PUTTING VALUE BACK INTO EVALUATION

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You Would Be Mad!

What is the value of evaluation if nobody pays any attention? Let me describe an imaginary scenario. You are the director of a museum who has had the amazing luck to receive a large donation that you can spend on anything you choose. You send your best exhibition team away to decide what to do and after two months they come back with a plan. They suggest developing a new exhibition on space technology–sounds great so far. But they then tell you that in their exhibition there will be no interactive exhibits, no computers, objects, photographs, audio-visuals, graphics, or science shows. Just text. Text, text, text, and more text. What's more, they say this text must be rigorously technical, containing much obscure terminology in order to maintain their intellectual credibility. Would you approve this project? Any audience advocate would say, "No, of course not," for you would be using thoroughly inappropriate means to communicate with your visitors. Yet are we audience advocates any good at taking such advice? Over recent years many excellent papers have been produced discussing how audience advocates can effectively influence the development of exhibitions (e.g., Borun et al. 1993, Hilke 1993, Wagner 1996). Various issues were identified–management structure, the objectivity and professionalism of the researcher, timeliness of the evaluation and the involvement of the stakeholders in the planning of the research. Undoubtedly all this is true but we don't believe that is all that is required. From previous, bitter experience we have found that even with the most amenable project teams, sensitive consultation with the stakeholders, and the most unequivocal support from senior managers, results of high quality, timely evaluation have been ignored. A crucial step in the process seems to be missed. Nobody has asked whether we the audience advocates are communicating effectively with our audience. Curators are people too, you know

In her paper, "Characteristics of a positive museum experience," Serrell lists the attributes of a successful exhibition (Serrell 1992): "discovery, wonder, wow, I didn't have to work to get it, I could connect it to something I know already, it makes the subject come to life, it gets the messages across quickly, it involves you." Should not this also be the how an exhibition team responds to the evaluation? In our experience, the failure of exhibition teams to act on the advice of audience advocates is not necessarily due to their lack of interest or willingness, but because we are asking them to do what we would never expect our visitors to do–read, memorise and draw conclusions from vast quantities of text. Curators and exhibit developers are, after all, ordinary people, and in the terrible maelstrom that is an exhibition project they do not have the time, energy, motivation, or freedom from distractions to read yet another wodge of paper. Or if they do, their chances of remembering much of it are pretty slight and they are unlikely to have the time to think how this should change what they do. To be honest, when we were both in similar roles we rarely bothered to read the evaluation reports that were dumped on our desks. It was just text, text, text, and yet more text! There is an irony in this–much of an audience advocate's time is spent extolling the virtues of interactivity,

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE (CONT.)

Office of Education. The idea was to get usable knowledge out the field for teachers and education administrators. We will need to determine what are the best ways for VSA to develop and share technical knowledge. Some of the questions we face are what should our workshop offerings be in the future and how can we best use electronic as well as print media to provide technical assistance?

I also believe that visitor studies cannot be isolated from significant changes that are going on in institutions such as zoos, museums, parks, historical sites, aquariums, and science centers. There has been a continual pressure to privatize institutions and emphasize the use of marketing and other commercial means to attract visitors and raise revenues. Is this pressure changing the nature of cultural institutions? A visitor study involves much more than just getting crowds through the entrance. It also involves understanding what happens to visitors during their visits and what they carry away as part of a lifetime experience. Should visitor studies also involve more research on what people expect from their visits and how they value the experiences visitation brings? Should we also be more active in researching how visitors value the institutions they attend?

Let me conclude by saying that you can read in this issue of *Visitor Studies Today!* about the people who are making things happen in VSA. It is because of these people that I am optimistic about our future.

firsthand experience, of seeing the "real thing." Surely, as experts in communication, we do not need to be reminded that if you hope to elicit any form of learning, you need to have motivated your audience, be sensitive to their need for time and energy, and recognise the importance of providing powerful memorable experiences.

Things Had to Change

When we were appointed audience advocates to a £45 million exhibition project, we realised that things had to change. It was time to begin applying what we have learnt about the principles of good exhibit design to communicating our messages to our audience–the exhibition team. Thus was born the "Inside the Visitor's Head," a training programme in visitor awareness. We wanted to provide something more motivating, compelling, and infinitely more memorable than just a great big wordy document. We also wanted to establish our credibility with the team by allowing them to see for themselves what visitors do, think, feel and say. The aim of "Inside the Visitor's Head" is emphatically not to collect data. Just as you do not expect someone to leave an exhibition with a university level of knowledge about a subject, so too we did not see this training programme as doing anything more than providing memorable experiences that would motivate the exhibition team to learn and think more about visitors.

So far we have developed four exercises: "a day at the museum," "have a bad day," "insect visitors," and the "weekly coffee morning." There is only room for a thumb-nail sketch of each exercise, but if you would like more details do please contact us.

