Case Study
Museum Victoria

Museum Victoria (MV) is Australia's largest and most popular museum organisation. MV is custodian of the state’s vast heritage collection of more than 18 million objects. With three museums; Melbourne Museum, Immigration Museum and Scienceworks, this year saw visitation of more than 1.6 million people.

Melbourne Museum is the flagship attraction of MV. Designed as a unique tourist attraction for Melbourne, the venue displays innovative exhibitions showcasing Australian society, indigenous cultures, the human mind and body, science and technology, as well as a Children’s Gallery and a living forest. It also hosts major touring exhibitions such as Pompeii, Tutankhamun, Afghanistan in Antiquity, and most recently Jurassic World: The Exhibition.

MV defines its target audiences as a blend of metropolitan Melburnians, school groups and tourists. The museum venues provide broad appeal to tourists from the UK, New Zealand, USA, Singapore and Germany along with domestic visitors from regional Victoria and neighbouring states.

Working to enhance support for visitors on the autism spectrum

Over the past three years MV has worked in partnership with AMAZE (previously Autism Victoria) and the Department of Education and Early Childhood to provide enhanced support for visitors on the autism spectrum.

Research has shown that approximately 1 in 100 children, almost 230,000 Australians, have autism and demand for support is growing. Around 55,000 Victorians have been diagnosed with autism and a growing number of children are being further diagnosed each year.

In Australia and overseas, Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs) are becoming more prevalent and demand for visitor services and support is growing.

The initiative was devised through MV’s Disability Action Plan with Melbourne Museum acting as a pilot venue from August 2015 before further implementation across Scienceworks and Immigration Museum in early 2016.

Harnessing the research

Providing greater access and support for visitors on the autism spectrum was identified in 2013 as a priority in MV’s Disability Action Plan and Annual Business Plan process.

From 2013-16, an internal project team created autism-friendly tools that were evaluated by inviting the autism community to test social stories and sensory maps at each MV venue. Critical feedback was collected in small and intimate focus group sessions to maximise improvement opportunities.

The sessions were overwhelmingly positive and helped finesse the formatting of the social stories and inspired an additional set of resources for families with very young children.

A dedicated and active email address also collects comments which is monitored for ongoing development opportunities.
The results

Using the research, MV staff across many departments collaborated to create autism friendly resources to assist families and teachers to plan and support a visit to MV’s venues. These include sets of social stories, sensory maps, information about quiet times, links to ticketing and a dedicated email address for visitor feedback.

Extensive training programs and workshops were also held across MV to equip over 70 education and community programs and front of house staff with the confidence and skills to ensure visitors on the Autism Spectrum were welcomed and supported during their visit.

Social stories

Social stories provide illustrated scripts about what visitors can expect and some behavioural guidelines.

Written for children in consultation with AMAZE, the social stories include photographs to show children what they’ll encounter during a visit to the museum. Each story is customised for various audience needs of (1) families with young children, (2) schools with students and (3) families with older children, and have been created for all three museums.

“Your autism friendly page is a breath of fresh air and your social stories will be of use to many. We very much look forward to our visit in November, and we will try to remember to let you know how we go. Bravo to you all on being so proactive with kids with ASD, it warms my heart to see a company be so inclusive!” – Sophie Oates and her family; interstate visitors to Melbourne.

Sensory Maps

Sensory maps aim to assist visitors to plan and navigate the museum experience. Available online and in hard copy at each ticketing desk, the maps were designed to help families and teachers to navigate the least disruptive experience for children on the spectrum.

Low sensory spaces are coloured blue on the map and represented quiet areas that have natural light, are usually quieter and have no multimedia. High sensory spaces were indicated in red and represented busy places with a mix of multimedia, loud noises and/or low light.

“Amy, Autism, age 11: The Autism Map was very helpful for my child. It gave him something to look at and a guide on where he was and where he could go. Thank you for considering our children and many children like my sons. Autist children will have a ball” – parent of a child on the autism spectrum.

Awards and interactions

As of July 2016, 1065 visitors have interacted with and downloaded one or more social scripts. In the first two months of resources developed for Scienceworks and Immigration Museums, 27 downloads have occurred at each venue.

The project was awarded a Museums Australia award in 2015 for its innovation and ground-breaking collaboration with peak industry bodies. It was noted “this initiative takes us into different territory where audiences are being thought of in a more granular way and the special needs of particular groups are now being seriously considered”.

The initiative has also increased general awareness of autism spectrum and MV approaches through international presentations at conferences in Amsterdam and Auckland.

MV will continue to work with AMAZE to promote the project to the community and to advocate within and beyond the organisation to provide access for visitors on the autism spectrum, as well as their families, schools and community.

More information

Learn more about Museum Victoria’s social scripts
See Museum Victoria’s social script for younger children
(2MB PDF download)
See Museum Victoria’s sensory friendly Melbourne Museum map
(715KB PDF download)

Contact information

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