

What's the Big Idea? Using Listening Sessions to Build Relationships and Relevance

By Janeen Bryant and Kamille Bostick

The Challenge of Listening and Intentionality

Museums have good intentions. Whether preserving history, educating the public, collecting artifacts, interpreting perspectives, or creating community programming, museums nationwide have long settled into the niche of providing expertise. Too often, “museums tell stories about human experiences or situations that the curators or developers have not experienced personally—historic events, cultural developments, scientific discoveries.” Telling contemporary stories with authenticity requires museums to build capacity for understanding based on building relationships and listening.¹

When Charlotte, North Carolina’s Levine Museum of the New South and its two partner institutions, the Atlanta History Center and the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, joined forces to look at how to engage Latino audiences, we had to find a way to listen that was both effective and replicable. Our *Latino New South* listening sessions were fertile grounds to learn to listen and how to listen best.

One Museum's Response to Changing Demographics

A major demographic change has swept across the American South since 1990. It is a particular case pointing to a national demographic transformation. Within a generation, the entire U.S. will have no single racial or ethnic majority. Rather this country will be mix of people from multiple backgrounds.²

The Center for the Future of Museums of the American Alliance of Museums urges all of America's cultural institutions to engage directly with this demographic transformation, to boldly rethink what audiences they aim to reach, the programs they will undertake, and what tools they will use. The center writes that currently barely 10 percent of core museum visitors are people of color. If that does not change quickly, museums will find themselves marginalized and irrelevant.

An Opportunity for Authentic Listening

Listening has many connotations and implications, many negative. Below are some responses from sessions when we asked museum professionals, "When I say 'listening session' what comes to mind?"

- Inviting
- Assumptions
- Public relations
- Survey
- Necessary evil
- Sense of obligation
- Internal vs. external listening
- Complicated
- Hard
- Group selection
- Focus group
- Control
- Don't want to/Not critical

Unfortunately, the prevailing notion that listening is simply a waste of staff time, resources, and energy permeates the field. Indeed, it is difficult, time-consuming, and hard work, but ultimately rewarding, authentic, and increases institutional relevance. An

CASE STUDY: *The Latino New South Project*

Having learned many valuable lessons from the exploration between Latinos and African Americans with past projects and ignited by a hunger in the community to continue with authentic relationship-building, particularly the process that some call "Latinization," Levine Museum embarked on a multi-year exploration of Latinos in the New South. The *Latino New South Project* is a learning network of three history museums in the southeastern U.S. The Atlanta History Center and Birmingham Civil Rights Institute joined Levine Museum of the New South to conduct on-the-ground research to gain a better understanding of this historic shift.

Our process started in May 2012 as all three institutions grappled with ways to approach learning more about the Latinos in their communities. We began with a research phase in which we recognized that relationships and connections were vital. We began to understand that each city had vastly different stories to tell, if we were only willing to listen. Our innovation team, including museum staff members from our three institutions, Latino community members from our three cities (Atlanta, Birmingham, and Charlotte), and an urban geographer, planned two-day listening sessions in each city. The entire team visited each city to learn more about Latinos and their communities as well as better understand the local context of the receiving communities. Based on our findings, each institution will develop programming to engage Latinos in the activities of their museums and help build bridges between Latinos and non-Latinos.³

Levine Museum utilized a process of listening that it had used before to begin to understand the process of what immigrant integration will look like in our city. Having observed the model since its beginning, our partners in the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the Atlanta History Center used the same model with a few modifications to fit their respective communities.

As the museum continues to work facilitating recognition of multiple perspectives used by people of different backgrounds to explain the past, evaluate the present, and project the future, we had a core question: Will our cities be welcoming places, creatively involving newcomers, or will our communities fragment? We listened for the answers.

A Latino New South

The South did not receive the great waves of European immigration in the early twentieth century and, consequently, is not as adequately prepared to address the shifting demographic makeup within its borders. The southeastern U.S. is now experiencing the nation's highest percentage growth in Latino newcomers and has since 1990. This is a great change for a region long known for its white and black racial landscape. Scholars suggest that this demographic and cultural shift may be the biggest story in southern history since the Civil Rights Movement.

