

A Study of Visitors to the *Mail Call* Exhibition at the National Postal Museum

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Abstract

The National Postal Museum (NPM) initiated this study of the *Mail Call* exhibition, conducted by the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) in the summer of 2012. The results reported here are based on exit surveys of visitors to the exhibition. From a random sample of 161 intercepted visitors, 131 completed surveys were collected (81% response rate).

Visitor satisfaction with the *Mail Call* exhibition was broadly in line with overall satisfaction from the previous series of surveys for the entire museum. More than three-quarters of visitors gave the exhibition a rating of Excellent (57%) or Superior (21%). However, the Superior rating percentage for *Mail Call* was about double that of three previous exhibitions, *Pony Express* (2011), *Victory Mail* (2008), and *Postal Inspectors* (2007)

More than half of exhibition visitors self-identified as either having served in the military (14%) or having a family member in the service (42%). Participants in the exhibition activities, on average, were more likely to rate their overall experiences with the *Mail Call* exhibition as “Superior”, than non-participants. These activities included: reading about certain topics related to the formats (27% Superior rating), delivery (25% Superior), and meaning (24%) of military mail and watching the exhibition video (32%).

Summary

In the summer of 2012 OP&A conducted two surveys of two specific exhibitions on display at the National Postal Museum. This report considers one of these, the *Mail Call* exhibition.

The Survey: A sample of visitors exiting the *Mail Call* exhibition was surveyed. The overall response rate was 81 percent.

Visitors: A majority of NPM visitors were making their first visit to the Museum (90%). More than three-quarters of respondents stated they came for a general visit to the museum (78%); a small percentage identified seeing the *Mail Call* exhibition (7%) as their purpose for visiting the museum. More than half of exhibition visitors identified themselves as either having served in the military (14%) or having a family member in the service (42%).

Rating: The ratings that visitors gave the exhibition (0% Poor, 3% Fair, 20% Good, 57% Excellent, and 21% Superior) were in line with overall Smithsonian museum ratings averages, and generally higher in the top two categories, Excellent and Superior, compared to previously studied NPM exhibitions.

Activities within the *Mail Call* Exhibition: Reading explanatory panels on different topics (75-78%) and reading letter content (86%) took precedence for visitors over multimedia activities like listening to audio clips (58%), watching the video (53%), or taking photos (24%).

Observations: Survey respondents appeared to rate the *Mail Call* exhibition “Superior” when they had engaged in various activities within the exhibition:

- ☐ About a third of respondents (32%) who watched the video rated the exhibition “Superior” versus 10% who didn’t watch the video.
- ☐ Respondents who read about the formats of military mail selected the Superior rating considerably more than those who didn’t indicate reading about this; 27% to 3%.
- ☐ A quarter of visitors who read about the delivery of military mail gave the exhibition a Superior rating while only 7% of respondents who didn’t read about this topic did so.
- ☐ Lastly, the survey respondents that reported to have read about the importance of military mail for morale provided Superior ratings at higher rates (24%), than those that didn’t read this content (10%)¹.

Also, survey respondents that said they would definitely return the National Postal Museum were more likely to provide a Superior rating to the *Mail Call* exhibition (35%), while only 9% of those who might come back rated the exhibition “Superior”.

¹ Due to the small sample size, the “Reading letter content” activity was not seen as statistically significant in terms of rating.

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Preface

In the summer of 2012 the Office of Policy and Analysis (OP&A) conducted this study for the National Postal Museum (NPM). The goal of the study is to understand the experiences of visitors within the *Mail Call* exhibition. Data for the study were collected by means of a survey. This report presents the results from the survey, conducted with visitors exiting the exhibition. We appreciate visitors' willingness to participate in this study.

I would also like to thank National Postal Museum staff for their assistance and guidance in the course of this study. K. Allison Wickens, Director of Education, initiated the studies. It is always a pleasure to work with her. She and Rebekah "Becky" Daniel helped with logistics and pretesting questionnaires, in addition to spearheading data collection efforts using only NPM staff. It was a true team effort.

