**What is IPOP?**

IPOP is the name for a new model of experience preference that originated in the Office of Policy and Analysis at the Smithsonian. The model developed out of many years of surveys, observations, and interviews in Smithsonian museums. It identifies four key dimensions of experience – **Ideas** (conceptual, abstract thinking), **People** (emotional connections), **Objects** (visual language and aesthetics), and **Physical experiences** (somatic sensations). The model maintains that individuals are drawn to these four dimensions to different degrees. Questions about self-identification with leisure activities outside of museums are used to calculate scores in each of these four dimensions. These scores describe the degree to which individuals are drawn to those dimensions, in comparison with all others in the database. Currently the full database includes 7,000 cases.

Initially this idea of experience preference was offered as a way to re-frame audience diversity, to help exhibition makers reflect on their own preferences, and to encourage staff in general to appreciate how their own preferences influence the decisions they make on behalf of visitors. The benefit of this approach has been documented in two articles in *Curator: The Museum Journal*, a peer-reviewed journal of museum studies.¹

Two years ago, in collaboration with Professor James B. Schreiber of Duquesne University, a specialist in educational research and former editor of two major journals of educational research, the concept of experience preference was developed into a scientific model on the basis of empirical research. Studies conducted initially at the National Museum of Natural History and subsequently at other locations both at five other Smithsonian museums and at the Canadian Museum of Civilization have supported the central tenets of the IPOP model – that experience differences influence what visitors expect, what they do, and how they respond in a museum.²

The entire purpose of this research is to discover new ways to improve the experience of visitors in museums. Its usefulness is being explored not just in exhibitions, but also in visitor services,³ mobile apps, and social media.

The next steps are:
1) to make the IPOP model more widely known, so that it can be used to create exhibitions and services that are more responsive to the diversity of visitors. To this end IPOP workshops have been conducted at the National Museum of Natural History (visitor services), Philadelphia Museum of Art (visitor services) and the Canadian Museum of Civilization (exhibitions), and are planned for next spring at the National Portrait Gallery (exhibitions), the Freer and Sackler Galleries (exhibitions), and the National Museum of American History (visitor services).⁴

2) to conduct research experiments that will enable more detailed understanding of how best to take advantage of IPOP insights.⁵
For more on IPOP see the Webinar by Andrew Pekarik, *Experience Preference Theory as a New Way to Understand and Respond to Diversity* archived at [http://adaconferences.org/ArtsnRec/Archives](http://adaconferences.org/ArtsnRec/Archives) filed under December 10, 2013

**Endnotes**


iii IPOP has been used to train those who engage with visitors to be more responsive to diverse experience needs. For an example documenting the program and results at the National Museum of Natural History, see the 2013 OP&A report *How Do You Improve the Experience of Museum Visitors? An Experiment at the National Museum of Natural History*. At [http://www.si.edu/content/opanda/docs/Rpts2013/13.01.NMNHConcierge.Final.pdf](http://www.si.edu/content/opanda/docs/Rpts2013/13.01.NMNHConcierge.Final.pdf)

iv Training for visitor services specialists is typically conducted over a period of months and aims to produce a program that can be self-sustaining. In the area of exhibition development, IPOP workshops have been one- or two-day events that describe the theory, present research results from exhibitions, and teach staff how to apply its principles in practice.

Workshops at non-Smithsonian museums were commissioned and paid for by those museums at no cost to the Smithsonian.

v Experimental IPOP research is currently underway in connection with the Augmented Reality App now being developed for the Osteology Hall at the National Museum of Natural History. Experiments have also been designed for use with social media at the National Museum of American History, but technical problems have put them on hold.