



# The Creative Age

Engaging and Exploring New Experiences

Columbia Museum of Art



With generous support from the Institute of Museum and Library Services, the Columbia Museum of Art began its Creative Age Initiative in an effort to build a more engaging and accessible institution for seniors. Our project offers a stronger learning and social platform for older adults—primarily age 70 and above—living in the central region of South Carolina. We believe it serves as a critical community resource.



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# Introduction

In fall 2013, the Institution of Museum and Library Services "Museums for America – Learning Experiences" program generously supported the planning, creation, and implementation of the Columbia Museum of Art's Creative Age Initiative. The CMA focused on creating participatory arts programs for the growing senior population in a four-county area to provide key social interaction and learning opportunities to reduce personal isolation and increase well-being, both central to a healthier life. Many people spend a considerable portion of their lives in the company of others, in the workplace or raising children. But as they reach retirement, the opportunities for socialization often decrease, especially if the senior must rely on others for transportation.

### An active social lifestyle is important in helping seniors:

- maintain a sharp mind
- remain connected to the world around them
- increase feelings of happiness
- develop a sense of belonging

Through this initiative, the CMA has provided programs that engage the mind and enrich the spirit while also providing socialization opportunities.

Our project has four goals:

1. Provide older South Carolinians with meaningful and engaging art programming that will encourage sociability and lifelong learning.
2. Create greater accessibility and comfort at the CMA to enhance visitor experience.
3. Grow a senior audience.
4. Develop a comprehensive toolkit (the one you're reading now) to replicate this program for small or mid-sized cultural organizations.

...which were carried out in three phases:

1. Year One: Discovery
2. Year Two: Pilot and Outreach
3. Year Three: Roll-Out



# Process

# Year One: Discovery

The Discovery Phase represents Year One in our initiative and began with modest upgrades to the museum to provide greater accessibility and comfort.

To better determine what improvements needed to be made, we developed the Docent Advisory Committee with select members from our Docent Corps.

During initial meetings, we addressed programs, communication, membership, public and gallery spaces, and general concerns among older adults. Docents became familiar with the IMLS grant and the CMA's proposed strategies for achieving goals. We appointed a Docent Liaison, who attended the National Center for Creative Aging Conference in June 2014 and remained actively involved throughout the grant.

In order for the CMA to achieve our goals, we made certain internal changes. The height of cases, font size on labels, and position and availability of stools and benches would need to be adjusted in order to better meet the needs of those with certain accessibility issues and still meet or exceed ADA standards.

## Other factors to consider internally: **Cross-departmental cooperation**

- In order for us to make internal changes, we need to maintain good relationships with other departments. It is important to remember that as an institution, we all work together to achieve institutional goals and meet the needs of the visitor.
- Always consult with the curatorial team in terms of case and label placement to ensure that they are not only ADA-compliant, but visually pleasing to visitors.
- Keep the facilities team updated of all anticipated physical changes.
- The communications and development departments can be invaluable in terms of helping promote your progress and seek funding to help advance and sustain the initiative.





## Case Study No. 1

*Meiji Magic: Imperial Porcelain from Japan*

*Meiji Magic* represents a shift in how we display art. For this particular show, cases were lowered to make art more visible for those with height concerns. An unexpected outcome of this show is the multigenerational bond it created, in that children could view the art more easily, which is critical when considering grandparents in the creative age demographic. We gathered input from comment books inside the galleries.



Examples of positive feedback:

- ➔ "I do think that the shorter exhibits will help everyone to see. My mother is in a wheelchair and it makes it difficult to enjoy things as a family."
- ➔ "I am 6'2", so the lower cases require me to bend or squat to see the detail, however I do not find this to be bothersome. Better to make the exhibits accessible to all!"
- ➔ "Loved the exhibit! My husband was in a wheelchair for 17 years, so I am sympathetic to the lowered heights. Perhaps you could dedicate a case on two of representative work at the lower height?"
- ➔ "A great way to expose art to those disabled and of the younger generations."

## Case Study No. 2

### *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*

During the run of *Norman Rockwell: Behind the Camera*, we experimented with large-print gallery guides. The guides featured 18 point size font and included text panel verbiage for those who might not be able to read wall labels. These guides were tremendously popular among older adults and were replenished weekly.



## Facility Upgrades

Facility upgrades represent some of the most important changes we needed to make in order to accommodate guests. Although the CMA is ADA-compliant, comfort is a different consideration.

