

Visitor Panels: In-House Evaluation of Exhibit Interpretation

Daryl Fischer
MUSYNERGY
Grand Haven, Michigan

Introduction

As museums strive to become more visitor centered, teams of curators, educators, and designers are incorporating visitor studies in the exhibit development process. "Visitor panels" have been useful in fine-tuning interpretive components at the Denver Art Museum. Using small samples and providing quick, action-oriented feedback, visitor panels generate substantive changes in new exhibits. Small studies with large impact, they are conducted by staff and can be applied in a wide variety of museum settings. Involving staff members in collecting and interpreting visitor studies data has several important benefits. Using in-house staff, as opposed to outside evaluators, makes visitor panels affordable, even for small museums. But perhaps more important than economics is education. Visitor panels provide excellent opportunities to educate the internal audience of staff members about the needs and concerns of the external audiences they aim to reach through exhibits.

Likened to "more focused focus groups," visitor panels are qualitative studies that rely on input from panelists who are representative of the museum's target audience. Visitor panels are composed of eight to ten adults who have an interest, but no formal education, in the subject of the exhibit. These panelists are thought of—and treated—as experts who can help staff understand the public's experience of new exhibits. They are called in repeatedly, like consultants, to critique different aspects of the interpretive program or to respond at different stages of the exhibit development process. Panelists are paid a modest amount for their services and visitor panels are conducted at the museum. The direct costs of conducting visitor panels are minimal, making them well within the means of most museums, even those with limited financial resources; however they do require an investment of staff time. Visitor panels are led by a staff moderator who forms a bridge between the panelists and the exhibit

team. Curators and educators on exhibit teams identify their questions and concerns about new exhibits and then listen to in-depth visitor panel discussions. They may also mull over recordings or transcriptions of the panels in an effort to clarify panelists' comments and translate this information into concrete, visitor centered improvements in the interpretive materials.

The Denver Art Museum has used visitor panels to improve several new exhibits. This paper will focus on their use in the reinstallation of two areas of the museum's permanent collection. From 1992-1994, teams of curators and educators worked with architects and other museum staff to reinstall the Asian and New World (Pre-Columbian and Spanish Colonial) galleries with generous grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. In the final stages of the process, representatives from diverse communities were asked to come to the museum to critique the new exhibits. Several months later, I interviewed ten curators, educators, and panelists about their participation in visitor panels and their reactions to the process.

Conducting Visitor Panels

Timing

The timing of visitor panels within the overall exhibit development process impacts how visitors' input will be applied in the museum. During the preliminary stages of concept development and object selection, visitor panels could be effective front-end evaluation techniques. Early in the exhibit development process, they could serve as formative evaluation. The Denver Art Museum used visitor panels to determine how interpretive materials were functioning in newly opened galleries, putting them into the realm of remedial evaluation. As such, they were scheduled late in the reinstallation process. Suggestions that might have impacted the entire interpretive program could not be implemented at that stage, but important changes could still be made because money had been set aside for this purpose. In addition to learning how to maximize the potential of the current exhibit, staff heard comments that will influence their thinking about future projects. "Since the project started, I've come to the realization that this material is more difficult and more alien than I expected," said a curator of New World art.

Evaluation conducted early in the exhibit development process can have the greatest impact relative to the investment of time, energy, and money. But if research is done after considerable time, thought, and resources have generated clear interpretive concepts and prototypes, visitors' responses can be very specific and fruitful. "If we'd done this research before the installation, we wouldn't have known how visitors responded to the physical part of finding the labels within the overall ambiance of the galleries," said a curator of Asian art.

Given standard exhibit development processes, there are two obvious options. One is to solicit input early, relying on relatively crude mockups of labels and installations and small scale models, rather than more costly full scale prototypes. The other is to involve visitors in the later stages, when exhibits are virtually complete, making it difficult to implement many of their suggestions—especially the most substantive. But perhaps there is another option—one that requires a fundamental shift in the exhibit development paradigm. What if museums developed new ways of presenting information that could be modified at a reasonable cost whenever new information became available or visitor needs dictated? Think how useful this would be in science and technology museums where the facts change far more quickly than the exhibits! Or in history museums where new interpretations lend new meaning to historical artifacts.

