

## Balboa Park Learning Institute's Smith Leadership Symposium

*Motivation, Interactions, and Impact:  
Understanding the Audience Experience*

On November 8, 2010, the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership co-hosted the Smith Leadership Symposium to present the results of its groundbreaking audience research project. The Symposium expanded its horizons in representing the philosophy and ideals of Robert F. Smith, Jr., honored for inspiring the creation of San Diego's Balboa Park Cultural Partnership in 2003. Smith encouraged Balboa Park to *think strategically and plan collaboratively*. Traditionally, this signature event is presented to the local cultural arts community to create dynamic visitor experiences. This year, the BPCP and the Learning Institute, led by David Lang, Executive Director, and Paige Simpson, Director of the Balboa Park Learning Institute, collaborated with California Association of Museums, California Exhibitions Resources Alliance, Museum Educators of Southern California, Cultural Connections of San Francisco, Learning Times and other partners to extend the Symposium to a broader audience. Through this collaboration, technology was employed to live stream the conference to cultural arts professionals from the convening museums in San Diego to the satellite museums in Los Angeles and San Jose and to the approximately 700 people registered for the world-wide audience on the web. In addition, in-person breakout sessions were conducted at the three venues and with the online audience to discuss the ideas presented by the speakers gathered in Balboa Park.

From introductions and welcome presentations by Paige Simpson, Dr. Michael Hager (San Diego Natural History Museum), Todd Gloria (San Diego City Council) and Celeste De Wald (CAM), participants in the Symposium were made aware of the valuable stimulus the arts provide for the economy.

## BREAKOUT SESSIONS:

**Nina Simon**, Museum 2.0 Blog, emphasized the need to find legitimate ways for the visitor to participate. The involved visitor develops a level of comfort, confidence and sense of ownership in the museum. She challenged museum professionals to visit a place not part of their regular routine, to see if they feel welcomed and engaged.

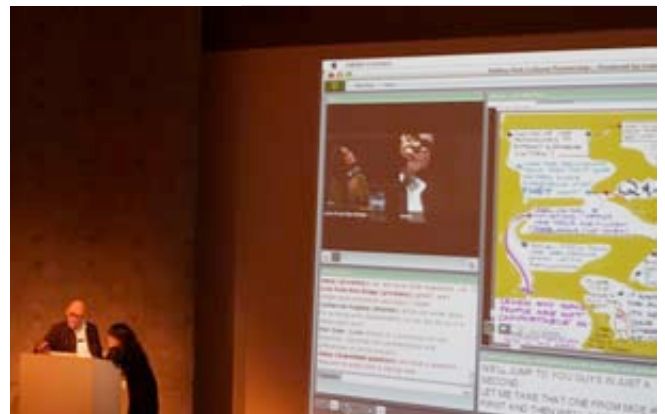
**Salvador Acevedo**, Contemporanea Marketing Communications, saw diverse exhibitions and visitors in Balboa Park but noted it was difficult to engage this diverse ethnic audience to participate in the museums. It is important to consider the whole person, not just the ethnic identification.

**Dr. Marianna Adams** presented the results of the Balboa Park Audience Benefit Survey. Over 10,000 exit surveys were completed at 13 museums between Memorial Day

and Labor Day 2010. Three representatives from museums in Balboa Park spoke about the usefulness of the survey to assist in enhancing the visitor experience. Museums will also be investigating the results to discover what specific activities and places at the museum influenced the high and low scores.

In the **Synthesis** at the conclusion of the day, ideas from the breakout sessions and connections to the central themes of motivation, interaction, and impact on the audience experience were discussed. Participants suggested ideas that were summarized as comfort/choice/control to create accessibility and memorable museum moments. John Falk congratulated the Institute on an important and ambitious study for deeper understanding of the audience experience.

As an introduction to the debut of the survey results, the three guest speakers provided summaries of the latest thinking in providing the ultimate audience experience and answered questions provided by the world-wide audience.



Dr. John Falk, Professor at Oregon State University, pointed out that visitor experiences are actually a series of one-time Contracts, depending on the visitor needs for that particular day. The physical building and the exhibitions are only part of the equation. The visitor determines an enjoyment level based on the ability of the museum to satisfy his/her own identity-related needs. During the Q&A, Falk added the need for museum websites to include more pictures of people enjoying the exhibitions. Let visitors know how they can use the museum to fulfill their own interests. Connect to the public. Use survey results to make informed decisions. After the Q&A, the participants moved into three breakout sessions. -- *Joanne Yoffee Furer*