With funds provided by the Hilliard Family Foundation, the CMA was able to update its Education Gallery. The renovations feature comfortable seating with armrests, which makes getting in and out of the seat easier for people with knee, hip, and back issues—

something often overlooked in gallery benches. While it may seem minor, enjoyable seating for all guests can have a huge impact on the visitor experience.

We also added more visible signs inside to indicate where wheelchair-accessible areas are, and added an additional handicapped parking space in the front of the museum. The parking space was added at no cost through working with the City of Columbia.



## Lectus Stools

One of the most substantial efforts during the Initiative was the acquisition of Swedish-designed Lectus gallery stools.

The CMA Grants Specialist worked with us to apply for and secure an Accessibility Grant through the South Carolina Arts Commission.

In June 2016, our new gallery stools arrived and were introduced during the opening weekend of the *Daufuskie Memories* exhibition. Surveys were administered to gauge visitor experience with our new gallery stools.



### Visitor Response Was Enthusiastic

- Q. How important is gallery seating on a scale 1-5, with 5 being the highest?
- A. 5- VERY important, it's great to have an option.
- Q. On a scale of 1-5 (with 5 being the highest), how would you rate your experience with the Lectus stools today?
- A. For our trip at the CMA, we used the stools in the downstairs gallery. They were awesome!!

## Affiliates Within the Museum as Partners

As mentioned earlier, we enlisted the help of the CMA Docent Corps, as the majority of docents fall within the Creative Age demographic. We asked the Docent Advisory Board to help us better assess what changes were needed. Our Docent Liaison for the Creative Age Initiative attended the 2014 National Center for Creative Aging Leadership Exchange and Conference and was able to share her insights and findings to the rest of the Docent Corps. She explained how this work fits in the museum and culture world and how the CMA can progress with our work, incorporating new trends in the field on a national level. We have continued to consult with the Docent Corps throughout the project to further our insight on what it means to be an active senior in a museum.



## External Aspects of Year One

In addition to working within museum walls, it is crucial to create and foster strong relationships with outside organizations. One of the first partnerships we established was with the Lieutenant Governor's Office on Aging.

The Office on Aging provided access to the calendars of various senior centers in the area, which led to speaking engagements. This increased our interaction with seniors outside of the CMA.

In addition to the Office on Aging, we connected with the Richland County Recreation Commission and set up a series of "Art du Jour" tours for seniors. These guided gallery tours provide lunch for visitors in a comfortable setting that encourages socialization combined with continued learning.

**Consider what partnerships can lead to more connections, and how they can help access your target demographic.**

## Programs

Meaningful and engaging programs are crucial to lifelong learning opportunities.

We revisited a former program and refreshed it: ArtBreak allows adults to engage in social activities with others who share similar interests. The program begins with a pop-up café 30 minutes before the scheduled lecture. Guests can interact with each other while learning something new.

ArtBreak is special because it highlights speakers with particular expertise outside the art world and asks them to share their perspective. This program has been very successful, not only because of its content, but because of its accessibility to guests.

According to surveys, the time of day (11 a.m.) is ideal for those in the 65+ demographic, but also allows younger visitors to take a lunch break and attend the lecture.

This is something to consider when planning daytime programs:

- Pick a time of day and week that can seamlessly transition into someone's lunch break or otherwise have a minimal impact on their workday if you want to attract visitors who might still be in the workforce.
- This provides a multigenerational program opportunity that our surveys have shown seniors enjoy.



# Year Two: Pilot Phase and Outreach

During the Pilot phase, Creative Age Initiative programs were offered to strategic partners, new partners found in the Discovery Phase, and the general public. We continued off-site outreach by presenting programs, attending more conferences, and developing a comprehensive daytime programming initiative called Creative Days at the CMA.

- Launched in January 2015, Creative Days at the CMA includes programs that do not require visitors to pre-register or to be on their feet for long periods of time.
- It is important to provide programs that offer the following:
  - » flexible daytime schedules
  - » focus on different themes for learning (ArtBreak, for instance)
  - » flexible parking options
  - » multigenerational interest
  - » interdisciplinary arts components such as music, dance, and theater

To reach our target audience, we produced the Creative Days brochure, which is mailed to every museum member and dispersed at various community centers, shops and institutions which the senior audience might frequent. In the first year, that meant these brochures were distributed to not just members, but 20 senior centers, the Lt. Governor's office on Aging, as well as areas and shops in high traffic locations.

