

Step Right Up: Ringling Museum Ticketing Task Force

- **Reduce visitor wait times**
- **Improve visitor processing per employee**
- **Increase historic home capacity**

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ABSTRACT

After the 2003 busy season The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art recognized that reducing admission waiting lines and creating more tour capacity in its historic home, Cà d'Zan, would significantly enhance the visitor experience and improve future revenues to support the programs of the Museum.

A Ticketing Task Force was assigned to address these issues. This Task Force evaluated the ticketing process of the Admissions staff high performers to learn their best practices and then adopted those best practices for the entire Admissions staff. Next, the Task Force identified best tour practices from other historic homes such as Vizcaya in Miami, the Hearst Castle in California and the Biltmore Estate. Finally, the Task Force examined alternatives to the docent led tours at the Cà d'Zan.

The Ticketing Task Force developed and implemented a series of best practices which reduced visitor waiting times from over one hour to less than 15 minutes, reduced the per visitor admission processing time and afforded the Museum the opportunity to recoup lost revenues.

Introduction of the Organization

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art and The Center for Performing Arts are affiliated with Florida State University.

The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art is the largest museum/university complex in the Nation. The 66-acre estate is the legacy of John Ringling (1866-1936), one of the great business tycoons of his day. The Museum of Art, recognized as the State Art Museum of Florida, includes 21 galleries of internationally recognized European and American art with paintings by Rubens, Van Dyck, Poussin and other Baroque masters. In addition, the estate encompasses Cà d' Zan, the recently restored 32-room Ringling mansion; the Circus Museum' the Original Asolo Theater; the Rose Garden and beautifully landscaped grounds overlooking Sarasota Bay.

The Center for Performing Arts is the home of the professional Asolo Theater Company performing in the Mertz Theater, which was brought to Sarasota from Dunfermline, Scotland. The Center is also home of the Masters in Fine Arts Degree program FSU Conservatory for Actor Training. Their performances are held in the intimate Cook Theater. And finally, the Sarasota Ballet conducts training classes and holds performances in the Mertz Theater.

Statement of the problem

After The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art's busy season from January to April of 2003, concerns over the length of time for visitors waiting to purchase tickets to the Museum lead to the establishment of the Ticketing Task Force. The Task Force noted the following concerns:

- Visitor wait times to purchase Museum tickets were often as long as one hour during busy days.
- Because of the small size of the Admissions lobby, many visitors had to wait for extended periods in the hot sun or in otherwise inclement weather. To mitigate this somewhat, the Museum erected a canopy to shade at least some of the visitors from the hot Florida sun. Visitor complaints about this situation were frequent and harsh.
- The 1100 person daily capacity of the Museum's historic home, the Cà d'Zan, would frequently sell out, leaving the Museum to turn visitors away or reduce the admission fee, thereby costing the Museum revenue. This daily capacity is driven by the fact that each visitor to the Cà d'Zan must visit the home as part of a docent led tour of no more than 20 people per tour group.

Design

The Ticketing Task Force under the direction of the Controller:

- Evaluated the processing speed of all ticketing employees to identify best practices among those employees.
- Discussed ticketing and tour issues with other historic homes from around the United States including:
 - Vizcaya, Miami, Florida
 - The Hearst Castle, San Simeon, California
 - The Biltmore Estate, Asheville, North Carolina
- Reviewed the concept of assigning docents to specific areas of Cà d'Zan as an alternative to docents conducting a complete tour.
- Identified best practices from the above research.

Implementation

To speed visitor processing:

- Assigned tour times to visitors. (Visitors who request another time are accommodated if possible)
- Installed a sixth ticketing terminal to create additional admissions capacity.
- Scheduled a lunch/break cashier when busy days are anticipated.
- Scheduled greeters on busy days to direct, inform and assist visitors so that the visitor is able to make a quicker decision about their tour options.

To reduce number of visitors in line:

- Moved a greater percentage of ticketing to phone-based Advanced Tickets. Through proper marketing to prospective visitors, historical homes contacted sell as many as 50% of their tickets in advance thereby permitting visitors to bypass ticket lines.
- Shifted greater numbers of visitors to advance ticket purchases by:
 - Staffing Advanced Tickets department 7 days per week during busy season.
 - Promoting advanced tickets in all media, brochures, website etc.
 - Offering advanced tickets free at Admissions counter. Charging \$1.50 per ticket for phone reservations
 - Encouraging staff and complementary ticket holders to use Advanced Tickets in order to reduce visitors in line.

To increase historic home, Cà d'Zan capacity:

- Added 2 visitors to each 20-person tour. The input from the other historic homes suggested that tours of up to 22 people could be managed effectively and would not reduce the quality of the visitor experience.
- Added up to 10 additional 22-person tours between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. during the busy season.
- These two steps increased daily Cà d'Zan capacity by 332 visitors per day.

Benefits

- Cà d'Zan capacity increased by 332 visitors per day or 33,200 over the 100 day peak season when the Museum is often at capacity.
- The Museum is now afforded the opportunity to recoup as much as \$1,480 per day on days when it is at full capacity. This assumes that half of the visitors who could not gain access to the Cà d'Zan chose not to purchase admission to the Museum and a blended admission fee of \$9.00 per person.
- Visitor lines at the Cà d'Zan Mansion during the height of the 2004 season were reduced to a maximum of a 15-minute wait versus the hour or more wait during the 2003 busy season. Thus, visitors now had more time to enjoy the Museum versus waiting in line. This is an immeasurable addition to the visitor experience.
- Shorter lines eliminated the need for erecting a shade canopy for visitors, thereby reducing Museum costs.
- Advanced Ticket sales of 6,115 during the busy season of 2004 was triple that of 2003.
- Advance Ticket revenue of \$4,563 for 2004 was approximately double that of 2003. (Note that the Museum decided to not charge for the advance ticket service for several ticket categories during 2004).
- Customer complaints about waiting lines diminished to a negligible level.
- Additional capacity is now in place to meet the increased number of visitors we anticipate with the opening of four new buildings: The Tibbals Learning Center, Visitors Pavilion, New Gallery, and the Education and Library Building.