

Want to create impact? Use curiosity!

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Curiosity. This word is, and should be considered, a powerful tool that arboretums can harness to create advocates for trees.

Curiosity drives our desire to explore and understand the world; pushing us to question, learn, and discover. [Curiosity is innate in all humans](#). As people learn, they can move along a continuum, from becoming excited about a topic, to increasing their appreciation, to seeking out knowledge, to finally, using this novel information to fuel new opinions and behaviors (see Figure 1). Science communication can help us tap into that power of curiosity, connecting our technical expertise about trees to our audiences. Yet, as learning centers, **we also need to be curious**, by asking questions and seeking answers.



Adapted from content in: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017. *Communicating Science Effectively: A Research Agenda*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

Figure 1. The results of science communication can be viewed as a continuum. Getting people excited about your expertise is the first step to creating a tree advocate.

While it would be wonderful if people visited our sites just to look at and appreciate trees and other plants, that isn't always the case. Visitors come and explore our grounds for many reasons. Using audience surveys or focus groups can be beneficial (and potentially cheap/free) tools to learn why people are visiting and what would make them visit more. For those that are not tree advocates yet, how could you connect their interests to nature? What do they care about? What motivates them? What environmental action would be in line with their interests?

Trees are such an important part of the human experience; [they benefit our lives in many ways](#) – from serving as the backbone of the terrestrial ecosystem to improving our physical and mental health, to inspiring us with their beauty and longevity. For example, art, history, and health are all topics that can seamlessly merge with the story of trees. As institutions, we need to balance revenue, audience interest and engagement, all the while avoiding mission creep (Figure 2). For example, at Longwood Gardens, we use many topics to create an entry point to connect our audience with our expertise. We do this through creating stories and engagement opportunities, delivered through multiple channels that link the topic to the importance of nature.

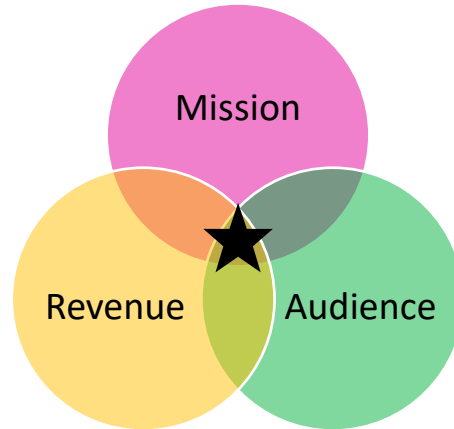


Figure 2. As arboreta, strive to find the right balance between mission, revenue, and audience's needs/wants. This is where you find IMPACT.

We understand that curiosity is key at Longwood Gardens. We use extensive audience research to set baseline metrics and to understand who visits us and why. With this information, we weave our horticultural and ecological expertise with other themes (such as beauty, sustainability, [history](#), or performing arts) and we find ways to disseminate it into the channels our audiences use and prefer. This can range from [formal education programs and classes](#) to virtual outlets (such as our [blog](#), [X](#), [Instagram](#) or [facebook](#)), and informal engagement (Such as our [Community Read program](#) or our [Science series](#)). We even find ways to create touchpoints in our [Garden Shop](#); this has included everything from [selling compost](#) that we make on site, sunflower seeds from our agricultural fields, honey from our beehives, and products created from fallen trees from the property. All of these items support the story of the importance of nature and environmental action. While not everyone is here to look at trees or plants initially, we can do what we can to get people to visit, explore, learn, and (if they aren't already) fall in love with nature.

Now, more than ever, we need to foster this appreciation and excitement of trees and the natural world so we can start protecting biodiversity on a grander scale. If we have the goal of motivating people to become an informed tree and nature champion, we need to use our innate curiosity to understand our audiences. Once we know what they care about, we can relate it to our expertise, develop appropriate actions and opportunities for them, and ultimately, motivate them to action.

"Listen with curiosity. Speak with honesty. Act with integrity. The greatest problem with communication is we don't listen to understand. We listen to reply. When we listen with curiosity, we don't listen with the intent to reply. We listen for what's behind the words." — Roy T. Bennett

Key Takeaways

- Use Audience Research to understand what your visitors care about
- Align Audience's needs and wants with revenue and mission
- Use curiosity to encourage engagement and to understand your audiences
- Move your audiences along the science communication continuum
- There are many ways to engage your audiences that are free or cheap, such as focus groups, or using a free online survey platform.
 - This [document](#) is a great starting point of inspiration!