—Dr. Tom Hanchett
Staff Historian
Levine Museum of the
New South



Alexandra Vichez for Levine Museum

What is a listening session?

When we decided to listen to our audience, we wanted to do more than conduct surveys or merely gather feedback on our ideas. The goal was to go beyond just tapping a demographic set for answers but to fully engage in the questioning process and use their thoughts as a way to further future conversations and actions.

For our listening sessions we wanted to create structured events where we could, as institutions, invite stakeholders to share ideas, insights, and input in an open forum.

Latino leaders in Charlotte share their opinions of how museums can play a role in relationship-building between the community and cultural institutions during a listening session.

important component of listening includes involving internal stakeholders (staff, board, members, and donors) as well as external stakeholders, and even those who have never been to your museum.

So how do you listen effectively and authentically?

Planning the Listening Session

Part 1: Set up a Framework

What idea is your institution looking to explore?

Think broadly. What are the issues facing your community? Every institution will have issues emerge from the economic, demographic, ecological, social, and political environment of its community. The issues will be unique to your community.

So what does it take to frame your big ideas?

Ask 1: What issues need to be addressed in your community and how could your museum have relevance to those issues? Where can your museum add value to community conversations and decision making?

Ask 2: Who needs to be in the room for you to deeply understand the experience in your community? Ask stakeholders, “Who else do we need to talk to?”

Ask 3: How can you use listening strategically to approach your big idea?

Ask 4: How will you create an environment conducive to listening and when?

Latino New South

At the start of this process, the *Latino New South* innovation team had to identify the motivating Big Idea for our needs. Here are our answers to the corresponding questions on the left:

Answer 1: What issues need to be addressed?

Inspired by the 2011 study, *All Immigration is Local* by Cornell University professor Michael Jones-Correa, Levine Museum recognized a need to address immigrant integration, or full and meaningful inclusion of newcomers in community life. We were propelled by a belief that museums can play a vital role in that work, and that sharing information between institutions will help our organization find effective strategies to truly engage Latino partners.

Answer 2: Who needs to be in the room?

For us, it was Latinos of all backgrounds as well as receiving community members.

Answer 3: How can we use listening strategically?

It was necessary to think outside the walls of the museum, figuratively and literally. We designed a two-day approach that involved listening to groups all over Charlotte (in Spanish and English).

Answer 4: How will we listen and when?

We decided to do this by starting with relationship building through individual meetings and we needed to start as soon as possible.

Part 2: Formatting the Session

Listening involves little technical knowledge, but much preparation, constant awareness, and plenty of follow-up. In planning for your listening session, adequate preparation and planning are paramount.

PLANNING
Research the dimensions of your topic
Identify barriers to participation
Identify opportunities to aid in participation
Prepare and plan for how you want to capture the information (include consideration of linguistic challenges)
Prepare questions (3-5 core questions are best)
Pilot first session with a group familiar with the museum and be open and honest with feedback
Consider promotional strategies to support session
DURING
Introduce your organization
Address the relevance of your Big Idea
Have participants introduce themselves to each other
Establish expectations of continued engagement
Share findings
Provide participants the opportunity to respond to questions in writing and verbally
Record and synthesize responses

FOLLOW-UP
Thank participants with an email after session (1 week)
Synthesize all transcripts and analyze for themes and suggestions (1 month)
Share findings and themes with key stakeholders (1 month)
Share the findings with participants and invite future engagement (2 months)

Part 3: Formatting the Session—Latino New South Case Study

SAMPLE AGENDA

- Welcome lunch
- Facilitated dialogue at each table
- Demographic presentation
- Bus Tour:
 - ◊ Compare Foods (grocery store)
 - ◊ Cooperativa Latina (credit union)
 - ◊ Norsan Multimedia (Spanish media center)
 - ◊ Camino Community Center
 - ◊ Latin American Coalition/United for the Dream Youth Group
 - ◊ Latino community members and teachers⁴

At each listening session, whether it was one person or a group, we provided key findings up to that point. This included demographic information about Charlotte and the U.S., relevant newspaper articles, and the opportunity to react and respond via bilingual paper (feedback) form. Sharing our research, articles, and time with them helped them to share their lived experience, hopes, and thoughts with us.

