

You've got them in the door...or do you?

First-Year Family Member Research for AMNH

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Some context...

- **2010 membership program research**
 - qualitative and quantitative
 - used to restructure program and optimize levels, benefits, and messages

Overview of Research Findings

2010
study

1. Most Members say they're content with their membership experiences at AMNH and expect to maintain the relationship. But there is evidence that they aren't as enthusiastic about their memberships as they could be. This probably affects renewal rates, upgrades, and word of mouth.

Overall, our findings indicate a certain *pro forma*, automatic quality to Members' relationships with the program, rather than a sense of active commitment and engagement. This is not unusual in mature membership programs of large, historic institutions, which may be why many such institutions are beginning to look strategically at new membership approaches and structures. The responses of AMNH Members affirm the museum's plans to reinvigorate the program and suggest that there is real potential for increased program performance and other outcomes.

- Many Members are quite loyal to AMNH, with membership histories averaging 8 years and 85% of Members expecting to renew their membership next year.
- But fewer Members (69%) consider themselves "very satisfied" with their membership experiences.
- Moreover, there is little movement up the engagement ladder to greater benefits and deeper philanthropic commitment: only 3% of Members expect to upgrade their membership upon renewal. Our other museum membership studies indicate that upgrade rates are usually twice as high—and can run as high as 25% for the most successful programs.

Overview of Research Findings

2010
study

2. Members enjoy visiting the museum, and they view the membership program as a way to reduce the cost of doing so frequently—but not as a value-added connection to AMNH. In their minds, membership is all about visiting. It doesn't give most Members a sense of community or deeper access to the museum's rich resources. So most opt into the lowest membership level that supports the way they visit the museum: those who tend to visit alone become Individual members, those who visit with a spouse become Dual members, etc.

Since the current benefit levels are differentiated largely by the number of people for whom benefits are offered, the structure provides little incentive for Members to upgrade. These findings highlight the opportunity to build on the program's success as a frequency/discount tool by adding layers of connection, community, and philanthropic reward.

- Members are largely satisfied with their experience visiting AMNH (84% give the top two ratings), but less so with their membership experience (69%).
- Only a third of Members feel that they are part of the museum community by virtue of their membership.
- Less than 14% of Members report ever having made a donation above and beyond their membership fees.
- These perceptions bind the membership renewal decision to visitation: many let their membership lapse from time to time, waiting until the next time they visit to renew.

Overview of Research Findings

2010
study

3. Members would love the membership program to be their gateway to a different kind of experience at AMNH, one with more intimate access and deeper insight into the Museum's content. They would relish opportunities to "get closer" when they visit: go "backstage" to see collections storage or conservation labs, interact informally with AMNH scientists, visit exhibits at special Members-only times, and hear more about how the museum is working to expand the boundaries of scientific and cultural knowledge.

New Members, in particular, expect the membership program to offer them enhanced access to the public and backstage areas of the Museum and to treat them as special, valued participants in the AMNH community. AMNH's relatively low first-year renewal rate may reflect their disappointment that membership doesn't deliver on that expectation.

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- There is nearly universal Member interest in all kinds of potential membership benefits that offer increased access and connection to the museum, such as curator- or designer-led tours, behind-the-scenes access to the storage, conservation, and research spaces, and opportunities to engage directly with AMNH scientists in informal or social settings.
 - This enthusiasm cuts across the attitudinal segments we identified (see main report).

