

# Chapter 3: Visitor Evaluation from the Director's Viewpoint

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## Introduction

It is a formidable task to try to represent the thoughts and attitudes of a generic "director" since our institutions range so greatly in size and scope. The thoughts I am about to share are subjective ones and are not based on quantitative research of any kind. I have taken the liberty of drawing on the wisdom of Ross Loomis (1987) as expressed in the first chapter of his recent book, Museum Visitor Evaluation. I strongly recommend reading pages 1-13 for a thoughtful reflection on the attitudes of management towards evaluation activities. Almost everyone must deal with a director, manager or administrator of some kind and I should hope that my remarks will be thought-provoking and, in some way, applicable to each of your unique situations. At the very least, I hope to promote greater sympathy for the many pressures facing the typical Museum Director of the 1980's!

I was recently privileged to participate in the Kellogg Museum Professionals at the Smithsonian Program in Washington, D.C. During my residency, the topic of my study proposal was "collection-based learning opportunities for adults in museums." In the course of visiting with museum and education professionals at the Smithsonian and in the Washington, D.C. area, I was greatly encouraged by the growing sense of urgency for visitor satisfaction. A small group of Smithsonian staff members is asking some very simple but critical questions such as: "How are visitors responding to our objects?" and "Why are they drawn to some objects while ignoring others?" Perhaps the most basic and yet most critical question of all is "Who are our visitors?" Recent statistics about the adult population were shared with our group by Dr. and Mrs. Leonard Nadler of George Washington University:

"... by the year 2,000, more than 1/2 of the workforce will consist of women; more people in the workforce will be over 55 than under 55; over 50% of the U.S. population will identify Spanish as a first language."

Since little is known about these populations (over 55 and Spanish-speaking in the U.S.) with respect to their behavior and attitudes toward museums, the importance of visitor studies becomes obvious. I would suggest that museum "people" spend too much time talking to other museum people. We need to talk to our visitors and begin the process of finding out what they are thinking and how they are relating to our institutions.

We cannot assume, therefore, that all directors have a negative attitude towards visitor evaluation. In fact, I believe that the generic director has a healthy interest in and commitment to this area of activity. What I would like to discuss, however, are some of the ongoing obstacles that tend to block the implementation of evaluation activity as well as some of the methods or approaches which may succeed in increasing the level of visitor research activity in your institutions.

## **Obstacles to Visitor Evaluation Programs**

Many specific obstacles may arise to stand in the way of an ongoing program of visitor studies in an institution such as a museum. All of these obstacles can be condensed into three broad categories: (1) the lack of time, (2) the lack of money, and (3) the threatening nature of evaluation.

### **The Funding Factor**

The lack of funding may not be the most difficult obstacle to overcome, but it is often the most convenient excuse for the administrator. In defense of managers, the budget process is a difficult one; the allocation of resources is not cut and dried. Many factors must be considered in allocating those resources fairly and productively throughout an institution, and a continuing "tug of war" exists between a variety of very important functions.

It has often been stated that every museum should have a staff evaluator, at least on a part-time basis. The administrator must ask many other questions, however, in making such a decision. Is an evaluator more important than a development officer, for example? Is a staff position for evaluation more important than an exciting new program? Won't the increase in patrons and benefactors which might result from a development office be more impressive? Won't the increased numbers generated through a new program be more visible? Of course, questions such as these involve long-run vs. short-run

considerations. Is your administrator more interested in long-range planning or immediate results? What is really most important for your institution at this point in time?

The director must also concern himself with aspects of the operating budget which have very little to do with visitors...collections management activities, financial management systems, etc. For governmental museums, is an evaluation program of interest to a city council or county administration? Realistically speaking, how many governmental bodies will be prepared to fully comprehend and appreciate the scope and value of such a program? What are the funding priorities for the current year? It is often necessary for governmental museums to plan accordingly.

What about the board of directors? Will business people view evaluation activity as just another survey that will end up on a shelf somewhere? How will it help them to raise funds? How will it help them to attract new collections? Will it require new office supplies and space? Will it delay already delayed projects further?

Even if a commitment is made to fund an evaluator or a program of evaluation, where will the money come from? A survey on attitudes toward exhibit evaluation by Bitgood and Carnes (1987) showed that nondirectors were more likely to agree that funds should come from the regular facility budget than directors. These statistics are not surprising, since it is the directors who must decide how an already tight operating budget can accommodate a new program or staff member.