A critical element of the brochure is its language. We used language that implied these programs are geared towards an older demographic without ever using the word "senior." In our research we learned that no one considers themselves a senior, so use of the word is a barrier. Words and phrases like "daytime" and "seating provided at every program," suggest that these events are senior-friendly. Likewise, the photographs used also suggest that these programs can be enjoyed by seniors, but are not exclusive to those 65+. We included photography with active and engaged adults who happen to be older.

Since the Creative Days brochure comes out biannually, it allows seniors to plan their museum trips in advance. Based on focus group findings, active seniors like to have adequate time to plan social trips, and this allows them that time.

Creative Days also touches on a sensitive topic: money.

All programs are free with admission or membership. Many seniors live on a fixed income, so it is important to stress that while we do offer numerous free and discounted programming at the CMA, almost all of our programs are free with membership, which is further incentive to join the museum. Furthermore, the CMA offers a discounted rate for senior membership.

Creative Days exceeded all expectations in attendance and demonstrated a shift in audience participation, as we saw that senior attendance increased by 350% and membership increased by 70% during this period. Effective marketing can make or break programs, as seen in the effectiveness of the Creative Days campaign. Providing active seniors with a comprehensive schedule of programs allows them to plan accordingly and can increase senior participation at your institution.

## New Website

The CMA website was updated in the summer of 2015 by a local web developer. Our new website is designed to be responsive, which makes navigation on any device easy and therefore more user-friendly. It includes expanded information about facility accessibility and comfort.

It is important to consider the technology abilities of your senior audience. Although “smart” devices are prevalent, not everyone will be as tech-savvy as presumed.



## Outreach

Outreach is vital for bringing seniors into an institution. A major component of our project is conducting outreach services to various senior centers in the area.

- A Speaker's bureau is a relatively easy way to bring the museum to visit on their own accord. A museum staff member visits off-site and presents about our programs, our world-class collection, and upcoming exhibitions through a Power Point.
  - Through our partnerships with the Lourie Center, Agape, and the Richland County Recreation Commission, we have conducted numerous speaking engagements to spread word about what we offer to seniors. From here, groups can book a senior-specific tour or plan around an upcoming lecture.
  - As previously stated, Creative Days brochures are left at each facility, further encouraging senior guests to visit.
- Showcasing ideas at conferences is also a good way to get your vision noticed. Staff presented our Creative Age Initiative at the South Carolina Federation of Museum Conference in March 2015.
  - In addition to presenting our progress, we conducted a survey with conference attendees to gather more insight about what we can do to further that progress.
    - » Introduce idea of Creative Age programming
    - » Retaining, growing, engaging senior audiences

The feedback from these surveys helped us look at the work we have accomplished and work yet to be done.

# Year Three: Roll-Out

The final year of our project, the Roll-out phase, allows us to apply what we have learned during the Pilot and Outreach phases. From here, we can continue our progress

## Technology

**iPad Minis:** The grant allowed us to purchase 10 iPad Minis to use for multimedia TAP tours and survey projects.

The CMA currently offers free multimedia TAP tours for visitors. These serve as a great alternative to a guided tour, because it allows the visitor to experience art at their own pace. These tours are available for free at the front desk on iPods and can also be accessed from a visitor's own smart device.

The larger screen on the iPad minis provides guests with vision difficulties the same tour opportunities.

### **Hearing Aids for Tours and Talks:**

The grant allowed us to also purchase a lightweight, multi-channel tour guide system to aid those with hearing difficulty.

The Williams Sound TGS Pro 737 meets ADA requirements and allows guests to enjoy tours as well as lectures.

Technology can seem daunting initially, but ultimately has numerous advantages. It is important to remember how fast technology updates, however, and the necessity to avoid obsolescence by staying current with trends, and budgeting for changes.





# Evaluations

We hired an external evaluator to help us reflect on our progress through the three years of the project. The external evaluator was asked to review surveys and other evaluation instruments that we used to assess this program. We used these traditional evaluation methods (such as surveys and group meetings) to gather information and test our own hypotheses about audience needs and expectations. Specifically, these methods were used to understand what our audience wanted from programming and what was standing in the way of participation.

As an example, we found during this process that “seniors” do not consider themselves to be “seniors.” If you ask someone in their late 60s to define seniors, he or she will describe people in their 80s or 90s as seniors. This, among other things, was very important to how we structured and marketed the programming.

The external evaluator also worked with the team to thoughtfully reflect on the progress of the project and its impact. The evaluator met with the team every three to six months and led the team through reflective practice exercises. These quarterly meetings allowed the team to apply our evaluations and determine what changes needed to occur to make our programs more engaging.