Overview of Research Findings

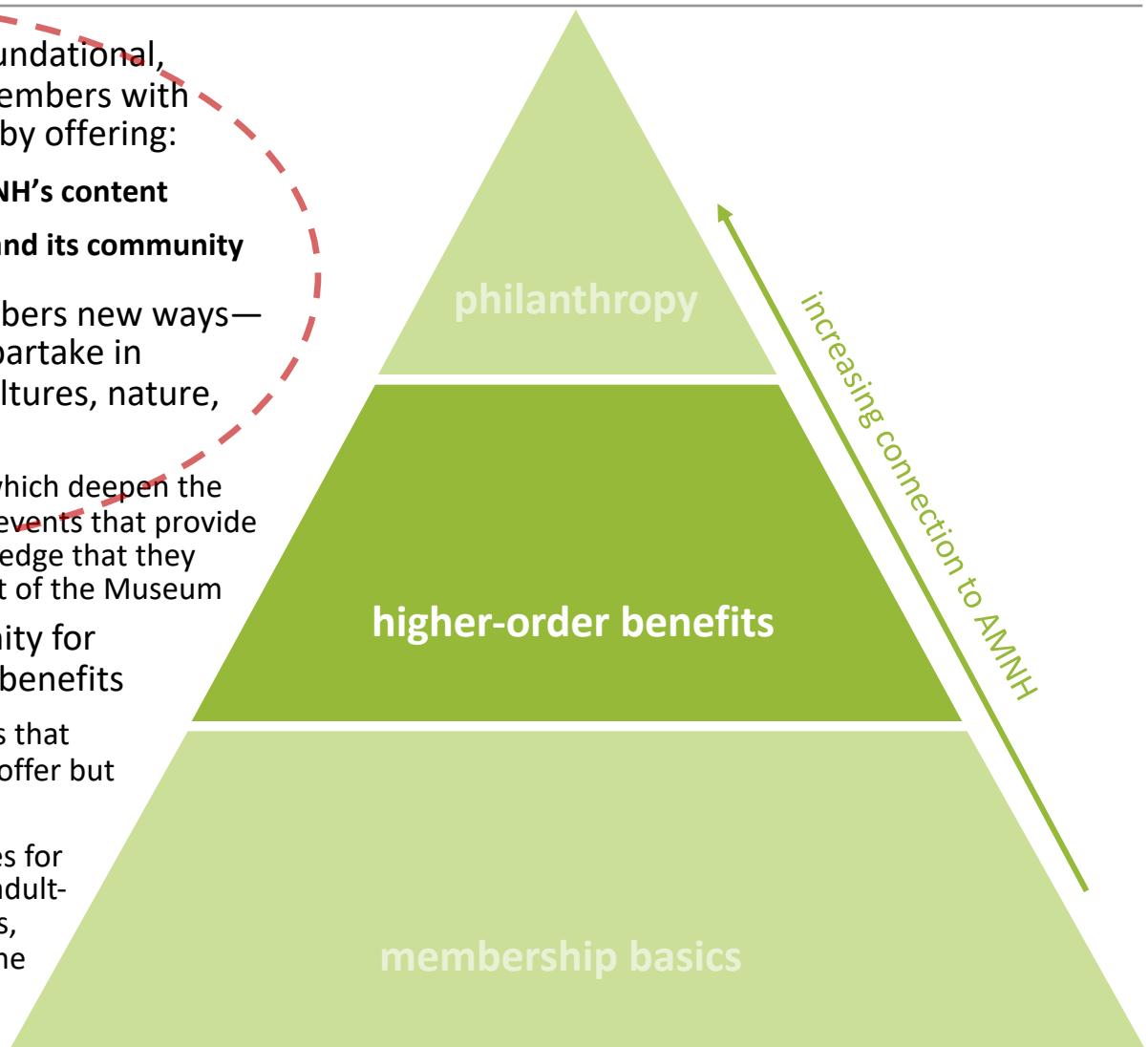
