

## Issues and Methods of Summative Evaluation

The first article that follows is a summary of Hayward and Loomis' (1994) paper entitled, "Looking Back at Summative Evaluation." The next two papers by Serrell and Shettel provide an argument/counter-argument on the "51% Solution" approach. Beverly Serrell's article on the "51% Solution" is essentially a proposal for a type of standardized summative evaluation that sets criteria for determining the success of an exhibition. Harris Shettel provides a critique of the 51% Solution describing some of his concerns in detail.

Both Beverly and Harris hope that these papers will generate some healthy discussion of our evaluation methods. Readers who are interested in contributing to this dialogue are invited to send their comments to *Visitor Behavior*.

### Summary of "Looking Back at Summative Evaluation"

Jeff Hayward & Ross Loomis  
From the 1994 Visitor Studies Conference  
Raleigh, NC

Hayward and Loomis led a discussion at the conference that served to provide a meta-analysis of summative evaluation. The following is a summary of the paper that summarized this discussion. Four issues were discussed:

1. *Why is summative evaluation taking a back seat?* A number of disincentives of summative evaluation were listed:

- attitude that the project is over
- no resources left
- results won't have an impact
- fear of bad news
- threat of criticism
- attitude that it does not have practical application

To counter these points, seven positive benefits of summative evaluation were discussed:

- it offers a chance to learn about visitors
- it's important in assessing the project's goals
- it helps funding agencies demonstrate the educational value of exhibitions
- it can be an important part of the planning cycle
- it is a useful first step in visitor research
- it is the best opportunity to demonstrate learning
- it provides a counterpoint to staff impressions

2. *The debate between summative and remedial evaluation.* The question of whether remedial evaluation is distinct from summative evaluation was discussed, but no resolution was offered. Remedial evaluation was described as: a study that attempts to fix or fine-tune an exhibition; a less

extensive study than summative; and may occur between final construction and a summative study.

Several questions were raised: "Is remedial just a small-scale summative?" "Should remedial be called 'final formative'?" "If remedial is not as extensive or systematic as summative, is the quality of it questionable?" "Is there a danger of remedial becoming a trade-off for summative?"

Some professionals feel that remedial deals with fixing an exhibition, while summative simply tells whether or not an exhibition is effective. Others believe that it is two sides of the same coin.

3. *Generally accepted strategy for summative evaluation.* The authors suggest that the research methods used depend on factors such as exhibition size, content, objectives, and the audience. Exit interviews, which seem to be the most common strategy for summative evaluation, may have some limitations (e.g., some visitors may need time to consolidate and reflect on what they've seen).

Other generally accepted procedures include: the use of large sample sizes, multiple methods (observations, pre- and post-visit interviews), and getting detailed feedback about visitor perceptions.

4. *Generalizability and usefulness of findings.* Although summative studies do not have to be generalizable to be useful, there is often value to others to share the findings.

### The 51% Solution Research Project: A Meta-Analysis of Visitor Time/Use in Museum Exhibitions

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The "51% Solution" is a methodology that combines a systematic, summative evaluation strategy with criteria for assessing and comparing the effectiveness of a broad range of educational exhibitions. Within the context of this study, each of these items has particular meaning:

- "51%" represents a simple majority.
- "Solution" is a metaphor for mixture, as in "dilution," rather than "the one-and-only answer."
- "Systematic" means using the same definitions and techniques in consistent ways in a variety of museum settings so that the data will be comparable.
- "Summative evaluation" means evaluating the whole exhibition (all its parts in context) after the exhibition is open to the public.
- "Strategy" consists of a combination of two techniques — unobtrusive observations of visitor behavior and exit interview/questionnaire with open-ended