The team was asked the same set of questions at every meeting:

- What was the original plan for this period?
- What was the reality for this period?
- What impact did reality have on Creative Age team thinking and direction?
- What impact did reality have on Creative Age visitors?
- What lessons were learned that could be passed to other museums?

The evaluator recorded the responses and sent short written reports to the team. This process allowed the team to take two hours every three to six months to reflect on the progress they had made—including impacts on the intended audience and impacts on other CMA audiences, and to reassert goals to be met in the next three to six months. This valuable professional practice is an invisible support of highly impactful programming. The program team is given time to think critically about the program they are developing. They take time to acknowledge successes, explore new avenues, recognize past issues that have been resolved, and consider new problems and seek their solutions.



# Findings

## Survey Example

- ➔ How would you rate your experience at the museum today?
- ➔ Is this your first time at ArtBreak? If no, how often have you been in the past 12 months?
- ➔ How often have you visited the CMA in the past 12 months?
- ➔ Why are you visiting today?
  - » I enjoy coming to the museum:
  - » To see the exhibition (name of exhibition here)
  - » My friends/family are visiting me
  - » My friends/family wanted to visit
  - » I want to do/learn something new
  - » I am visiting Columbia

Generally, survey results were favorable; 100% of those who participated rated their experience as excellent, and visit the museum between three or more than six times per year.



## Focus Group

Focus groups were used in conjunction with the surveys to better understand the impact of Creative Age on program visitors. The focus group, held in April 2015, was an hour-long discussion led by the external evaluator. It is beneficial to use an external evaluator (because they lack institutional bias), but please note that focus groups can be run by an internal staff member if external evaluators are not available or practical.

The purpose of the focus group was to dig deeper into program satisfaction, motivations, and ways in which the Creative Age program was, or was not, a unique addition to the visitors' lives. The focus group questions can be found in the attached appendix.

The focus group revealed or confirmed several important aspects of the Creative Age Program which help to better understand the Creative Age audience at any museum:



- Creative Age visitors want to experience the museum in a new way and be exposed to new objects and ideas. For example, one Creative Age program participant commented: "One of the things that I like about coming to these lectures is [seeing] 'behind the scenes'. I've never done that at a museum before."
- Creative Age visitors are passionate about sharing the program experience with others – whether it be family or friends. Social aspects of the program are important and Creative Age visitors want to be able to socialize with people of varied ages. In other words, do not attach an age minimum on the programming.
- Proximity to the museum is considered by visitors, but not as significant a barrier as once thought.
- Timing was far more important in that Creative Age visitors prefer to avoid rush hour traffic. Building coffee, meals, or other social events around the program allows participants to attend the program while still attending to other responsibilities.

Talk to prospective Creative Age visitors. You may determine a "sweet spot" in the day which works for your Creative Age population.



# Conclusion

For over three years, the Columbia Museum of Art has created a stronger and more enjoyable environment for seniors. Our programs are more inclusive and engaging, and we are steadily making facility and technology upgrades to follow suit. It is important for institutions to study the rapidly growing population of seniors because they represent some of our strongest members. In understanding how to accommodate seniors' needs without being patronizing, connection and involvement become more personal.

Take a look at your senior guests and think about what makes them unique; how can an institution become more involved in their lives to get them more involved in yours? Surveys, evaluations, and internal changes take time and effort, but will improve the participation of seniors in your community. Programs, facility, and further external adaptations will encourage participation. We hope that with this toolkit, you can apply the lessons we have learned to improve the quality of senior opportunities at your institution. It is our hope that this toolkit provides you with the necessary resources to engage this vibrant population in your community.



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# Appendix A

## External Evaluator Focus Group Questions

Columbia Museum of Art – Creative Age Evaluation Study

INSTRUMENT: POST TOUR FOCUS GROUP

3/8/2016

Questions which will be asked to participants in group

1. What were your favorite parts of this program? If you were to tell someone else about this program, what would you say to them? (Follow-up: Tell me more about that.)
2. What other activities do you participate in? How did this program compare to some of those? (Follow-up: Tell me more about that.)
3. What is important to you in terms of these types of programs? Is it social, emotional, content learning? (Follow-up: Tell me more about that.)
4. Do you think your children (or someone 25 years younger than you) would enjoy this program? What would they like about it? What would they not like? (Follow-up: Tell me more about

# Appendix B

Growth in CMA Senior Attendance over Baseline

