Institutional Need and Response: Visitor Research at the New York Botanical Garden

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For most of its 100-year history, the New York Botanical Garden has thrived as an exemplary horticulture research institution with an international reputation, located on a 250-acre site in the middle of the Bronx. For the public, it has offered an expansive setting of natural and cultivated plantings, with seasonal flower shows, beautiful conservatory, mature forest, rose garden, and much more. And it was free, except for an admission charge to the conservatory.

In 1989, a new president at the Garden was faced with the increasing costs of operating the scientific and public program aspects of the institution, as well as decreased support (a situation that deteriorated rapidly with a series of substantial cuts in traditionally-reliable operating support from city and state sources over the next few years). The president responded with both short-term actions and long-range planning.

The short-term actions included attractive, but inexpensive, "landmark" constructions on the grounds: open lattice-work units about three times as high as a gazebo, which included orientation signs, maps, and some interpretive panels. These entities gave visual continuity to a very large and multifaceted institution.

The long-range planning process soon turned to the need for visitor research as a way of providing information for audience development.

After two "first attempts" at audience research (a mailed survey to the local community, conducted in-house with a 13% response rate, and focus groups conducted by a commercial research firm), the new Planning Office sought help from consultants experienced in audience research for interpretive environments. People, Places & Design was fortunate to be hired for a single-season study in fall 1991 and then for a second seasonal study in spring 1992.

Like many institutions that begin visitor studies, there was little background for strategic research decisions (reliable visitor counts had been started only a year earlier; there were seven entrance points to the Garden, some staffed and some not staffed; there was considerable speculation by the staff about the number of non-English speaking visitors and their languages, etc.).

There were also new "complications" that suggested fall 1991 would not be comparable to previous fall seasons (a new admission policy required visitors to "pay what you wish but you must pay something"—$3.00 was the suggested admission—and accompanying this new policy there was a fence installed between the parking areas and the grounds; also, there were relatively new special events such as a Pumpkin Parade).

And, there were other "intangibles" likely to affect the research: there was some lingering resentment among visitors about the previous closing of Garden roads to car traffic and about the closing of one entrance gate, and some staff worried that visitors would be offended at the prospect of being interviewed.

Two visitor studies later, the Garden has become much more articulate about its audience. For one example, staff estimates of the proportion of first-time visitors ranged from 25-75%, but the actual proportion was only 14%. Now, meetings of the Visitor Research Committee focus on the need to attract more new visitors.

In a second example, staff perceptions of visitors tended to place a value judgment, depending on their commitment to horticulture (saying things like, "We don't get the 'serious visitor' in the summer and fall" and "Locals view us as a park"—for picnicking, blankets, chairs, frisbees, ball throwing, jogging, roller blading, etc.).

As a consequence of the studies, the Committee has more interest in and respect for casual visitors now that it has discovered that most of them produce as much or more spending-per-person compared with 'serious visitors' (discretionary spending in the store or cafes).

Although the Garden is just beginning to assimilate the results and implications of these systematic visitor studies, it has positioned itself to benefit from this process because it has:

- relied on a multidisciplinary cross-departmental Visitor Research Committee, which had input into the priorities, participated in the data collection, and continues to review and interpret the results;
- been willing to listen and learn, sometimes finding that their own intuitions were reasonably accurate, but sometimes discovering they were far from representing the actual audience;
- tied audience research to audience development, which required the research to serve as a baseline for future estimates of change, while the research also had to be "action oriented" in defining options for expanding attendance. At the same time, it has required audience development to be grounded in the data and conclusions of audience research; and

- continued to think in both the mode of short-term actions as well as that of long-range planning, which serves to highlight some implications for action as well as appreciating input to a new master plan for physical development of the site.

Technical Details of the Research

Even though the focus of this article is on the process of an institution's need for and response to visitor studies, some basic facts about the studies themselves include the following:

- Primary research method: exit interviews with randomly-selected visitor groups (one person interviewed per group); samples of 400 visitor groups in each of two seasons; cooperation rate was about 90% of visitors approached.
- Additional research methods: a survey of languages spoken by visitors, interviews at entrance gates, interviews at the conservatory.
- Demographics included: residence, group composition, age, gender, education, income, racial/ethnic identification, membership.
- Behavioral measures included: prior visits to the Garden, entrance and exit points used, duration of visit, awareness of cafe/store and spending at those visitor services, features of the Garden visited on the survey date, mode of transportation to the Garden.
- Psychographics included: reasons for visiting, awareness of publicity about the Garden, reactions to the fees, satisfaction with the visit, disappointments with the visit, future interests, whether and how visitors pursue special interests in horticulture through other activities.

Public Perceptions and Use of Lincoln Park in Chicago

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Lincoln Park is a large multi-use park on Chicago's lakefront used by millions of people. It is an impressive landscape of natural features such as grassy fields, trees, beaches, and ponds. It also has numerous facilities including a zoo, a conservatory, a golf course, tennis courts, softball fields, and picnic areas.

In the process of developing a master plan for the park, the Chicago Park District and the Recreation and Leisure Task Force requested an extensive investigation into the public's usage patterns and perceptions of Lincoln Park. Some of the questions for the study were: Who uses the park and who doesn't? What are the most common activities? What are the most salient issues in the public's perceptions of the park? What characteristics of park users are important to consider when planning for a diverse urban population?

In a multi-method research project conducted during the summer and fall of 1990 (final report 1991), three different methods to gather information pertinent to these questions were used:

1. Behavioral mapping. Observers recorded the number of people in different areas of the park at different times, and what they were doing (i.e., bicycling, jogging, playing frisbee, playing softball, reading, etc.). These observations of nearly 55,000 summer visitors served to document the "what," "where," and "when" of user behavior during the primary season of park use.

2. Interviews with people in the park. Four hundred summer park users were interviewed to find out who they were and what they thought about the park.

3. Telephone survey. Approximately 1000 Chicago households were called in the fall of 1990. Information was collected about park use in all four seasons, about people who don't use the park and why, and reactions to some potential policy initiatives prepared by the Task Force.

Highlights of Findings

The park is a metropolitan attraction. Visitors come from all over the city as well as from the suburbs. Roughly 70% of members of Chicago households had visited the park within the previous two years. The most frequent users are the local residents from adjacent neighborhoods. These residents are more likely than those who live farther away to use the park in seasons other than summer.