Checking In

Institutions usually ask: how is listening institutionally aligned or does this make you do more work? The short answer is to always start with the mission. By examining the mission of your institution you will quickly find out if your institution has a commitment to explore new strategies of community engagement and sustainable audience development. If the mission is aligned, listening sessions can be a powerful tool for you.



Dr. Tom Hanchett (far left) and members of the *Latino New South* innovation team, which includes the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Atlanta History Center, participate in a listening session at Cooperativa Latina, a credit union in Charlotte, NC.

Alexandra Vichez for Levine Museum

We were able to plug in social media. For instance, the Atlanta History Center had a social media campaign telling their followers about the project and letting them respond. They posted several tweets throughout the listening sessions as well as a follow-up blog post.

We recognized that each of our cities had a different community context; therefore, we knew we were going to examine perception about the museum both in the broader community and Latino community.

An Important Note about Questions

We created the set of questions for the *Latino New South Project* to demonstrate our willingness to learn more about Latinos, share historical perspectives, and to explore new engagement strategies not previously considered. We wrote questions in a simple, easy-to-read format, giving careful consideration to nuances found in translation from English to Spanish. Over the course of three months, the team conferenced at least eight times to draft these three questions:

1. Using a particular instance that you have encountered, would you describe Charlotte as a welcoming city to newcomers?
2. What do you think the perception is about Latinos in the broader community?
3. What role can the museum play in telling the story of Latinos in the Southeast?

Benefits of Listening

- **Authentic Connections.** Particularly with groups that don't typically have a history of engagement with your institution, it is important to ask questions that not only increase the number of people attending programs, but also to foster a relationship dynamic with give-and-take from both sides.
- **Responsive Relationships.** Much different from a traditional focus group (in which participants answer questions and never engage with the results), the institution is asking with the transparent motivation to be responsive to answers. (A museum's actions may or may not address participant suggestions, but they will overtly reference them.)
- **Alignment with Community.** Once you ask real questions and establish transparency, your institution will have knowledge to become more aligned with the community. In our case, listening helped us understand family, the importance of language, and much more.
- **Stretching Staff Capacity.** When interacting with any new individual or group, we are stretched on a personal and professional level. (For example, learning how to conduct basic introductions and point of sale exchanges at the front desk in Spanish is a crucial skill for creating a welcoming environment.)

What Happened for *Latino New South*?

As a demographic grouping, this group has been largely without voice for arts and cultural institutions in the South. Our listening sessions offered a valuable opportunity to build relationships through listening to Latinos and how non-Latinos responded to the welcome Latinos receive in our communities.

We planned two days of sessions, both in and out of the museum.* A group of museum representatives and project partners attended a session at the museum with fifty Latino and non-Latino community members. The museum actively sought out and brought in experts, community organizers, and everyday people to create a space where a multitude of perspectives and backgrounds could engage with us.

The museum representatives and project partners then embarked on a bus tour of the city, stopping to have conversations with a cross-section of participants from diverse areas.

Ultimately, these listening sessions provided a platform for reciprocity between the museum and Latinos in our communities.

**Organizations may not need to do such aggressive scheduling of listening sessions. A series of smaller sessions over time may prove more effective depending on project needs and time constraints.*

Some Frequently Asked Questions

• What are the greatest challenges to conducting listening sessions?

First, institutional buy-in is necessary. The board, leadership, and staff must understand how the institution will benefit and the logistics of how to conduct effective sessions. This is why we suggest the first listening sessions happen internally. Second, staff must be committed to conducting sessions and THANKING every participant. All sharing may not shape the final product, but it will inform the process.

• How is this different from a focus group?

Listening is a process of empowering your constituents and actually using their input in exhibit and program design. It is about establishing sustainable engagement. Changing responsiveness depends on reciprocity with newly engaged stakeholders and the museum. This is the start of building a long-lasting relationship and cultivating future museum goers.