A Day at the Museum

This is a form of participant observation that we have used in the past to study visitors, but in this case we are using the technique purely as a training exercise, allowing us to be more flexible about how we recruit visitors. Families or small groups of adults are invited to the museum— these are usually friends or relatives of staff. Some are first-time visitors, while some have been here before; they may or may not know the observer but in practice this does not seem to affect the outcome all that much. The visitors are briefed about the exercise both in advance of their visit and when they arrive at the museum. One member of the project team joins the group at the start of their visit and follows them wherever they go. As far as possible, the observers must behave as if they were just another member of the group:

> *"Nobody has asked the question: Are we the audience advocates communicating effectively with our audience, the exhibit development team?"*

joining in the conversation, answering children's questions, standing queues, fighting through the scrum to get to the cafe. What they cannot do is make any suggestions as to where the group should go or how long they should spend in the museum. If the group gets lost or if they ask for advice, their questions are deflected by suggestions such as, "Is there a map anywhere around here?" or "How about asking a warder"? Other conversation is encouraged–previous visits to other museums, expectations for the visit, factors that lead to successful leisure activities.

The observers are asked to take note of the following:
• Which galleries do they visit?
• Where are the decision points where they stop and look at the map, discuss what to do next? How do they decide what to do?

• How the energy levels change during the visit?
• What sort of exhibits or events attract their attention and why? When do they read labels?
• How long do they stay in the exhibitions, cafe, shop?
• What social interaction occurs amongst the group, with other visitors or members of staff?
• What problems do they experience?

Have a Bad Day

The idea behind this exercise is to provide colleagues with the experience of being an extremely reluctant visitor. As museum professionals we tend to have a natural inclination to visit other similar institutions, and we can easily forget what it can be like to be dragged kicking and screaming to a museum. Each member of the team is asked to select a friend or relative who has an interest or hobby that they themselves emphatically do not share. They are then asked to find a museum or exhibition on this very topic and visit it with their friend or relative. Participants complete a pre-visit questionnaire that asks them to introspect about their hopes, fears, and expectations, and a post-visit questionnaire about how their experiences matched their expectations.

Insect Visitors

The idea behind this exercise is to encourage members of the team to spend some time watching visitors out on gallery. We have found that what you observe while hurrying through a gallery on your way to a meeting is very different from what is observed when you remain stationary at one point. Yet, rushing through the galleries is often the only contact members of staff have with visitors. As audience advocates we frequently conduct observations, but other members of the project team do not usually have

the opportunity to do so.

Each member of the team were asked to spend 45 minutes in four locations around the museum at different times of the day, noting what visitors they saw and how they behaved. Locations were selected to represent areas in the museum where different patterns of behaviour are likely to occur–orientation, intensive use of interactives, movement between areas, and label reading. Times were selected to ensure participants observed how the number and type of visitors varies during the day. In order to focus their attention, we asked participants to imagine that they were classifying each visitor as a kind of insect. Are they grasshoppers leaping quickly from one thing to another? Army ants moving in columns destroying all in their path? Bees moving methodically and purposefully through the area? Or are they stick insects–you have to look really hard to see them move?

Coffee Mornings
A series of informal weekly meetings held every Monday morning (attendance strictly optional) provide a chance for us to train the team in various aspects of visitor behaviour and exhibit development. Topics have included developing temporary exhibitions; what makes a "good" interactive; visitor orientation; needs and wants of family groups with young children; visitors' learning styles; and many other similar topics.

Increasingly we are encouraging team members who are subject specialists to present sessions about their field of expertise. This is often the first time they have tried to present their subject to a non-specialist, demanding audience. Some valuable, if extremely painful, lessons about science communication have been learnt. In addition to the main exercises, we have also devised other activities that aim to increase our colleagues'

awareness and understanding of the audience:
• Training for members of the team in survey and observation techniques and then at least three hours helping with on-going evaluation projects
• The opportunity to attend, as observers, focus group discussions with visitors. How was it for you?

Our task as audience advocates has been made immeasurably easier by being able to start discussions with, "You remember you were telling me how that family…" rather than our previous opening gambit of, "We find that visitors…" But what does the team say? The feedback has been extremely positive. The following are quotes from some of the feedback questionnaires in response to the question, "In the end what, if anything, did you feel you gained from this exercise?"
• "Real life experience of what it's like to be lost–the frustration of spending a lot of time going the wrong way"
• "Trailing around trying to find galleries using the map…"
• "Seeing the museum through visitors' eyes, wishing I could take them to more interesting bits"
• "Having hammered home, beyond gainsaying by others, that the visit of a family group is largely determined by the wishes of the kids"
In response to the question, "What was the most useful aspect of the exercise for you?" participants mentioned:
• "An idea of how exhausting a very loud, busy, teenager-filled place can be. Maybe how a parent feels after battling with the Science Museum interactive areas all day"
• "That a trip out can be exciting in itself even if you've not been looking forward to the place…activities involving people doing things (even if you are only watching them) are best"

What Next?
Do try these exercises for yourselves, copy and distribute the instructions as you wish, and let us know how effective they were in your institution. We would also like people to devise new exercises that could be used to increase awareness and understanding of visitors. Any exercise needs to involve direct experience of museum visitors, be highly participatory and memorable. Write, e-mail, or telephone us with your comments, criticisms and suggestions. These exercises are far from perfect and we hope to continually improve and refine them. Let us know if this really does put the value back into your evaluation.

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