

### Editor's Note

We end the publication of *Visitor Behavior* with a special issue from "Down Under." As this issue demonstrates, Australia has a very active group of professionals. We are pleased to be able to give a forum for a representative sample of this group. Last year, we published a special issue from Germany. It's unfortunate that we cannot provide a similar forum for other countries. Perhaps the Visitor Studies Association's new newsletter will be able to serve this function in the future.

Steve Bitgood, Editor

### Guest Editor's Introduction

Lynda Kelly, Evaluation Coordinator,  
Australian Museum, Sydney

Welcome to this Australian edition of *Visitor Behavior*. Thanks to Steve for giving us this opportunity and for his patience in waiting for us to get our act together! Is it just me or does everyone else think that evaluators must be the busiest people working in museums?

The articles in this edition have been designed to give a snap-shot of the practice in Australia as it stands at the moment. As all articles are necessarily brief, we have included email addresses at the end of each so that those of you who want to can follow up with each author individually.

People working in all areas of museums, both internally and externally, have contributed to this issue under the auspices of the Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group (EVRSIG) of Museums Australia. The aims of the EVRSIG are to act as an advocate for the role of both the visitor and of evaluation within museum practice in Australia, as well as being a professional forum for exchange of ideas and methodologies between practitioners.

You can also visit our website at <http://www.nma.gov.au/AMOL/EvrSig.html>. It is still in the very early development stages and will be continually added to in the months ahead and we'd welcome your feedback. Bookmark it for future visits.

So sit back, open a good bottle of Aussie shiraz, think of sun, surf, sand, blue skies, wide open spaces, a hot, hot Christmas and enjoy this Australian edition of *Visitor Behavior*.

### Evaluation and Visitor Research in Australia: Developments and Trends

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Within six years, the evaluation and visitor research field in Australia has grown exponentially in terms of the number of the projects undertaken, the outcomes for museum programs and the development of professional standards and practice. This brief overview has two aims: to set the context for the practice of evaluation and visitor research in Australia and to identify the indicators that point to an emerging field with important significance for museums in this area of the world.

### Accountability and Recognition

The comparatively recent focus on evaluation and visitor research in Australia is primarily attributable to two factors. On the one hand, the majority of museums in Australia are government funded institutions accountable for the public monies they receive.

This accountability takes two forms. Firstly, museums must indicate that they are reaching substantial proportions of the population through reporting the number of people who visit. In addition, however, evidence of representativeness across all sectors of the local population is also required in line with government policy. For example, in New South Wales, a Charter of Principles of Cultural Diversity was adopted at state government level in 1994. The Charter requires public institutions to ensure that their programs, activities and services are implemented in such a way that maximum participation from all members and sectors of the community is possible.

Compliance is not the only factor that has provided an impetus for the development of this field. Contemporary museological practice worldwide recognises principles of equity and access in relation to collections. The active role of the visitor in the interpretation of material culture is increasingly acknowledged. The visitor is less likely to be perceived as a blank slate upon which the museum message is written. It is now recognised that the visitor comes to the museum with attitudes, ideas, expectations and knowledge. Respecting the role of the visitor as a partner in the joint interpretation of culture frames our practice.

Compliance and recognition of the role of the visitor as a participant in the interpretation of material cultural heritage have combined to highlight the part that visitor evaluation and research can play in identifying existing and potential audiences, their needs and their interests. These factors have

given considerable impetus to the development of the field of evaluation and visitor research in Australia.

### Growth

Two indicators of growth are the amount of resources dedicated to the field and the number of projects resulting from activity in this area. Less than six years ago, the first permanent position for an evaluation and visitor research coordinator was created at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney. This was followed in 1994 with the establishment of similar positions at the Australian Museum (Sydney) and the Museum of Victoria (Melbourne) and a further appointment in 1996 at the Australian War Memorial (Canberra, Australia's capital city).

Though these dedicated positions exist in comparatively few institutions, the lack of a specific officer does not mean that evaluation and visitor research activity is absent. Each year, the Council of Australian Museum Directors Survey (CAMD) undertakes a comprehensive survey of museum activity related to income and expenditure throughout Australia and also more recently, New Zealand. In 1995/6, the twenty institutions participating in the survey reported that a total of 97 visitor research studies, 71 exhibition evaluations and 19 program evaluations had been undertaken.

### Extension, diversification and demand

These factors have made museums more aware of the importance of visitor information as an integral tool for program development. Importantly, front-end evaluation has emerged as a key part of the process in testing the potential attraction and interest of new exhibitions for target audiences. In a time of limited resources, museums are more conscious of the need to invest resources wisely and to ensure that new programs will achieve success with the visiting public.

However, it is also noticeable that all stages of exhibition evaluation are now being implemented including formative and remedial and that evaluation is being applied to new program areas such as communication technologies (CD-ROMs and World Wide Web sites).

On the visitor research side, other changes are evident. It was common, five years ago, for museums to seek information that would identify their audience profile. One of the key developments in the area of visitor research has been the recognition that a museum audience is, in fact, comprised of multiple and diverse audiences. Target marketing to each of these sectors has to take into account of the values, experiences, specific interests and needs of each. Consequently, in recent years, a considerable amount of research has been devoted to discerning the demographic, psychographic and motivational characteristics of multiple audience groups.

Moreover, as museums move beyond recognised existing audiences and grapple with the concept of the total potential audience, activity has been generated to address some of the issues that this extended concept brings. Studies in barrier analysis to identify the reasons for lack of partici-

pation among certain sectors of the population have become more prevalent.

All of this work has foreshadowed the need for complementary types of information and the systems to capture it. Whilst evaluation and visitor research find much of their activity in specific projects, the need to develop on-going systems to track changes in visitor patterns and trends is emerging as a major focus. The establishment of relational databases is providing trend data that can effectively demonstrate key audience participation times, changes in visitor demographics, logs of on-going customer service and visitor satisfaction issues and a range of information on museum visitors profiles to compare with national profiles. The development of databases and systems to track these trends longitudinally has become an important focus.

And, as institutions develop a literature based on their cumulative studies, it is becoming possible to undertake meta-evaluation - the analysis of data across several years of evaluation and visitor research to track trends and answer major questions about audience expectations, interests, values and behaviour.

Within many institutions, evaluation and visitor research are becoming more integral to the general process of exhibition and program development. With this comes the evolution of a habit of critical reflection on practice within the institution as a whole.

### Professionalism

With the growth in the amount of activity and the appointment of dedicated officers within several key institutions, there has been a corresponding growth in professional development. In 1995, a full conference highlighting emergent practice in this field was held in Sydney. Evaluation and Visitor Research in Museums - Towards 2000 was attended by 114 museums professionals from Australia and New Zealand. One of the outcomes of the conference was the expressed interest in developing a professional forum for this field. At the 1995 Museums Australia Conference in Brisbane, a Special Interest Group (EVRSIG) was formed. This group went on to organise full day seminars on evaluation and visitor research as part of the national Museums Australia conferences in 1996 and 1997 and EVRSIG members have provided many of the papers that form this special edition of *Visitor Behavior*.

### Conclusion

If we have achieved much, we still have a considerable way to go. Establishing systems to share information through the Internet, offering assistance and practical help to small museums and galleries through outreach, developing rigorous standards, models of practice and benchmarks are some of the areas identified by the Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group for attention in the foreseeable future. Our future looks busy, active and bright!

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