• How did you choose participants?

Build a network by reaching out to traditional stakeholders and ask them for connections. Build relationships with new stakeholders and then go to the community, and create safe and welcoming opportunities to share and LISTEN.

GARNERING INSIGHTS: *Latino New South*

As we held our listening sessions, several trends emerged about the museum's role in creating a culture of welcome in Charlotte.

- Latino community members thought Charlotte was welcoming to newcomers. In contrast, Latino leaders almost unanimously said Charlotte was not welcoming.
- “Levine has a great responsibility to educate our community, letting them know we also make history. They need to get to know us so they can accept us.” This respondent explained that he thinks the museum should do more to educate the entire community about Latinos. The receiving community needs to know Latinos so they can accept them. Another interpretation indicates that the museum has a responsibility to play the role to educate ANYONE in the community—to act as a bridge builder and catalyst.

As we listened and heard all of these responses—particularly from Latinos—in our community we realized we have to extend ourselves in new ways.

Seven Insights into Working with Latino Partners

The following insights reflect what we heard from Latino community members during our listening sessions. As such, while some of these insights support traditional and scholarly research on Latinos in the U.S., others do not and are to be interpreted as distinct to this project and the three cities upon which it focuses.

In our listening sessions, Latinos and non-Latinos both asked that museums help receiving communities understand these realities.



Laura Anderson for Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

Multiple groups representing receiving and Latino communities as well as staff took part in simultaneous facilitation in Birmingham, AL.

1. Latinos are here to stay

- Few people grasp the huge demographic change in the Southeast since 1990. Latinos have gone from 1-2 percent of the population to around 10 percent or more in many localities.
- Roughly half of Latinos counted by the U.S. Census are already citizens—not just documented, i.e., progressing toward citizenship, but have achieved citizenship. Many are born here in the U.S. and Latino youth are the fastest growing group in many school systems.
- Museums need to convey this new reality. They can both facilitate discussion of the stresses these demographic changes bring, and also point out the opportunities.

2. From many cultures

- Latinos want everyone to know that they come from many cultures. While Mexico has sent numerous immigrants, one-third to one-half are from elsewhere in Central and South America.
- The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” (see also number six below) are U.S. creations. Latinos usually do not self-identify as Latino/Hispanic but rather as Cuban American, Colombian, or from their particular Mexican state, for example.
- They want receiving communities to appreciate these culturally rich backgrounds and are weary of being lumped together as Mexican, or answering questions like “Where in Mexico is Puerto Rico?” They also deeply desire that their Latino neighbors and their own children do likewise.

3. Biculturalism is growing

- Young people raised in the U.S. are typically, English-proficient and bicultural. They embrace U.S. food, entertainment, and so on, but do so without abandoning Latino culture and heritage. Adults, however, do not change as quickly or as completely.
- Latinos are more likely than the overall U.S. population to use the Internet and social

GARNERING INSIGHTS: *Latino New South*

media. This is partly because communities have so many youth who are “digital natives.”

- On the part of receiving communities, the perception that Latinos refuse to amalgamate into American culture (e.g., learn English, follow American laws and customs, etc.) is the single most expressed fear for Latino communities. Countering that misconception and fear can be a top museum goal.

4. Extended families are important

- Latinos usually experience cultural offerings as an extended family unit—mother, father, grandparents, several kids, cousins, plus maybe a friend or other relative.
- When choosing an activity, they look for things that will both bring pleasure and renewal or self-improvement and engage all family members.

5. Bridging is essential

- People urged us to get outside the museum, to go to places where people already are.
- They talked of the need for multiple introductions: Latinos to other Latino groups; Latinos to receiving community; Latinos to southern (especially African American) history; receiving communities to Latinos; and so on.
- Latino/African American bridging is especially needed. On the one hand, many Latino immigrants bring anti-black stereotypes spread by American media. And both groups often compete for entry-level jobs. On the other hand, civil rights history can be an inspiring model for immigrant efforts today. We heard that both groups are excited and grateful to learn each other’s story, “Something we never heard in school.”
- The organization Welcoming America emphasizes that communities become welcoming only when immigrants and non-immigrants *do things together*, and therefore get to know each other.