Within OP&A, Zahava D. Doering guided and participated in the overall survey design, analysis, and report writing and preparation. Kelly Richmond, an OP&A volunteer, took on the survey development, questionnaire design, preparation of materials, and discussion of data collection protocols for NPM staff (with assistance from Andrew Pekarik), data processing and analysis (with direction by Lance Costello), and drafting this report. Hyemin Kim, an OP&A intern, helped greatly with the technical aspects of analysis.

I thank all of them for their hard work.

Carole M. P. Neves
Director, Office of Policy and Analysis

Cover: Mail Call exhibition at the National Postal Museum. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution

Introduction

In the summer of 2012 OP&A conducted two surveys of two exhibitions on display at the National Postal Museum (NPM), *Mail Call* and *Systems at Work*. The *Mail Call* exhibition opened in November 2011 and will remain a permanent exhibition. According to the National Postal Museum's website, the *Mail Call* exhibition seeks to explore "how the military postal system works and why the mail is an important resource." The exhibition highlights how the "types of mail, transportation methods, and postal workers have changed over time" and how technological and organizational innovations have allowed mail to become more diverse and mail services be more reliable.

The exhibition is in one room that is approximately 500-600 square feet. External visual panels of enlarged historical photographs create an entryway into the exhibition from the National Postal Museum's central atrium space. A panel located directly in front of visitors entering the gallery gives the name of the exhibition and branches visitors either left or right into the main, expanded horseshoe space. The assumed pathway through the exhibition is that visitors would turn to the right upon entry. There is a video near the entrance with four seats and audio stations on the back wall of the exhibition. The rest of the exhibition is composed of object vitrines and explanatory panels.

Methodology

Data for the study were collected by means of a sample survey. The survey was administered to a scientifically selected sample of visitors as they exited the *Mail Call* exhibition. Exiting visitors were intercepted during nine two-hour survey sessions and asked to complete a one-page, self-administered questionnaire about themselves and their visit. Of 161 intercepted visitors eligible to participate, 131 completed the questionnaire, for a cooperation rate of 81 percent.²

The questionnaire used for the study is in Appendix A. Frequency distributions of survey responses are in Appendix B.

² Smithsonian staff, contractors or other people at NPM for business or meetings, and young people under the age of 18 or in school groups were not eligible to participate. In this study, five of 166 intercepted visitors were not eligible.

Findings

Mail Call Exhibition Visitors

- ☐ Nine out of ten *Mail Call* visitors were making their first visit to the museum (90%); the remaining tenth were people who had visited the NPM before.
- ☐ More than three-quarters of respondents identified coming for a general visit to the museum (78%) as their reason for coming to the National Postal Museum. Only a small number identified seeing the *Mail Call* exhibition (7%) as their purpose for visiting.
- ☐ About one-fifth of visitors were visiting the museum alone (22%). Of the remaining visitors about half were with other adults only (47%). The other group compositions were: with children under 12 only (8%), with adults and children 12-17 (8%), with adults and children under 12 (11%), with children of any age (2%), and with adults and children of any age (3%). Visitors to the exhibition that were with a child of any age were about one third of visitors (32%).
- ☐ Visitors were spread almost equally among the age groupings; with visitors in their 60s (18%), 50s (18%), 40s (21%), 30s (20%), and 20s (24%). The average and median visitor age were 42.
- ☐ Slightly more than half of the visitors were women (52%).
- ☐ More than half of exhibition visitors identified themselves as either having served in the military (14%) or having a family member in the service (42%).
- ☐ A small percentage of visitors (7%) indicated they worked for the US Postal Service (USPS) and another 18% of respondents had family members who worked for the USPS.