Improved interpretation could be built into an ongoing exhibit development process by developing basic exhibit components that anticipate rethinking interpretive messages. "Choice Labels" were developed by curators and educators at the Denver Art Museum to offer visitors opportunities to understand the makers, patrons, and users of objects in the Asian collection. Discreetly mounted to display cases or walls, these two-sided labels can be pulled out of a sleeve by visitors who seek more information than standard labels provide. They display both text and illustrations about individual objects or small groups of objects on two sheets of paper placed back to back. Mounted between a laminated sleeve that is screwed to handles at either end, new copy and illustrations can be replaced for a modest cost.

The Setting

Visitor panels do not require a room specially equipped with microphones, video recording equipment, and a one-way mirror; they can be conducted in any conference or general purpose room at the

museum. Focus groups typically meet off-site in a neutral environment, removing participants from the context of the museum setting. Meeting in the museum allows panelists to move back and forth freely from discussions in the conference room to assignments and observations in the galleries. In addition to convenience, the museum environment may also help panelists feel that they have a stake in the process.

Exhibit team members sit at the back of the room so they are not separated from the moderator and the panel by a wall with a one-way mirror. Staff reactions can be read by the moderator, helping her to know when to probe further, but their presence does not appear to distract or inhibit the panelists in any way. "I wouldn't have felt any more comfortable if they hadn't been there," said one panelist. "In fact, I was glad to know that so many people from the museum were interested, were listening."

The Moderator's Role

The role of the moderator is vital to the success of visitor panels. "I saw myself as a translator," said an educator who served in this capacity. Like an effective conduit, she had to facilitate communication in both directions. To serve staff needs, she met with members of the exhibit team before the panel to learn their questions and concerns. "Although I had little to do with identifying the issues," she explained, "it was my role to make what they wanted come out of the group for them." To do this, she often had to probe deeply, asking panelists to "explain that to me. . ." or seeking clarification by saying, "I'm not sure I understand what you mean by that." She saw her role as helping panelists to communicate with staff "in their own terms so they can follow their thought patterns. It's less of a cued response, which allows panelists to explore an idea and convey it directly to staff."

To elicit the information staff needs, the moderator actually has to know more about the exhibit than she can let on to panelists. A thorough understanding of the team's goals is necessary in order to probe panelists' responses, but down playing her role is an effective way to encourage panelists' involvement. "She mentioned that she wouldn't work on implementing our suggestions," said a panelist, "because her role was just to manage the discussion. She was very much neutral and she said we were not there to agree with one another."

Moderators establish an atmosphere that makes panelists feel comfortable and respected. "I tried to be neutral and warm at the same

time. I saw myself as someone who had no connection whatever with the project, but was very interested in what each panelist had to say. I acted as a gatekeeper, making sure that everybody had a chance, that no one person dominated." A panelist said the moderator was successful in "holding the reins of the session all the time—she was totally in control and this was a major contributing factor to having an objective session." Panelists were grateful for the moderator's role in helping them speak frankly about things the staff might not like hearing. "I liked it when she said, 'If there's something we need to know that we don't necessarily agree with, we still need to hear it, so don't cover up your feelings.'"

Recruiting Panelists

Visitor panelists were recruited through a random phone screening process. A telemarketer called prospective panelists and explained that the Denver Art Museum needed their input to improve labels and other interpretive devices in two new exhibitions. If they agreed to serve after this phone briefing, they were sent additional information to confirm their participation and help them find their way to the museum. Fischer (1996) outlines screening questions and other specific procedures used in conducting visitor panels. Previous studies at the Denver Art Museum revealed the viewing patterns and preferences of *novice visitors* and *advanced amateurs* and the reinstalled galleries were designed to serve both audiences. Panelists were selected to reflect both groups.