6. Language is a powerful symbol

- Spanish—words on the wall, personal greetings from a Visitor Services person—is a powerful

signal that Latinos are welcome. For young people who are usually comfortable with English, this welcome is symbolic. For older people, it is functional—they do need some Spanish in order to be able to guide their group and teach their children, etc.

- Spanish text also signals to non-Latinos that the South is now increasingly bicultural.
- The terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” seem largely interchangeable. In Charlotte, we heard Latino more often; in Birmingham we heard Hispanic more often.
- The term “illegal” offends many Latinos, who say that acts may be illegal, but no person is illegal. We suggest using the terms “undocumented” or “unauthorized.”

7. Becoming “documented” is difficult, often impossible

- People in receiving communities often ask, “Why don’t immigrants just obey the law and work toward legal citizenship?” Along with “They don’t want to learn English,” this is the most common negative reaction to Latinos we hear.
- In fact, quotas and convoluted regulations often make legal immigration impossible. People pointed to a graphic, “What Part of Legal Immigration Don’t You Understand?” as an illustration of the barriers. At best, it is an extremely lengthy process requiring expert assistance (a leading Charlottean from Mexico talked about the nineteen years it took her to become a citizen).
- These legal problems can split families. Youngsters born here can suddenly find their parents sent back to their home country. Youngsters born in their native country but raised here can suddenly be deported to a strange land they have never known.
- Post 9-11 fears and new “show your papers” laws in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina have greatly increased problems for Latinos. Anyone who looks Latino—even a distinguished India-born surgeon in one case—can be jailed until they prove their legal status.

Conclusion

We have found that listening yields insights otherwise inaccessible to museums. In reaching out to hear thoughts and explore trends, listening also shows stakeholders—new and old—that their ideas and presence are valued.

In the case of the *Latino New South Project*, listening gave Levine Museum of the New South accessibility to participants we had not previously heard from. In addition, it gave voice to a community that heretofore had not been sustainably engaged. Because of our choice to listen, we have been able to create culturally relevant programming, develop culturally sensitive evaluations, witness an increase in our visitation, and learn about issues and practices that help us serve as a welcoming space for our community.

As museums seek relevance and to reflect their communities, we simply cannot afford *not* to listen, especially to a fresh set of voices. Regardless of a museum's size or demographic, a bounty of learning opportunities exists. Those with the most to say may not come directly to us, so we have to seek them out, openly hear what they have to say, and complete an authentic exchange by applying what we hear to everyday practice.

An advocate and catalyst for building community capacity and understanding culture, Janeen Bryant is Vice President of Education, collaborates, manages, and executes education experiences for Levine Museum of the New South. A graduate of Davidson College with a B.A. in anthropology, she completed her Master of Science in Leadership and Management at Montreat College. She joined the Levine Museum staff in 2007, after several years as a teacher in Charlotte. She can be reached at jbryant@museumofthenewsouth.org.

Kamille Bostick, kbostick@museumofthenewsouth.org, is a programs coordinator at Levine Museum of the New South. She facilitates and designs education programming that fosters civic engagement, connections between the past and contemporary issues, and builds community. In her position, she also works with schools and teachers on connecting curriculum to the museum's exhibits and initiatives.

Resources

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¹ Gretchen Jennings, "The Empathetic Museum," 2013 American Alliance of Museums Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD.

² Sharon R. Ennis, Merarys Ríos-Vargas, and Nora G. Albert. "The Hispanic Population: 2010." *U.S. Census Briefs*. (May 2011). Retrieved from <http://on.aaslh.org/CensusHN>.

³ "Receiving Communities" refers to all non-Latinos, American-born Latinos, and Latino immigrants who have lived in the U.S. for more than twenty years.

⁴ We met this group at a local Latino restaurant as it was a safe, comfortable setting. Two sessions were held simultaneously with the community member session being done entirely in Spanish with no translation to English while the teacher session happened on the other side of the restaurant.