At the risk of a negative reaction or an outcry of despair from dedicated evaluation professionals, I would suggest that evaluation may need to "come in through the back door" in most of our institutions. If it gets that far, the supporters of the project need to help their directors answer some of the difficult questions listed above.

To use the Anniston Museum of Natural History as an example, the happy circumstance of a successful collaboration with the Psychology Institute at Jacksonville State University did not occur simply by chance. The project was supported by the administration from its initial stages due to the fact that it coincided with long range goals and objectives which had been previously established by the Board of Directors. In particular, the Museum had actively sought increased collaborative activity with the nearby University as well as increased involvement of Jacksonville State University students in the Museum. With a student body of nearly 8,000, the University represents an

important audience for Museum programs; this audience has long proven to be a difficult one to attract.

Other advantages presented themselves to the Museum as a result of a collaborative association in the area of visitor research. Most importantly, the activity provided members of the Museum staff an opportunity to participate in original research projects; this is an activity that is not always possible in a developing museum with limited staff and resources. In addition, staff members were provided with a rewarding opportunity to publish the results of their findings in major publications. Finally, the Museum itself benefits from the publicity and exposure that results from all of the above. The very fact that the First Annual Visitor Studies Conference was held in Anniston, Alabama, is of great significance to the Anniston Museum of Natural History and provides a level of awareness and prestige in the field that could not easily be obtained otherwise.

There are, of course, many advantages for the University as well. The Anniston Museum of Natural History serves as an "open laboratory," so to speak, for visitor behavior studies. University students are motivated by exciting and different learning opportunities. University professors have been introduced to a whole new audience (i.e. the museum field) to present and expand on their research activities. And all of this for free, you may think...certainly not, since the cost in staff time is great.

## The Time Factor

Time is a precious resource, often wasted. Time is the enemy. Time is the scarcest commodity in a busy organization. Time has been called many things by many people. Time is often the most reliable excuse for not doing something. Most institutions have numerous unfinished projects and not enough people to get them done. We are constantly trying to meet deadlines, launching new and innovative projects, and trying to garner greater publicity and exposure for our museums.

Due to the precious nature of time and the lack thereof, the reaction to evaluation proposals is often negative. According to the survey by Bitgood and Carnes (1987), 44% of nondirectors feel that staff does not have enough time to do evaluation vs. 14% of directors. At the Anniston Museum, even staff members have difficulty arguing the "time excuse." Even with our collaborative arrangement involving students as surveyors, a great deal of staff time is absorbed. The Director is keenly

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aware of the fact that it is often easier for the University professor to schedule a meeting with two curators at once than it is for him to do the same. The allure of a special project of this kind can also create a danger, of sorts, in that routine responsibilities can often be overshadowed. A collaborative project of this kind requires constant monitoring and continuous evaluation of its own.

As regards exhibit evaluation in particular, the pressure of deadlines can often stand in the way of implementing formative evaluation studies. The Director often fears that the evaluation process will further delay the exhibit opening. Very often, the evaluators themselves are guilty of taking too much time to design the study rather than going forward with the project itself.

A 'quick fix' to overcome the time obstacle is obviously accomplished by incorporating visitor studies into established activities rather than approaching it as some new entity of its own. Evaluation needs to be woven into ongoing, existing activities until it becomes an integral component.

One final concern relating to time is the impact on the visitors themselves. Administrators often voice some concern regarding the amount of time that visitor surveys require and whether or not visitors will view this as a negative interruption into their day. Directors need to be reassured that the surveyors are sensitive to this consideration as they approach visitors for assistance.

## **The Threat Factor**

The threatening nature of evaluation may be the smallest obstacle to the implementation of an evaluation program in an institution. This factor should never be overlooked, whether the threat is real or perceived. A certain resistance to change is inherent in most people, particularly in administrators who are used to doing things in long-established ways. Even in the best of situations, directors have many continuous pressures facing them; why should they add to their troubles by finding out their exhibits aren't working! Finally, directors often function as "mothers" and "fathers" too; they aren't going to want to have their staff members demoralized by evaluation either.

The threat of evaluation becomes more real when the terms "success" and "failure" are introduced into the process. Certainly it is more satisfactory for evaluators to discuss "degrees of success" in most cases.

Perhaps a good way to introduce evaluation is with "audience research." Who can argue with the need to better understand the museum's audience? This would seem to be the primary function of the marketing staff if one exists; as an aside, it is interesting that this is not the department from which evaluation activity developed at the Anniston Museum of Natural History. It may be a logical place for the process to begin at other institutions, however.