During the past three years, the Denver Art Museum has recruited three separate visitor panels. Members of the first group, which met six times over the course of a year, came to identify so strongly with the museum that staff began to question whether their comments and attitudes represented average visitors. One panelist said, "I feel so comfortable at the museum that when I go there I feel like I'm at home." Although staff members love to hear such comments, this level of comfort does not reflect the majority of museum visitors. Eventually, panelists' extraordinary inclinations to understand the museum's goals began to set them apart from casual visitors.

Realizing this, the museum recruited a new panel of visitor panelists. In the second group, one overly talkative individual tended to dominate the discussions. When the panel was reconvened, this individual was simply eliminated from future discussions. This ability to shape a panel

after getting to know the strengths and challenges of its members is a real advantage of visitor panels.

Visitors Speak

“If school was like this, we all would have come out A students! If we’d been given that kind of opportunity to express ourselves, digress, then come up with resolutions or closure . . .” This museum visitor’s comment speaks of a dialogue between the individual and the institution. It is what museums aim for in developing exhibits and programs that provide visitors with opportunities to create their own meaning. However, it wasn’t an exhibit or a public program, but a visitor panel, that created this satisfying learning experience for the visitor.

“Never in my life have I done such a beautiful thing!” This visitor’s comment speaks of those rare, but pivotal, experiences that can happen once and change our lives forever. The precious nature of original works of art or the poignant connections between viewers and objects in museum collections can create numerous opportunities for such powerful experiences, but the potential is far too often unrealized. It wasn’t an encounter with an original work of art that brought this exclamation, but the opportunity to serve on a visitor panel, that opened new doors of enjoyment and appreciation for this visitor.

Visitor panels create a human connection between staff and visitors that extends in both directions, making the panelists’ reactions as interesting to consider as the staff’s responses. The informality of the visitor panel format allows visitors to get to know staff members as people. As they do, their respect and comfort level grows. One panelist mentioned how much she appreciated the fact that staff “projected themselves on my level. They accommodated my vocabulary. They said, ‘Your opinion is important—don’t hold back. Give it to us.’” Not only the moderator, but all staff members who participated contributed to this impression. “The ones that were sitting behind us were nodding, their faces were warm, accommodating. I never felt like they were sitting back there being above us, aloof. I like that about them. . . Some of them would take you aside after we were done. It was neat to shake hands with them. I told them I felt lucky to be involved in this.”

This mutual respect and rapport helped visitor panelists feel safe making suggestions to staff—even in areas where they were not experts. “I felt very comfortable for the simple reason that I am a public

accountant,” said one. “All my life I’ve been looking at financial statements and giving opinions, making suggestions. So I feel like I can contribute by giving an independent opinion at the museum, too.”

The same man expressed profound admiration for staff. “Tell them how much I appreciate devoting their lives to the advancement of the arts, making it their full time job to work in a museum.” While he was sharing information he was also learning about the operations of a museum. Until his participation in the visitor panel, it never occurred to him that a museum would have an education department. “That sparked many ideas and made me more anxious to contribute.” Museums are recognizing that one of the most successful ways of building a community of museum users is to lift the curtain on what goes on behind the scenes. Visitor panels accomplished this by bringing panelists into the process of improving exhibits.

Although the goal of this research was not to build respect for the museum staff or fellow panelists, I know of few museum programs that accomplish this more effectively. Visitor panels provided a means for staff and visitors to get to know one another, understanding different perspectives and breaking down stereotypes in the process. When she talked to her church group about her experience at the museum, one of the panelists said, “When you think of people who have Masters degrees and Ph.D.s, TV and movies portray negative images of those people. They look down their noses at you ‘cause they’re cultured and you’re not. But I’ll tell you, that’s not even the truth. I know because I’ve had the opportunity to participate in some panels at the Art Museum. They’re just like you and me. Working in the hospital, I’ve found that lots of doctors are down-to-earth people, too.” Acting as a museum ambassador, this visitor panelist did double duty when she spread the word within her community.

