

From Survival to Triumph: The Kansas City Zoo Reaches World-Class Status by Listening to Its Customers

Walk into the Kansas City Zoo on a beautiful day, and it's hard to believe this 100-year-old institution was ever on the brink of collapse. Beyond the numbers, visitors now express a more positive view of the Zoo.



A stylish wooden gateway ushers visitors onto a sun-drenched path flanked by colorful flowers and well-trimmed bushes. Young children immediately spot the river otters and run excitedly to the tank where they watch the wet, furry creatures swim and play. Families look around trying to decide where to go next—the new polar bear exhibit or the new snakes exhibit. With 202 acres of animals, shows, rides, and treats, the possibilities are endless!

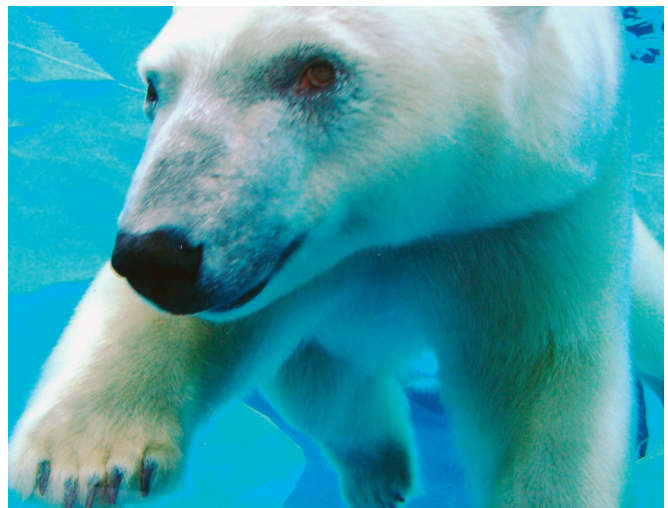
But it wasn't always like this. In fact, the biggest challenges to the zoo's survival came as recently as the early 2000s, when attendance was dwindling, finances were running in the red, and losing accreditation was a real possibility. Worst of all, insufficient upkeep, inconvenient walking paths, and limited animal visibility created a less-than-ideal reputation among the Kansas City community.

Carol Hallquist, the zoo board's immediate past chairperson, joined the board in 2001 when things were looking their grimmest. Despite the hurdles, she took the position anyway. "I have a passion and a belief that a great city needs a great zoo," she said.

To begin the process of transforming the zoo into a successful, profitable institution, the board decided to privatize in 2002, which meant taking control away from the city and giving it to the Friends of the Zoo, a nonprofit,

membership-based organization. In 2003, Randy Wisthoff, who had been with the world-renowned Omaha Zoo for 27 years, was hired as the new director. And in 2004, Wisthoff focused his energies on getting back in the black after annual losses of \$1 million.

"We tried to analyze the things that needed to be done to put us back on a pathway to stop the bleeding, stop the decline in attendance, stop all those negative things that affected public perception," said Wisthoff. "We tried to plug the hole in the ship and get it back up floating again." But Wisthoff pointed out that while making those cuts and balancing the budget was crucial, it wouldn't solve the problem. "I wasn't hired to just balance the budget. I was hired to build a world-class zoo." >>



Figuring Out What People Want

Sharing the belief that a vibrant, successful zoo was an essential aspect of any great American city was Andy Fromm, president and CEO of Service Management Group (SMG), who joined the board in 2005. SMG is the leading

international customer experience research firm and is based in Kansas City. Fromm strongly believed that SMG could help the zoo turn itself around by becoming more focused on the customer experience, so he offered to provide SMG's services to the zoo on a pro-bono basis.

interact with the animals and the keepers, such as elephant painting, sea lion feedings, and tropics keeper chats. Viewing decks were built throughout the zoo grounds to provide a closer look. The result of all this work has been a 28 percentage point increase between 2005 and 2012 in visitor satisfaction with the ability to view animals.

“You can’t just use raw attendance and profits as a driver. At some point you’ve got to dig down into layers about what people really want.”

— **Randy Wisthoff**
Director of Operations, The Kansas City Zoo

Wisthoff and the board understood that they needed to pay more attention to the customer experience in order to bring the Kansas City Zoo to the next level. But SMG was able to provide them with a data-driven approach to evaluate its business, the satisfaction of its associates and customers, and opportunities for continued growth and success.

While Wisthoff and his team already knew from national surveys which animals were most popular and what kinds of things make businesses successful, they had to dig deeper. As Wisthoff explained, they needed specific answers to one crucial question: “What do people want when they come to the zoo?”

The customer satisfaction survey SMG developed and distributed to guests beginning in 2005 answered that question loud and clear. “It’s the only way to really get to the root of what visitors are looking for,” said Wisthoff.

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Digging Into the Data

As one might guess, animals were one of the most crucial aspects of the visitor experience. Animal selection was consistently ranked as a top priority by respondents. But the surveys found something more: zoo patrons felt they had to walk too far in order to see the animals. They wanted to be able to see animals at the very beginning of their visit. They also wanted to see them often and up-close. In response, the zoo moved the river otter exhibit so people could see an animal immediately upon entering the zoo. Keepers adjusted their feeding times to ensure animals were around at peak hours. They also arranged to have regularly scheduled opportunities for people to

Also at the top of the list: cleanliness. That meant clean bathrooms, well-kept flower beds, and no trash on the ground. “Everybody picks up trash—myself included,” said Wisthoff. But the zoo’s staff didn’t just clean things up—they created a harmonious, pleasant environment filled with thriving plant-life, inviting snack bars and gift shops, and easy-to-read signage. As a result of these changes, SMG found the number of people who said they were highly satisfied with cleanliness of the zoo grounds and the restrooms improved.