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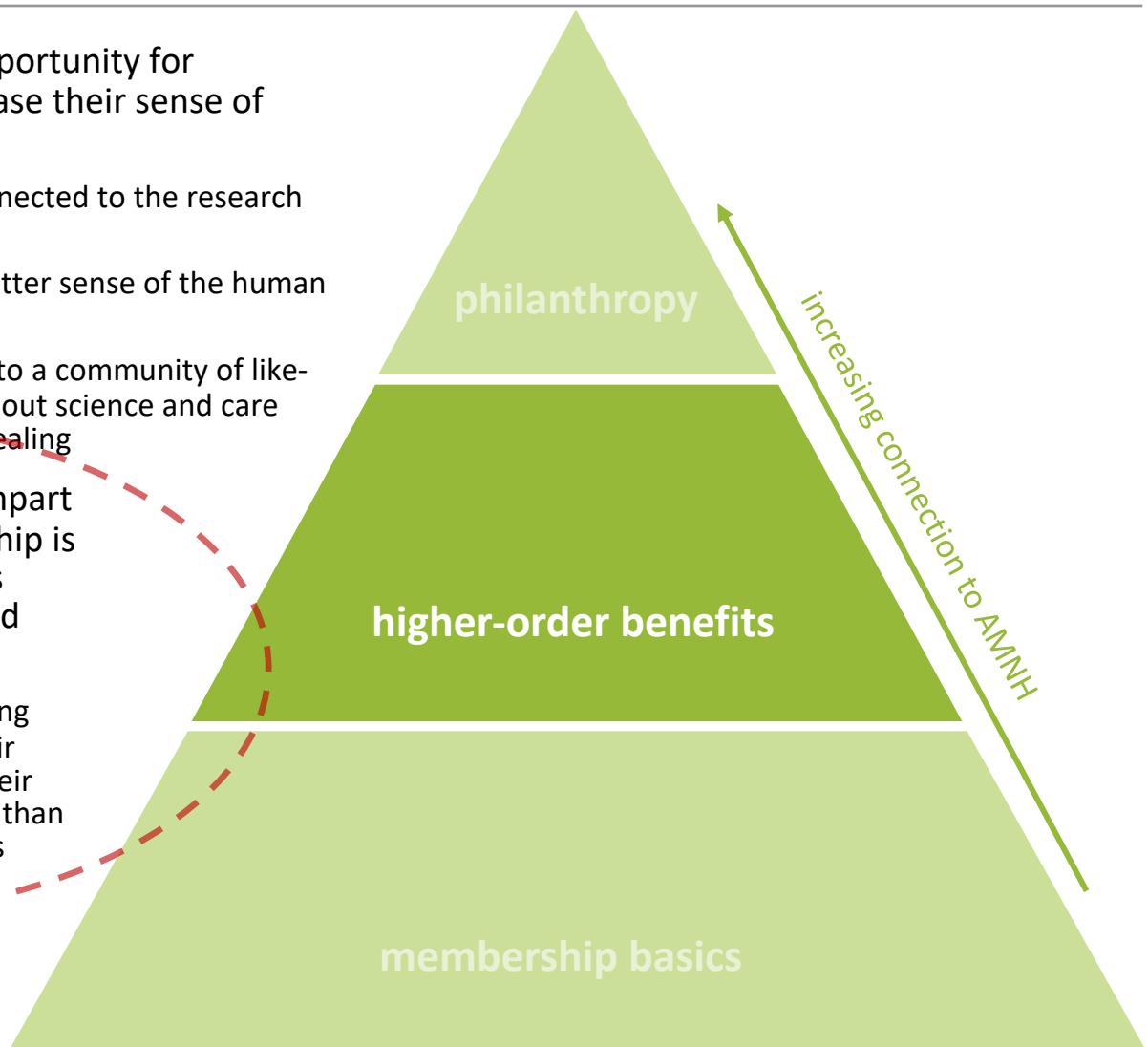
Executive Summary (cont.)