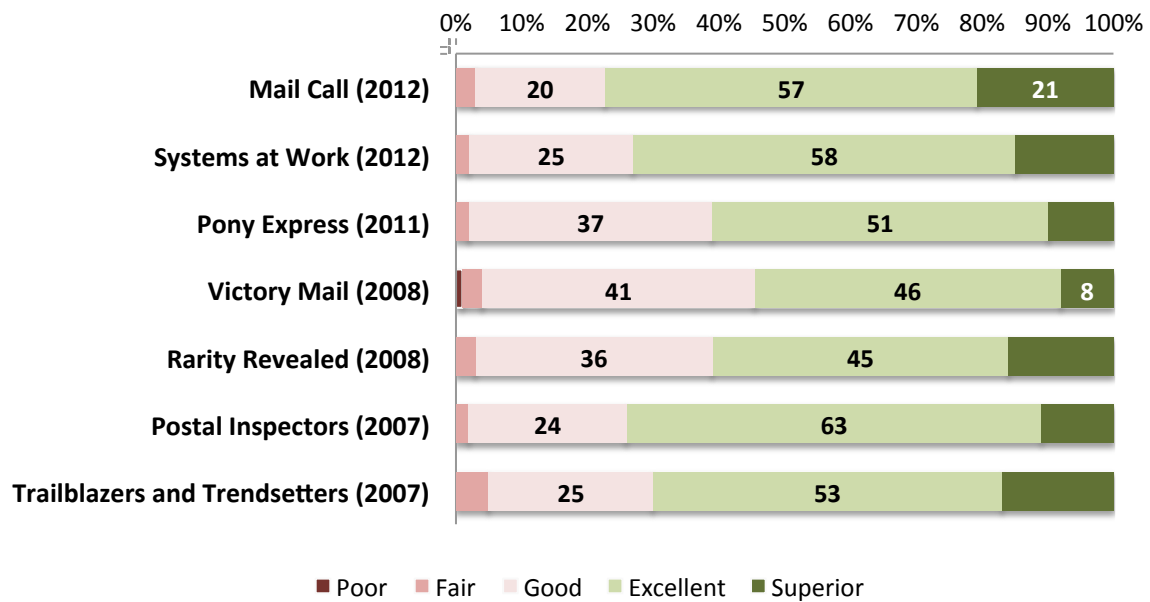


World War I postcard marked "nurse's mail." Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution

Satisfaction with *Mail Call* Exhibition Visit

- ☐ Visitor satisfaction with the *Mail Call* exhibition was broadly in line with overall satisfaction data from the previous series of surveys for the National Postal Museum. A majority of visitors gave the exhibition a rating of Excellent (57%) or Superior (21%).
- ☐ However, the Superior rating percentage for *Mail Call* was about double the percentages of three previous exhibitions, *Pony Express* (2011), *Victory Mail* (2008), and *Postal Inspectors* (2007) (Figure 1). While *Mail Call* is an exhibition of similar size to *Pony Express*³, size did not appear to impact the respondents' impressions of the exhibition.

Figure 1. Rating of Experience in the *Mail Call* and in Other NPM Exhibits (Percent):



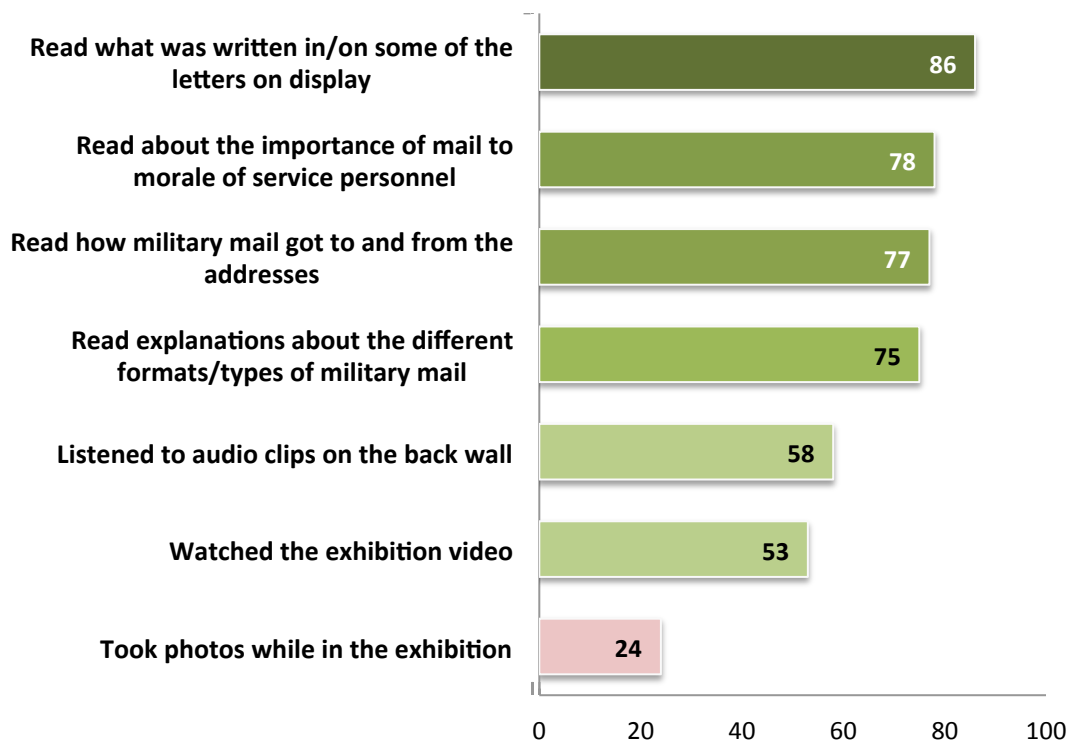
- ☐ Close to half of visitors marked that they would definitely return for another visit to the National Postal Museum if they were in Washington in the next year (48%); approximately the same percentage stated they might visit again (47%). Only five percent of surveyed visitors stated they would not make a return visit.
- ☐ Three fifths of survey respondents who reside locally stated they might visit the museum again (60%), while the percentage of local respondents who would definitely visit the museum in the future was more than a third (37%). Two fifths of respondents who did not live in the area stated they might visit NPM at another time (41%). More than half out of town respondents would definitely visit the galleries going forward (54%).