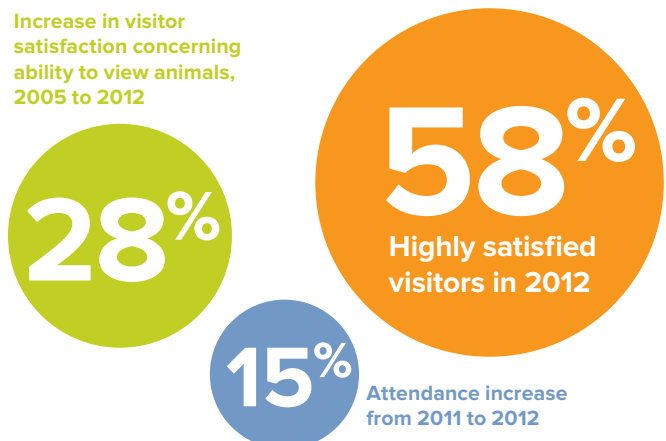
For Wisthoff, the specific data provided by SMG was essential to understanding the zoo’s customers, giving them the experience they wanted, and encouraging them to become loyal patrons. “I think any business that doesn’t evaluate what you’re doing will just never know. You can’t just use raw attendance and profits as a driver. At some point you’ve got to dig down into layers about what people really want.”

Kids Are Key

The Friends of the Zoo board of directors and staff knew that a large percentage of its customer base was made up of parents of small children. But the survey told them something surprising about this group: “The people with kids were less satisfied—and that’s our target consumer,” said board chair Carol Hallquist. So the zoo went into overdrive to make substantive changes that would satisfy the “stroller set.”

FIGURE 1

2012 Customer Feedback by the Numbers



One of the first things that had to be done was to redesign the entrance. Previously, the parking lot sat on a hill overlooking the zoo, requiring a long walk down to get in and a steep climb up to get out. Now visitors can choose from several parking lots that are all in close proximity to the entrance, and there's even a convenient drop-off area. The front gate was enlarged and pictures of animals were added to make it more grand and welcoming, and a play area was built so the fun could begin even before children enter the grounds.



The Kansas City Zoo brought attractions forward to the park entrance.



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Another major addition specifically for kids was the Discovery Barn. "We took a barn that nobody would go into and we provided air conditioning and restrooms and an elevator and animals that were active throughout the daylight hours," said Wisthoff. "You can put your nose up to the glass and there's a meerkat on the other side with his nose up to the glass." Rather than going for a natural habitat, they decided to make the barn kid-friendly, with bright colors and play equipment. "We tried to get back into looking at who our customer was."

"We came out especially today to see the polar bear exhibit and we think it was the best ever. We've been to many zoos in the United States and this is one of the best we've ever seen. We really enjoyed our visit."

— Visitor Comment

Most recently, the zoo added the polar bear exhibit. Ninety-five percent of visitors indicated they visited the polar bear passage in 2012 and visitor comments indicate the zoo's efforts to meet the needs of families have really paid off.

Always Reaching for the Top

At first, the zoo's staff and board members were perfectly content with customer responses in the positive range, until SMG stressed that unless guests are highly satisfied with their experience, it's just not good enough. "SMG is very clear about the need to get to that top box. Nothing matters more than people who are highly satisfied," said Carol Hallquist. SMG also emphasized the need to prioritize. "Board members can have great

ideas, but unless they're focused on improving the zoo experience and attendance, they're not really important," she said. "Ultimately, it's about the customer experience."

So while the zoo has been able to get funding for several blockbuster exhibits, it just isn't

enough. "If we're going to grow the business and make it a great zoo, we've got to address all those things that are above and beyond just building a polar bear exhibit. That only gets people from their breakfast table and into their car to here." The zoo is working to figure out what will make visitors come back, and what will inspire them to tell their friends and family to come too. "Word-of-mouth is some of our most important advertising."

A Vision of Success

Despite the very real challenges of a poor economic climate and reduced public and private funding, the Kansas City Zoo has managed to succeed on many fronts. First and foremost, attendance for 2012 was 824,218, up 15% from the year before. The most encouraging finding is the huge difference between *Overall Satisfaction* in 2005 and 2012. In that very first survey, less than one-third of respondents said they were highly satisfied with their overall zoo experience. But the most recent survey found that a solid majority, 58%, were highly satisfied.

Beyond the numbers, visitors have expressed a new, more positive view of the zoo.

The process of evaluation has also had a major effect on the zoo's staff. While some have found the exercise of exposing the zoo's weaknesses and shortcomings to be somewhat scary, the overall result has been positive for all involved. According to Wisthoff, all members of his staff—from senior-level management to grounds keepers—have become increasingly motivated to try harder and give more to ensure visitors are not just satisfied, but highly satisfied. ●

"We had a great visit. I loved the new displays and the landscaping was great. The zoo was very clean and well maintained. The staff was very helpful and also friendly. We just had a great time!"

— Visitor Comment



Insights to Innovation.

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