Staff Respond

Patterson Williams, Dean of Education at the Denver Art Museum, believes that an exhibit is an exchange between the museum and the visitor. “In my mind, there’s only one reason for putting objects on display, as opposed to putting them in a storeroom, and it’s so people can have meaningful experiences with them.” If an effective exhibit involves an exchange, a useful evaluation must also. “Without visitors playing an

active role, there's no one insightful enough to know what they're thinking," says Williams.

Effective visitor studies must keep two audiences in mind. One, of course, is the external audience—the visitors the museum aims to serve through its exhibits and programs. They are the *suppliers* of information. There's another audience that must be considered if a visitor study is to be used to take action—the internal audience. The curators, educators, designers, and administrators who make decisions about exhibits are the *consumers* of information collected in visitor research. At the American Association of Museums' 1995 annual meeting, Harris Shettel chaired a session entitled "The Politics of Evaluation." Panelists explored the reasons why evaluation has not been more widely accepted and applied in museums in spite of 15 years of useful studies. Perhaps the message isn't received by the people who need to hear it. Evaluators can send the message from visitors, but if curators, educators, and designers don't receive it, there will be little impact. To communicate effectively, the message must be sent in a language that is readily understandable to the receiver. Using *evaluspeak* to help museum staff understand visitor behavior is as difficult as using art historical terms to help a novice visitor appreciate a painting.

Exhibit team members heard visitor panelists' comments first-hand and sought ways to incorporate their suggestions. "It's hard to keep trying to refine an exhibit to make it the best it can be," said Williams. "The visitor's voice is the most compelling device for marshaling energy in a museum to make the galleries better for visitors. When you hear it in the visitor's own words, it's not translated by a marketer or even another staff member. It just feels so much more real than any kind of report written on a piece of paper, so there's a far greater impact in terms of changing attitudes."

In their academic training, art historians learn the value of primary sources, which they continue to rely on in studying objects in the museum. They value the opportunity to see for themselves and form their own judgments. The closer they come to the object or first-hand information about it, the more they trust it. A museum educator suggested that the same preference for primary sources may apply to information about museum visitors: "I certainly credit what I hear from visitors more than what I learn from written reports based on other people gathering information." A curator agreed, saying that he didn't want to have the information translated or interpreted by educators or evaluators: "Hearing

people talk and seeing who they are gives me some criteria for assessing their comments.”

Teamwork is an integral part of exhibition development at the Denver Art Museum. It is also key to the success of implementing suggestions made by visitor panelists. The collegial feelings that develop over time between teams of educators and curators provide a foundation that helps them deal with criticism in a constructive way, share responsibility for successes and failures, and come to consensus about how to improve exhibits. “One of the benefits of working as a team is that people had challenged us through the entire process,” explained a museum educator. Our group has great rapport and we were all in this together in terms of making it work.” Visitor panels provided the feedback staff needed to improve exhibits, which was their primary goal. Like many effective processes, they also paid dividends that were valuable in their own right. The goal was exhibit development,” explained a museum educator, “but the bigger agenda is team building. The most positive outcome was that it bonded our team to a common purpose. Spending a couple days together listening to the same input and mulling it over is a wonderful way of getting the whole team focused on the same task.”

When I interviewed Denver Art Museum Director Lewis Sharp, I asked which staff members could benefit from hearing panelists’ comments. He replied that curators, educators, designers, public relations, and development staff should all be involved. “The more people understand the concept, the more the institution can buy in.” However, Sharp was quick to point out that this approach requires experience on the part of staff. “The more insightful and experienced the professional staff, the more useful this type of visitor input can be. It takes a great deal of experience and maturity to take in all of that information, sort it, sift it, and come out with something constructive.”

Meaningful visitor studies are an ongoing process that needs to become a regular part of museum life. Staff can’t interpret visitors’ comments accurately the first time they hear them. Perspective requires reflection and distance. It’s very difficult for team members who have spent months or years developing an exhibit to be objective in evaluating visitors’ comments about it. It’s important for staff members to be aware of the subjectivity in their own interpretation of visitors’ comments. “You always have some selective bias yourself,” said an educator. “Anyone tends to focus on the information that supports how they want things to change or remain the same.”

