

Object Lessons 5

***You are worth it!* How to charge for/get the funding you deserve to work with children and young people who deserve it**

Firstsite Colchester 10am to 4pm, 8 February 2018

Cathy Simon- Chiltern Open Air Museum.

The ethics of Survival: how can we justify charging for our learning programmes?

Context

Cathy is head of Learning at the Chiltern Open Air Museum. The Learning Department now generate slightly more than a third of the overall income of the museum which means that they now look at their offer as meeting both the needs of our learning community and the financial needs of the museum. Over the past four years Cathy has led changes in programming and established a new focus on excellence; during this time visitor numbers have increased by 120% and income by 270%

Key points

Is there a genuine conflict in purpose between being educators and income generation?

Why are we happy to look for funding from a whole range of funders but not to charge for learning?

If charging for sessions increases access to these by creating a long term sustainable programme then this is a positive move. Charging also allows good resources to be bought for a session and ensures that the offer is of the highest quality. Building a long term sustainable programme contributes to wider organisational resilience which is not reliant on less predictable funding bids.

What is charged for? Groups are given the chance to make unique things, have unique experiences are given the chance to connect with heritage and are given experiences that they can't have in the classroom- this is all valued. A free offer isn't always valued.

How was it done?

The team accepted that its offer was tired and needed refreshing so they spoke to schools to find out what was wanted. They discovered:

- Schools wanted an offer with NO worksheets or paper trails
- They wanted full day sessions
- Themed days were popular
- They wanted an experience that they couldn't get in school

All new sessions were piloted with local schools to ensure that they met the needs of teachers and that the outcomes mirrored those wanted by local schools.

The team also had to consider balancing creating volunteer opportunities with getting a job done quickly and looked at whether resourcing everything in-house was sustainable. Sometimes buying off the peg appears expensive but when time is factored in this can be false economy.

Financial calculations

The fundamental question asked in order to start the process was 'How much do we need to spend to make learning experiences the best that they can be?' The focus was always on excellence and charging a fair price in order to be able to offer this. The pricing was benchmarked against other learning offers to ensure that the charging would be reasonable. The charges were packaged for a class based on cost per child.

The museum had to consider whether by charging they were excluding schools that couldn't afford the learning offer. Having a clear understanding of the cost and value of the offer meant that they could approach funders to help this group and local funders have identified the museum and its learning offer as sustainable and are happy to donate. A schools fund is now established which helps schools cover costs if they can't afford them. The Learning team took note of schools that booked and then cancelled due to costs and offered them support. Supporting schools is now included in all funding bids. In general most schools find a way to fund out-of-school experiences if they believe them to be high quality. The team never considered lowering the cost of sessions- they are good value for excellence- but looked for alternative funding streams to support struggling schools.

Outcomes

- After two years 66% of the schools visiting are repeat visitors
- Numbers are up by 170% (from 9K-25K PA)
- Income is up by 270%
- The Learning Department now raises one third of the museum's income
- The profile of Learning has been raised within the museum
- Trustees are more confident to allow the Learning team to experiment and try things that may not make an income
- The Learning Department has grown from 7 staff to 25 including a Marketing Officer

By focusing on excellence throughout the whole process a high quality learning offer is bringing in the income needed to maintain high standards and is valued by the schools using it.

<https://www.coam.org.uk/learning/>

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