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Ethical Dilemma Paper

Indianapolis Museum of Art to Newfields

The first exhibition organized by the Art Association of Indianapolis was started in 1883 (History). Though there was a strong start to the art exhibition, there have been multiple changes in location and name over time. Years later, the association changed their name to the Indianapolis Museum of Art and moved from the Indianapolis Circle to a new location on 38th Street and Michigan Road (History). The Indianapolis Museum of Art had not been charging admission for the past seven years. Previously, the Indianapolis Museum of Art had a $7 admission fee, and did announce that the fee would return at some point in the future to maintain financial sustainability. (Anthony). Then in 2017, The Indianapolis Museum of Art announced it would be moving to one location (History). When they announced the move to 38th street, they also announced the new name for the organization as Newfields. The new name and location encompasses all of the programming and everything they have to offer. Newfields would now be a place for nature and the arts. When they announced the organization’s location change, they also announced that they would now charge admission to the museum like they had in the past (Anthony). This announcement about the fee for admission had multiple reactions from the visitors of the museum. Some reactions were positive, while others were negative because of a lack of understanding.

As the Indianapolis Museum of Art was making its transition to Newfields, they announced they would be charging an entrance fee as they had done in the past. The new fee at Newfields is now $18 for adults and $10 for children between the ages of 6 and 17 (Anthony). Even though in the previous years the museum had shared that there would be an entrance fee in the future, people in the Indianapolis area were concerned for many reasons. Seemingly, the most important of the reasons being that lower income families and individuals would not be able to visit the museum anymore. Reasonably, this tends to be a concern because people generally think that art should “belong” to everyone and everyone should be able to enjoy it. Newfields recognized that it may be an issue for people in different demographic situations to pay the admission fee, so they opted to offer free admission from 4-9pm every first Thursday of the month (Anthony). Some felt as if they were being excluded from the museum and what it had to offer by moving and charging a new, slightly more expensive fee than the years in the past. All of the improvements had not been shared with the public, so they did not understand how this would truly benefit them in the near future or in the long term. A professor at Indiana University’s School of Public and Environmental Affairs commented on the negative comments that had been coming from the public. “’I think part of the backlash the IMA is receiving is due to bad marketing”’ (Briggs). It is as if the IMA did not announce that they would still have other options for people who may not be able to afford the daily or annual fee, or if they did, they did a very poor job at communicating it. Education from the organization was lacking , but was definitely needed to inform the public on the revisions that were being made.

From the organizations perspective, adding a small fee in exchange for admission into Newfields would allow the organization to thrive for years to come. According to Charles Venable, the CEO and the director of Newfields, the museum had to spend as much as 8 percent of the endowment to be able to function for the past years (Anthony). Endowments are required by federal law to give out 5 percent of what an endowment holds, but 8 percent is a very large percent and would not be healthy for an endowment of any kind. Endowments will not survive long into the future if this would continue to happen over the next few years. This would continue to lower the amount the endowment has at a drastic rate. Today, the endowment at Newfields has been able to spend about 6 percent and hopes to move closer to 5 percent annually as more individuals and families continue to purchase annual memberships (Anthony). Since they have been able to improve their tight financial situation over the past years, this goal does not seem too unrealistic, from the perspective of an outsider. Since learning how to effectively spend enough of the endowment and also generate revenue to keep Newfields afloat, there has been visible success in their numbers of attendance. In October of 2017, memberships had grown from about 5,000 when the museum was free to more than 17,000 annual members (Briggs). This is a large spike in numbers and has continued to help the organization stay afloat after membership numbers being much lower for many years.

Three questions that I think should be addressed in this dilemma are: Has the price of admission hindered people from coming to Newfields?/Are low income families and individuals still able to participate? What new features are important to Newfields and what audience are they reaching with these new features? Has Newfields upheld their mission throughout all of the transitions within the past years? These questions can be answered to some capacity, but I do not think that they can be answered in full because of the short time that we have been able to study about this concept.

To answer the first question there is an individual that does study this concept as a living. According to Professor Joanna Woronkowicz, “The assumption is if you don't charge admission, everyone can come, but what the research has shown is when you get rid of an admission fee, it's the same people coming, but now they're not paying anything,” (Briggs). This shows that it truly does not affect the low income residents because they were either not coming in the first place, or they have taken advantage of the discounted pricing allocated to low income individuals. Newfields still offers free admission on the first Thursday of every month from 4-9pm and allows low income residents into the museum for $2 all of the time (Briggs). This provides a way for individuals and families that cannot make it to the free admission nights a chance that they may not have had because of their work schedule.

