

Benchmarking Data and Funders

What Benchmarking can and can't do

The first point to make is that it is unlikely that your Benchmarking data can be used in isolation when reporting to funders. Rather, you should see it as one source of information amongst many others.

For example, Benchmarking data is good at demonstrating 'how many' or 'how much' (e.g. the cost per visit or the impact your museum is making to the local economy) but it cannot tell you whether your visitors feel they have had a worthwhile visit and whether or not they intend to return. Benchmarking data in short is better about telling a story of 'quantity' than 'quality'. So it is likely that you will need to rely on other information that your museum might collect, for example from comments books, surveys, interviews, visitor observation or other sources.

When are you using Benchmarking data?

Another thing to consider is whether or not you are using your Benchmarking data to apply for funding or as a means of reporting back to your funders on support they may have already provided. In the first instance, you may be able to get away with using the performance indicators that Benchmarking collects against, but in the second instance it is likely that you will have had to put in place other measures to collect information which is important to your funder(s).

This leads on to another related point, that is, if you are currently only estimating certain figures, it might be worth setting up methods to turn these figures into actual counts as this will provide you with more compelling evidence to present to funders. This in turn may raise other issues such as whether or not you have in place a Data Collection Policy. Renaissance South East has recently produced a useful document 'How to develop data collection process and Policies' which is available at: http://www.mla.gov.uk/what/programmes/renaissance/regions/south_east/news/publications.

How best to present Benchmarking data

Available funding in recent years has been shrinking so it's become even more important to have good evidence to argue why you need financial support. Use your Benchmarking data to illustrate a good track record:

e.g. in the amount of funding you have secured in past number of years, or to show what visitor numbers you are delivering with limited numbers of staff or wholly with volunteer support – this is where you can 'benchmark' yourself against other similar museums to get a sense of whether or not you are doing particularly well.

BUT be clear about where there is room for development and how their financial support will help you achieve this.

"Compiling and presenting evidence is the most painstaking part of the fundraising process. Larger funders will require information to back up your initial application and, in some instances, to prove you have spent it effectively after the fact."

(Museum Practice, Issue 42, 2008)

The key points

Funders look for a rich narrative that is supported by statistics, not applications or reports that are wholly driven by facts and figures. You can put Benchmarking and other similar data to best use by:

- **Making your evidence as interesting as possible** (e.g. Why is it important or noteworthy that you have increased outreach attendances in the last year?)
- **Making it demonstrate need** (e.g. 'Over a two year period, i.e. from April 1st 2008 to March 31st 2010, we have seen a 10% increase in total visits to the museum, but this now means we need to develop other offers, such as outreach, to develop our audience profile')
- **Linking it to other evidence** – what research already exists that can lend support to your own findings? (e.g. taking your total visits to quantify the impact on local and regional economies using AIM's Economic Impact Toolkit)
- **Summarising it through charts** – this illustrates your data more succinctly than textual description alone
- **Ensuring it supports other qualitative information**, such as visitor feedback (e.g. 'The museum has achieved an increase of 12% in school visits compared with last year but over 80% of teachers are continuing to rate their visit as 'excellent' in our annual school survey. This means that despite increasing numbers, the museum is still able to deliver a quality experience).

For further general information on applying for funding, please see the well-written article in Museum Practice, Issue 42 (2008) entitled 'Write a star funding application' available at:

<http://www.museumsassociation.org/museum-practice/fundraising/16536>