

'SHIVER ME TIMBERS!' – DELIVERING A FAMILY SHOW

The Museum of London tells the story of the capital and its people from prehistoric times to the present day. The museum has three sites: the Museum of London in the City, the Museum of London Docklands in Canary Wharf that charts the history of the River Thames and London's trade with the rest of the world, and the Museum of London Archaeological Archive in Hackney (the largest archive of its kind in the world).

SUMMARY

In 2016, the Museum of London Docklands developed a family show which ran every Wednesday through Saturday during the whole of August, three times a day at 11.30am, 12.30pm and 2.30pm. The first showing of the day was adapted specifically for families with young children. This under 5s show focussed more on repetitive actions, words and songs, and encouraged the whole audience to participate together, whereas the over 5s show invited individual children to take on a particular role on behalf of the audience.

The show was called 'Shiver me timbers' and explored the theme of pirates and sailors. The show addressed some typical stereotypes around pirating and provided families with the opportunity to explore what life as a pirate might have been like. The show also included a scientific element – a demonstration of the flammability of sugar and how when heated, it can create a fireball!

AIMS AND GOALS

For our organisation

- To make programming easier to manage during the long summer holiday – we did this by repeating the same event each day. Before, we would run a new event every two days, and we were spending a lot of time and money creating marketing copy and leaflets, purchasing additional resources, and setting up rooms
- To create something that could be delivered time and time again
- To drive visitor numbers and attract first-time visitors by providing something a bit different to our usual programming

For our audience

- To provide activities that could accommodate larger numbers of visitors so as not to disappoint families when they couldn't attend activities that were too busy or had limited numbers
- To provide something that had a 'wow' factor for families
- To complement a full day out
- To provide an activity for families with wide age-ranges of children



OUTCOMES

For our organisation

The show was delivered either by a freelance actor or by one of our existing Visitor Experience hosts. This allowed us to combine different skillsets, with the hosts bringing the historical knowledge and the actors bring their acting experience.

Delivering the same activity repeatedly throughout the holidays meant that the holiday programme ran a lot more smoothly. All staff knew what to expect and how the day would run, and once everyone was in the swing of things it didn't require very much staff support at all. It was also a lot easier, and cheaper, to market one event.

Our evaluation showed that we were bringing in new visitors to the museum, with almost 54% of respondents visiting the museum for the first time, and just under 67% of respondents coming to the museum specifically for the show.

The museum has continued to run family shows in 2017 and 2018 on different topics relating to temporary exhibitions such as archaeology and Roman funeral practices.

The 2016 show attracted 2,604 visitors throughout the summer holidays, compared to 615 in 2015, when we ran a programme with many but smaller events.

For our audience

Our evaluation showed us that on the whole, families enjoyed the show, with 99% rating it as 'outstanding' or 'good'. When asked what they would remember most about their day, most respondents highlighted the show in some way, so we are confident that the show did have a 'wow' factor for families. Many families also mentioned visiting our other galleries, especially our Mudlarks children's gallery, as well as the café. So it does seem that families were coming to the museum for a full day out.

The ages of children attending the show ranged from under one year up to 9+, with most children being aged three to four years, so we are confident that we managed to provide an activity suitable for the whole family. By running two separate shows on the same day for different age ranges, we gave families the option to choose which level would be most appropriate for them.



LESSONS LEARNT

Under 5s shows were extremely well attended and demonstrated to us that there is a desire for more events like this. The majority of our activities for babies and toddlers up until this point had been on a much smaller and more intimate scale. This type of event accommodated much larger numbers but still in a relaxed atmosphere.

In the development process a script was first written for an over 5s show, which was then adapted for an under 5s audience. We were programming one dedicated under 5s show every morning, followed by two shows suitable for over 5s but we soon found that the actors were sometimes finding it challenging to jump in and out of different scripts on the same day, especially when the scripts were so similar.

When developing our 2018 family show at the Museum of London, 'Celebrating the Circus', a separate script for the under 5s performances was written and the show was performed by an early years specialist. Instead of one show a day, we dedicated one full day of shows to under 5s, alongside the over 5s show. This worked better for the actor performing the show, as they could focus solely on the under 5s script, and it gave us the opportunity to work with someone with a specialism in this area to deliver the sessions. Unfortunately, attendance at these shows were lower than anticipated, and in the future we would consider running sessions across two half days instead.

TOP TIP

Family shows are a great way to welcome a larger number of visitors, appeal to new audiences and attract visitors from further afield. But make sure the content is designed to meet the needs of your audience, even if that means writing two separate scripts.

FUNDING

This project was delivered by the museum's Family Programme, which is core funded by the museum.

BUDGET

Script writing/development: £160

Training: £640

Delivery: £2,600

Materials: £1,000

Total: £4,400

FURTHER INFORMATION

This case study was written by Victoria Smith, Early Years Programme Manager at the Museum of London.

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