

Participant Recruitment Strategies for the Museum Environment

Look friendly and approachable. Smile! Orient yourself towards the general direction of visitor traffic, and use discretion when talking with other researchers or museum staff so that you look ready to interact.

Be ready to leave your research area and approach visitors to invite them or their children to participate in your study. If you are concerned about leaving your stimuli alone, be strategic about how you set up your stimuli and move about the museum, or bring a research assistant to help you.

Be prepared to talk to the visitors when you approach them. It is helpful to have a short greeting prepared to introduce yourself and your study. Additionally, if you have parent-friendly handouts about your study bring them with you and pass them out to visitors.

Sample introduction: “Hi, my name is Jane Doe, and I am a student from Smith University. I’m interested in how children problem solve, and wanted to see if your child would like to participate in our fun study. Our study is located in the corner over there, and we’ll be here until 1 pm. Here’s a handout describing our study in more detail. If you have any questions, please let me know. Thanks very much!”

You may also want to approach the child in addition to legal guardians. Make sure you get down to the child’s level. It may also be helpful to take a prop, such as a puppet from your study, with you. If they seem interested in participating, then approach the parent with more information before moving to the testing area as a group.

Sample greeting for children: “Hi there! Do you want to play a game with me? We have an awesome game with stickers and stories. Let’s see if it’s okay with your grown-up!”

When you approach a family, be mindful of what they are doing and how much time they may have to speak with you. Children and families who are engaged in exhibits farther away from the research area or who are very engrossed in an exhibit may be less interested in participating immediately. In these cases, quickly introducing yourself to the adult and providing them with a study-specific handout is a great way to let them know about the opportunity of participating during their museum visit. If a family has just arrived, it may be better to wait for them to spend a little time in the museum before you approach them to allow them to get acclimated to the exhibit. Also, if a parent seems to be struggling to keep an eye on a large number of children, it is usually best to not distract that parent with an invitation to participate.

Use exhibits to your advantage. You may want to learn more about the museum exhibits so that you can use them as tools during recruitment and debriefing. You can also interact with the exhibits near the research area to “break the ice” with visitors, and invite them to participate in the study once you’re a familiar face.

Although the museum staff is not expected to recruit participants for your study, it is always helpful to build rapport with the staff members. Museum staff, interns and volunteers are the experts in interacting with the public and are responsible for creating a comfortable environment for visitors. By taking the time to explain your study to staff members, they will be ready to answer visitor questions and will be more likely to encourage visitors to find you to learn more about your study. If there is a lull during your shift, take the time to participate in some of the activities or learn a new interpretation of an exhibit with the staff members. By watching them interact with the exhibit and the public, you may find more efficient and effective methods of recruiting and educating participants.

Above all, remember that the visitors to the museum are there to learn and try new activities, and are used to being approached by staff and volunteer interpreters. So be confident that your study will provide them with an interesting, educational and fun experience at the museum!