³ The *Pony Express* report suggested that perhaps lower ratings were due to the small size of the exhibition.

Activities During the *Mail Call* Exhibition Visit

- ☐ Visitors indicated that they read letter content and explanatory panels in the exhibition at higher rates than doing interactive or multimedia activities (Figure 2).
 - The most popular activity in the exhibition for visitors was reading what was written in or on letters on display in the exhibition (86%).
 - Visitors also read about the importance of mail for service personnel's morale (78%), read about how military mail traveled to and from addresses (77%), and read explanations about the various type and formats of military mail (75%).
- ☐ In terms of the media aspects of the exhibition, visitors reported less usage.
 - Less than two thirds of visitors listened to audio clips in the exhibition (58%) and just over half watched the exhibition video (53%).
 - Less than a quarter of visitors chose to take photos while in the exhibition (24%).

Figure 2. Survey Responses to activity participation during *Mail Call* visit (Percent):



Observations

☰ From the study it appeared that survey respondents were inclined to rate the *Mail Call* exhibition “Superior” when they had engaged in particular activities within the exhibition:

- The activity that created a difference of 22 percentage points was watching the exhibition video. About a third of respondents (32%) who watched the video rated the exhibition “Superior” versus 10% who didn’t watch the video.



USO phonograph albums allowed World War II soldiers to record messages and these were mailed home. Photo courtesy of Smithsonian Institution

- Reading explanatory content in the exhibition also contributed to increased Superior ratings. For instance, those respondents who participated in reading about the formats of military mail selected the Superior rating considerably more than those who didn’t indicate reading about this; 27% to 3%.
 - Visitors who participated in reading about mail delivery gave *Mail Call* a Superior rating at a higher rate (25%), than those who didn’t read about this topic (7%).
 - Lastly, about a fourth of the respondents (24%) who reported to have read about the importance of military mail for morale considered the exhibition “Superior,” while a tenth of visitors gave this rating, when they didn’t read this content⁴.
- ☰ Also, survey respondents that said they would definitely return the National Postal Museum were more likely to rate Mail Call as Superior (35%), while only 9% of those who might come back rated the exhibition “Superior”.
- ☰ Before the study it was hypothesized that visitors who had performed military service or had family members who had served might be more inclined to rate the *Mail Call* exhibition “Superior”, but due to the small number of responses that had these characteristics (14 responses), the data was not adequate to prove such a conclusion.

⁴ Due to the small sample size, the “Reading letter content” activity was not seen as statistically significant in terms of rating.

Appendix A: Mail Call Exhibition Survey Form

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Summer 2012 Mail Call Exhibition Survey

Is this your first visit to the National Postal Museum?