Learning how to step back from visitors' comments and not take them personally takes practice. When I asked her what she remembered most about the visitor panel discussion, a curatorial assistant recalled the time a woman read a label she'd spent weeks writing and said "Who cares?" Once she got past her personal feelings, she realized the panelist was suggesting that visitors wanted a whole different type of information. This is a good example of "reading through" the obvious (and potentially hurtful) content of visitor comments to try to understand the positive intent. It helps to remember that in critiquing a label, visitor panelists are not criticizing the staff member who wrote it.

Still, it's hard to hear that your work has missed its mark. "I'd be less than honest if I said it wasn't disappointing," confessed an educator. "On the other hand, I know you have to get into it before you can benefit. If you're going to test something, you have to be willing to change it—otherwise you just feel terrible. Make sure you do this early enough in the process so you're not totally invested in something and then learn that it's not working."

Visitor Panels and Other Audience Research

There are many visitor studies options available to museums today, depending upon their goals, the experience of their staff, and the size of their budget. Visitor panels, focus groups, exit interviews, and unobtrusive observations ask different questions and provide different answers. Staff at the Denver Art Museum have had opportunities to participate in a variety of audience research over the years, so when I interviewed curators and educators, I asked them to speak about the strengths and weaknesses of each method.

Although the majority of curators and educators I interviewed found visitor panels to be the most interesting studies conducted for these particular exhibits, they were quick to recognize that all the data must be considered together. "Different types of evaluation have to be played off each other," said a New World curator. "The group discussions have to be played out in the real arena of the galleries. That's the only way for us to know how what people say matches what they do." An Asian curator explained his need for quantitative and qualitative studies, "Without that general perspective of the visitors, I'd have trouble interpreting their specific comments." Visitor panels are not a panacea. They cannot and were not intended to stand alone, but to be considered along with other

instruments for measuring visitor experience. The bigger the issue, the more data is needed. "The larger and more costly the issue I'd want to measure," said Williams, "the more I'd want to combine multiple approaches. With something as simple as making changes in labels, I'd feel comfortable just using a visitor panel." In academic research, the more sources that are consulted, the more conclusive the research. This is equally true of audience research.

Visitor panels cannot reveal important data such as circulation patterns or the length of time spent looking at objects or reading labels, which require larger samples and different research methods. As part of another remedial evaluation of the Denver Art Museum's Asian and New World reinstallations, Loomis (1994) and graduate students at Colorado State University did unobtrusive observations and exit interviews with visitors. They measured the frequency of visitors' use of new exhibit components like the Study Gallery, Seminar Room, reading and video areas, as well as their responses to these areas. Their reports include very specific data about which objects were most and least noticed by visitors and the percentages of visitors using new interpretive devices. When asked about the reports, a curator said "I recall looking at them, but nothing specific comes to mind at the moment." Different people process information in different ways. For some staff members, the findings start to blur after looking at several pages of pie charts, bar graphs, and percentages. Although the reports contain important information, it's hard to pick it out after reaching this stage of information overload. If staff don't grasp the relevance of data, they're not likely to translate it into action.

Conclusion

The visitor panel process may have applications that extend beyond evaluating exhibit interpretation. How might visitor panels inform family programs or school tours, development, marketing, and public relations efforts? When I asked one panelist how he would make infrequent visitors into frequent museum users, he told me how pivotal the experience was for him. "If I hadn't had the chance to participate on this panel, my experience of museums would have stayed minimal. How else you would have gotten me in the first place, I don't know." Who knows? Handing some authority over to visitors by asking what they think may prove to be a good way of involving them in museums.

References

- Fischer, D. (1996). *Visitor panels: A handbook for improving interpretive materials through audience input*. Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum.
- Loomis, R., Birjulin, A., & Mace, B. L. (1994). *Denver Art Museum remedial evaluation series: Asian galleries, Spanish colonial galleries, study gallery*. Unpublished report.