The second question addresses the new features to Newfields and how they have been reaching a new audience. Some of the new features at Newfields include the outdoor walking trails, the Lilly Mansion, and seasonal exhibits like Winter Lights and Spring Blooms. “It is about experiences — that is true. Art was always an experience. A Rembrandt painting was a personal experience. But the bottom line is, I can’t make someone a lover of Rembrandt if I can’t get them to ever come here” (Tugend). In the past years the Indianapolis Museum of Art had added a miniature golf course and had multiple shows for certain times of the year. Most visitors enjoyed the different activities that the IMA had to offer, but some of the others were deeply disgusted that an art museum would have these attractions as entertainment. Venable makes it very clear that it is all about the experience that the visitors have when they come to Newfields (Tugend). He is fully aware that this is a completely new approach, but is convinced that this is the direction that other museums should be moving toward as well.

The last question that I would like to address is: Has Newfields maintained the fulfillment of their mission throughout the processes of change? Before the IMA made the transition to Newfields, the mission included art, the natural environment and design. The Newfields Mission Statement now is: “To enrich lives through exceptional experiences with art and nature (History). Both mission statements fall in line with each other and are actually quite similar, the new mission is a bit more broad. If the mission statement had changed to something completely different, the programs and other experiences offered at Newfields would have to completely change. Newfields has done a spectacular job at living up to and maintaining the new mission statement that they have created. The upcoming years will be something to look forward to knowing that they have been successful thus far.

If I happened to be an employee at Newfields, I would address the charge of admission with an open mind, with a stronger marketing strategy, and with the American Alliance of Museums Code of Ethics in hand. Looking at this situation from a perspective that you do not see eye to eye with can be challenging. From the perspective of a low income family from Indianapolis, it can be a hassle to only be able to enter the museum for free on specific days of the month. Most low income families are working multiple jobs and are still living in poverty. Instead of paying for parking at the pervious location, they were able to use their bus passes or they were able to walk from their homes. Moving the location to 38th street and charging an admission fee could be very inconvenient for these individuals and families. Second, I think hiring a marketing specialist before these changes came into place would have been incredibly beneficial. Through an effective marketing campaign you would be able to express your new message and vision that you are trying to work toward. Marketing strategies could take place on the museum’s website, on billboards around the city, on commercials, or even by a special event including the public to kick off the new changes. This probably would have started the community off with a pleasant taste in their mouths, rather than a sour taste because they did not know exactly what to expect for the years to come. Last, I would have written a letter to the general public of Indianapolis, and would have put it on the Indianapolis Museum of Art’s website. This could have explained in greater detail that what they were planning to do and could have shown the people that visit the museum that this transition is really meant to benefit them and their families in the long run. In this letter I would have included a link to the AAM Code of Ethics for Museums. In this code of ethics, it is explained that changes are to be made, especially in the changing conditions of the world (AAM Code of Ethics for Museums). Instead of one large announcement that can knock everyone off of their feet, I think one with one small modification at a time, the public would have handled it with a little more ease.

In this situation at Newfields, I think it is reasonable for visitors of the museum to be upset, but I also think that it is completely reasonable to move on and improve the museum by broadening their mission. By implementing a few strategic marketing events and tools, this process of returning to requiring an admission fee to enter the museum could have been much less of an ordeal. The education that was needed for the Indianapolis public would have been very helpful and could have made for a much greater understanding from the people that visit the museum. Change seems to be difficult for some to comprehend- this could be from past experience or from a cynical point of view. In order to address these two circumstances, it would be beneficial to educate the public on the renovation of the organization both physically and internally. These changes could have been approached with a very educational pitch of explaining in detail how these changes would benefit those that come to the museum in the future. In my opinion, the Indianapolis Museum of Art could have made the switch to Newfields a lot less controversial by holding an event that would explain the great benefits of the adjustments and advancements of the new museum. It was a great idea to remodel what the organization would offer, because it very clearly needed some revision. Newfields new mission and vision encompasses not only the arts, but also nature. Now nature lovers will be inclined to visit Newfields, and can experience something that they have not experienced before. Improving the museum was necessary to keep from consuming the entire endowment.

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