Yes No, I have visited times before today

What led you to visit the museum today? *[Mark all that apply]*

General visit to museum To see *Mail Call* exhibition
 To see *Systems at Work* exhibition To visit the museum store
 Other reason, specify: _____

Please rate your overall experience in the Mail Call exhibition today:

Poor Fair Good Excellent Superior

Which of the following did you do with regard to the Mail Call exhibition? *[Mark all that apply]*

	Yes	No	Not sure
Entered after seeing large graphic panels outside the room	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Noticed the name of the exhibition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read what was written in/on some of the letters on display	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Listened to audio clips on the back wall	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Watched the exhibition video	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read explanations about the different formats/types of military mail	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read how military mail got to and from the addresses	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read about the importance of mail to morale of service personnel	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Took photos while in the exhibition	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Have you or a member of your family served in the military? *[Mark all that apply]*

Self Family No Don't know

Have you or a member of your family ever worked for the U.S. Postal Service? *[Mark all that apply]*

Self Family No Don't know

Do you live in the United States or another country?

United States, specify ZIP code: Another country, specify: _____

Are you visiting alone or with other people? I am alone I am with other people

Other than yourself, how many people are with you?

of adults (18 and over) # of youth 12 to 17 # of youth under 12

Are you male or female? Male Female

What is your age?

If you were in Washington in the next year, would you visit this museum again?

No, I would not I might Yes, I definitely would

Please comment on your experience in the exhibition, Mail Call:

*Thank you for
your assistance!*

Ses Seg 1 2 3 4 Status C R L I I (age) Int ID

Appendix B: Frequencies of *Mail Call* Exhibition Survey Responses

Is this your first visit to the National Postal Museum?

Yes	90%
No	10%
TOTAL	100%

For “No” respondents

Visits: 0-2	60%
Visits: 3-8	25%
Visits: more than 8	15%
TOTAL	100%

What led you to visit the museum today? *[Could select multiple options]*

General visit to museum	78%
To see <i>Mail Call</i> exhibition	7%
To see <i>Systems at Work</i> exhibition	1%
To visit the Museum Store	2%
Other reason	17%

Please rate your overall experience in the *Mail Call* exhibition today:

Poor	0%
Fair	3%
Good	20%
Excellent	57%
Superior	21%
TOTAL	101%

Have you or a member of your family served in the military? *[Could select multiple options]*

Self	14%
Family	42%
No	47%
Not sure	0%

Have you or a member of your family ever worked for the U.S. Postal Service? *[Could select multiple options]*

Self	7%
Family	18%
No	76%
Not sure	1%

Which of the following did you do with regard to the *Mail Call* exhibition?

	Yes	No	Not sure	TOTAL
Enter after seeing large graphic panels outside the room	83%	11%	6%	100%
Notice the name of the exhibition	75%	18%	6%	99%
Read what was written in/on some of the letters on display	86%	11%	3%	100%
Listen to audio clips on the back wall	58%	39%	3%	100%
Watch the exhibition video	53%	46%	1%	100%
Read explanations about the different formats/types of military mail	75%	23%	1%	99%
Read how military mail got to and from the addressees	77%	18%	5%	100%
Read about the importance of mail to the morale of service personnel	78%	18%	4%	100%
Take photos while in the exhibition	24%	74%	1%	99%

Do you live in the United States or another country?

United States	82%
Another country	18%
TOTAL	100%

Are you visiting alone or with other people?

Alone	21%
With others	79%
TOTAL	100%

For "With others" respondents

With Adults	70%
With Youth 12-17	72%
With Youth under 12	77%

Other than yourself, how many people are with you?

<u>With adults (18 and over)</u>	
0-2	87%
3-5	10%

more than 5	3%
<u>With youth 12 to 17</u>	
0-2	100%
3-5	0%
more than 5	0%
<u>With youth under 12</u>	
0-2	89%
3-5	6%
more than 5	6%

Are you male or female?

Male	48%
<u>Female</u>	52%
TOTAL	100%

What is your age?

Aged 60 or above	18%
Aged 50-59	18%
Aged 40-49	21%
Aged 30-39	20%
<u>Aged 18-29</u>	24%
TOTAL	101%

If you were in Washington in the next year, would you visit this museum again?

No, I would not	5%
I might	47%
<u>Yes, I definitely would</u>	48%
TOTAL	100%