- While membership basics are foundational, **higher-order benefits** provide members with enhanced experiences at AMNH by offering:
 - Deeper engagement with AMNH's content
 - Closer connections to AMNH and its community
- Higher-order benefits offer members new ways—beyond the traditional visit—to partake in AMNH's knowledge of human cultures, nature, and the universe
 - For instance, special lectures which deepen the learning experience or special events that provide members with access to knowledge that they don't necessarily get in the rest of the Museum
- And members see a lot opportunity for AMNH to provide more of these benefits
 - Again, some of the experiences that members want are already on offer but awareness of them is low
 - But there are also opportunities for membership to provide more adult-oriented learning opportunities, participatory experiences for the family, and in-depth coverage of the ideas and concepts at the heart of AMNH's mission



Executive Summary (cont.)

- They also see considerable opportunity for membership benefits to increase their sense of “ownership” in the museum
 - They want to feel more connected to the research work that AMNH conducts
 - They also want to have a better sense of the human personalities behind AMNH
 - And making membership into a community of like-minded people who care about science and care about the institution is appealing
- These kinds of benefits can impart a sense that AMNH membership is part “who I am,” which makes renewal much more stable and increased support more likely
 - There are many loyal, lifelong members already—but their loyalty stems more from their love of the visit experience than from what membership has provided



An exploratory inquiry

- **Observations & interviews of new family members**
 - Phase 1: On-site ethnography:
 - Observation during entry, interaction with staff, and decision to purchase general admission or become members
 - Brief interviews after the purchase decision (24 families)
 - “Follow-alongs”: researcher joins family on first hour of visit, observing and occasionally interjecting questions about the experience
 - Phase 2: Follow-up phone interviews 4–6 weeks after their purchase decision
 - Phase 3: second round of interviews with same family members 7–9 months after their purchase, in the months leading up to the renewal decision

Motivations for joining

- When these families did decide to join at the gate, they did so for financial reasons
 - Membership is a cost-effective alternative to paying for individual admission and special exhibition tickets
 - Or it isn't!
 - Cost savings is the main pitch from staff at admissions and membership desk
 - But visitors are already thinking within that frame

Motivations for joining (cont.)

- **They're also hoping for future rewards**
 - Membership can (will?) encourage them to visit again / more frequently
 - moves AMNH to “our short list” for a year
 - Commitment device or reasonable risk
- **Membership reduces hassles (another kind of “cost” of visiting)**
 - Shorter lines, come-and-go flexibility, coat check, etc.
- **It's not really about philanthropic support**
 - They admire the institution and a few want to support and “be part of it,” but most aren’t thinking that way when they join

Motivations for joining (cont.)

- New family members can't readily imagine how membership might deepen the visit experience or their overall relationship with the museum
 - A few said it “gives you a sense of ownership”
 - But most were in the financial/logistical frame

Follow-ups—how are they feeling?

- **First follow-up, a month or two later**
 - These new family members are happy with their decision
 - They enjoyed that visit (when they joined), though they had valuable feedback about some logistical aspects
 - They expect to return soon
 - But relatively few (~1/4) had returned so far
 - Most said the value lies in allowing/encouraging more frequent visits
 - How often they visited will be a prime factor in their renewal decision
- **Second follow-up, leading up to renewal**
 - Will their satisfaction turn into renewal? Stay tuned!

Some broader observations

- Is there a disconnect between our frame and theirs?
 - Joining at the door for cost reasons isn't a category or phase shift in their minds
 - But we put them in a different category of investment, messaging, and expectations
 - Then if they don't renew, we think we've "lost them"
- If membership doesn't give these new members a qualitatively better experience—thereby shifting their frame from *discounting* to *deepening*—then the renewal decision will just be a replay of the purchase decision (cost & convenience)
 - How could we help them shift that frame...right from the start?

Some broader observations (cont.)

- **Currently, membership is seen as a way of reducing the negatives rather than adding positives**
 - It mitigates some of the hassles (cost, lines, lack of escape [if there's a member lounge], etc.), provides information
 - But it doesn't really add unique positives
 - **How could it make a good thing (the museum visit) even better?**
- **How to help people make the mental shift from “I got a deal” to “I’m having a special experience and I’m part of this”?**
 - Renewal communications may be too late. Can we imagine recasting the decision much earlier in the process?
 - Would the incentives of the point-of-entry staff need to change?

Let's brainstorm

**How could your membership program
deepen the visit experience for members
and enhance their relationship with the
museum?**

- Groups of four
- 12 minutes, no “bad” ideas, think experimentally
- After 5 minutes, focus on 1 key idea to develop
- Quick report-out

NOT SHOWN
at AMMC

A more pragmatic approach

- **What if we just accept that new members from gate conversion are going to be a high-churn population?**
 - Would we stop spending money “chasing” something unrealistic?
 - Could we come up with benefits, messages etc. to reward them anyway, even when they don’t renew?
 - In other words, what if we made our binary categories (member, lapsed member) more complex to accommodate this reality?
- **Are there markers that could help us pick out the minority of new members who are ripe for renewal and long-term support?**
 - Our next round of research for AMNH will shed light on those markers qualitatively, but data mining could help complete the picture.