

# HOW WILL SCIENCE CENTRES RECOVER FROM THE COVID 19 CRISIS?



Professor Per-Edvin Persson  
Oy Per Edvin Persson Consulting Ltd Ab,  
Helsinki, Finland  
[www.peredvinperssonconsulting.com](http://www.peredvinperssonconsulting.com)

April 14, 2020

## **INTRODUCTION**

Everybody in the science centre field is currently very busy planning and providing digital offerings and discussing how the Covid 19 crisis will impact the field in the future. How will the public react to hands-on science experiments in the post Covid 19 world? What changes in offerings and policies will be necessary? And above all, how long will it take before visitor numbers reach pre Covid 19 levels? In this memo I will look at a case of economic depressions from the past and some recent data that may help us to understand what lies ahead. Of course, an economic depression is not the same a pandemic, but the economic consequences of Covid 19 are very similar. Recovering from Covid 19 may contain elements that are difficult to predict, as we are still fairly early in the crisis.

## **HISTORICAL LESSONS FROM TWO DEPRESSIONS: CASE STUDY HEUREKA**

Finland suffered a severe national depression in 1991-1992 – the GDP in 1991 decreased 7.1 % from the previous year and the social effects were long-lasting and harsh. Unfortunately, the current Covid 19 crisis is producing almost as dramatic effects on the Finnish economy. Heureka, the Finnish Science Centre opened its doors in 1989 and the first three years of operation were great, partly because we brought in the first dinosaur exhibition in 1991. However, the drop in annual attendance from 1991 to 1992 was 25 % with dire consequences for the institution.

Let's look a bit closer at the Heureka attendance numbers in 1991-1994. I have chosen the time period September to August to exclude the dinosaur effect in early 1991 and to adjust to the onset of the depression.

Heureka mean annual attendance 1990-1999	283 107
September 1991 – August 1992	212 757
September 1992 – August 1993	257 682
September 1993 – August 1994	281 682

The first year the depression hit attendance was down 25 %, the second year it was still 9 % below average and only in the third year were “normal” numbers attained.

Based on this experience, recovery took three years. However, note that the crisis was purely economic, there were no restrictions on people's movements etc. If reopening after Covid 19 happens in stages restricting attendance levels, the time of recovery will probably be correspondingly longer.

The world wide depression in 2008-2010 did not affect Heureka as badly as the 1991-1992 depression. Looking again at figures from September through August (Lehman Bros filed for bankruptcy on September 15, 2008) the figures look like this:

Heureka mean annual attendance 2000-2009	262 994
September 2008 – August 2009	243 355
September 2009 – August 2010	241 544

In the third year of depression the attendance numbers soared, because we brought in the dinosaurs again. In fact, every time Heureka brought in a robotic dinosaur exhibition in the period 1995-2010 attendance figures increased by 31-55 % compared to the preceding year!

The Heureka post-2008 experience actually points to a possibility of speeding up the recovery process by taking in a block buster exhibition in the years immediately after the crisis. In the Covid 19 world such an exhibition should probably be fairly non-tactile compared to usual science centre exhibitions. Again, if paleontology at all figures in your institutional identity, a robotic dinosaur exhibition is an obvious choice.

## **INTENT TO VISIT AND REDISTRIBUTION OF VISITATION**

I am a great fan of Colleen Dilenschneider of the IMPACTS Research and Development corporation ([www.colleendilen.com](http://www.colleendilen.com)) – they produce hard data that is enormously useful for any leader of a cultural organisation. If you do not already subscribe to her newsletter, I strongly recommend that you do.

In just a few weeks Colleen has pulled up an amazing amount of data on intent to visit cultural institutions and visitation patterns relating to the Covid 19 crisis and the world after. The data seems to support much of what you might expect regarding some of the patterns.

The good news is that long-term (6-24 months) intent to visit seems stable, indicating that once the crisis is over people intend to visit cultural institutions. However, there will be a redistribution of visitation patterns after the crisis. Some institutions will gain while others will lose.

Generally speaking, institutions with open spaces where people can move around freely, like botanical gardens or zoos, may seem more attractive after the crisis, while institutions where you sit closely together in a confined space (like a concert hall) will seem less attractive. Art and history museums could probably expect return to normal conditions, while science centres based on largely tactile experiences are at greater risk. The perception of tactile risk may indicate longer recovery times unless new sanitary procedures alleviate it.

An interesting detail in Colleen's data is that the very fact of reopening seems to reinforce willingness to visit.

## **MY HUMBLE RECOMMENDATIONS**

In order to speed up the recovery process, a science centre should do the following:

1. Try to stay in people's minds throughout the crisis by offering digital products and services and producing news about them. Marketing is essential during a crisis.
2. Use the shutdown period to plan and prepare hygienic and operational procedures that may be needed in the post Covid 19 world. There are a great many discussion groups and webinars available on these issues.
3. Reopen as soon as you can as reopening by itself will reinforce people's intention to visit.
4. Bring in a non-tactile blockbuster exhibition, such as a robotic dinosaur exhibition, as soon as possible after reopening.

## **CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you wish more information, or wish to discuss what I could do for you in this crisis, or if you wish to book a robotic dinosaur exhibition in the next few years, please, get in touch with me at [pelle@peredvinperssonconsulting.com](mailto:pelle@peredvinperssonconsulting.com) or by phone +358 409015200.