may total 99% or 101% rather than 100%.

**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).

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

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