Of course, the director should be involved as much as practical from the early stages of an evaluation project. It is also very important to involve relevant staff members. It is pointless (except for pure research purposes) to seek information of no interest to the director or senior staff. Evaluators who allow the director to provide input into the formulation of questions, etc. will find that the administration will be less likely to dispute any final results. To use a more general example, the simple request that I become involved in the Visitor Studies Conference has resulted in my reading the Ross Loomis book, Museum Visitor Evaluation. As with many other administrators, I certainly intended to read the book, but other projects stood in the way. Managers are usually problem-oriented, after all, and when reading the book became the solution to a problem (i.e. preparing this paper) it was done. In addition, the process of reading the book helped to increase my own personal commitment to the process of evaluation in my institution.

Finally, evaluators should be willing to let the director think that some of the process was his or her idea. This may be the most severe test of an evaluator's commitment to the field.

Remember that evaluation efforts must permeate the whole institution if they are to become truly successful. Another threat, which is perhaps more serious, is the one which is perceived by other staff members. The involvement and interest of as much of the staff as possible is essential to support a good evaluation program. If the institution lacks a full or part time evaluator and evaluation responsibilities are assigned to existing staff, questions of turf and latent resentment can easily kill the program if they are not effectively overcome. This is best accomplished by good communication and wide involvement.

## Responding To Evaluation Proposals

To paraphrase from a February, 1986, article in Museum News by Mary Ellen Munley (1986), evaluation is like exercise...some people relish it because they know it will have beneficial results; others force

themselves because they believe they should learn to like it; still others avoid it unless they are forced. How can those interested in evaluation foster its growth in institutions where it is not taking place?

First of all, evaluators need not be purists. At the risk of criticism, I am going to suggest that a bad evaluation may, in fact, be better than no evaluation at all. At least the process will have begun and people do have an amazing capacity to learn from their mistakes. In reality, there are lots of good materials and basic examples from which to work. After all, if our basic goal is to get people to respond to visitor needs, we must begin by generating an active interest in the process.

Secondly, evaluators or those interested in the subject must be prepared to work evaluation into the annual cycles of budgeting and long-range planning. This is merely common sense; there are always optimum times to encourage any new activity. An enlightened director will surely be seeking the input of staff in both the budgeting and long-range planning review processes; it is much better to provide input when it is sought rather than at times when other unknown pressures on the director may easily overshadow your requests.

Provide reading material to your administrator in small doses. A manager is heavily bombarded with reading material from many sources and on many subjects. When you do provide reading material, highlight areas which you think may be of particular interest or perhaps consider providing a brief interpretive summary of the material.

If you need an immediate response of some kind, consider sending a memo which includes a recommendation for action of some kind at some time. This will generally "require" a response from the administrator and will surely garner attention. This can be overdone, however, and caution should be exercised in the proliferation of "action" memos.

One final thought in this area involves recognizing the dynamics of the workplace. If you are fortunate enough to work with a director who allows for an atmosphere that fosters creativity and new directions, don't abuse it! Despite the freedom that may exist in the workplace, employees should never lose sight of the fact that the director has goals and needs, too. A valued employee is one who tries to recognize those and provides support in those areas as well as his or her own special interests.

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## Conclusions

The collaborative project in visitor research between the Anniston Museum of Natural History and Jacksonville State University has been a very rewarding one for us and I hope it may serve as a model for other institutions. Whether it be known as evaluation, visitor studies, audience research or by some other term, this activity is critical to the future of our institutions. We need to know what is bringing people to us as well as what is keeping them away. We need to constantly reflect on how much time we spend talking to each other as compared to the time we spend talking to our visitors. We need to reflect on the time we spend trying to impress our sister institutions and colleagues as compared to impressing our average visitors.

Few institutions can afford the luxury of turning their backs on their visitors. For museums, our future is based on our ability to relate our collections to the needs and interests of the public. I would encourage museum directors and senior staff to spend more time themselves observing and talking to visitors.

It has been said that "the future ain't what it used to be" and we better do our best to find out what it will be! Visitor evaluation is an important ingredient to the future success of our institutions in meeting the challenges of the future. I applaud evaluators for what they are doing...take heart, have patience, don't give up...eventually it will become a standard part of our institutions' operations.

## References

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