

Eight Common Misconceptions of Evaluation

From: C. G. Screven (1990). Uses of Evaluation Before, During and After Exhibit Design. *ILVS Review*, 1(2), 36-66.

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Below is a summary of part of an excellent article on visitor evaluation in museums and other exhibition facilities. Chan Screven identified misconceptions commonly held by professionals in exhibition centers. As with any such summary, reading this is no substitute for studying the original source.

Misconception #1. "The needs and expectations of visitors uncovered by front-end evaluation encourages superficial treatment of topics and panders to visitor interests rather than an expert's view of the topic." This is just not so. The museum staff or other experts are still the ultimate resource for exhibit messages and priorities. Front-end evaluation may allow the staff to modify the topic treatment to provide a hook and bridge for visitors to become involved in the exhibit for other reasons. To expose visitors to an experience that peaks their interest is not to pander them, but moreover, in public facilities, may establish a pride of ownership that their views are utilized to further the exhibit experience for others.

Misconception #2. "Problems uncovered by handmade mockups for teaching and motivational impact are unlikely to work at the occupancy stage because the testing conditions are not the same." As long as the functional characteristics of the mockups remain intact the value of teaching and motivational impact are unchanged. Any changes to content in the post-occupancy state will not change the process by which we initially hoped to gain holding power. Granted testing conditions will not be identical, but differences may be so minimal that outcomes may still be reasonably predicted.

Misconception #3. "Greater visitor attention and interest often seen with handmade mockups is the result of their novelty." Indeed, the novelty of the mockup may be an attraction, but more significant are the hook questions, interesting content, manipulability, challenge, etc. that the mockups may contain. These may be the sustaining factor for visitor interest and involvement. Visitors continued attention probably reflects reading or interaction with the mockups and should apply after installation once post-occupancy distractions are corrected.

Misconception #4. "Mockup materials used in formative and remedial evaluations require weeks of preparation before testing with visitors."

If true, these materials would be too expensive to meet both budget and time constraints. The staff need not spend too much time preparing mockups for testing. Hand drawn or computer generated mockups are quick and cost effective and will provide sufficient concepts for early testing. Les-

sons learned with these simple versions can then be easily incorporated into the larger display provided earlier tested materials have not changed.

Misconception #5. "Evaluating the motivational effectiveness of mockups is not cost effective during design stages." Just the opposite. Unobtrusive observation of low cost mockups holding power during the design phase improves the chances of their behavioral effectiveness when installed as a permanent fixture. Installing a finished product without formative evaluation of its attracting/holding power is not the cost-effective method.

Misconception #6. "Visitor testing to see if mockups work is a form of pilot research requiring control groups, statistical analysis, and other scientific procedures." Visitor testing with formative evaluation or remedial evaluation are in fact none of the above. Both provide useful information about exhibit features and explain why the design does or doesn't work. Both are tools for planning or improving exhibit design. Often these studies are done by sources outside the museum, mainly universities, and do not require more than 10-15% of total exhibit budgets if paid for by the museum. Bottom line - if you want to create exhibits that work, these evaluations should be included in the budgets at ground level.

Misconception #7. "Making, evaluating, and re-designing mockups is something you undertake until you find something that works." You cannot blindly approach mockup design. This is the thought process that leads to misconception #5 about cost effectiveness. Clearly, to go trial and error until you find what works will deplete your budget. Designing these components requires a "theory" of what might be expected in the given exhibit setting. Museum designers must draw on their experience and outside sources to grasp this starting point and develop a plan. Evaluation is a necessary component of this plan and must be included.

Misconception #8. "Evaluation must be conducted by professional evaluators and psychologists." This need is directly related to why the evaluation is being conducted and available resources within the institution. Evaluations should not be blindly assigned to individuals unfamiliar with behavior or evaluation principles, but can be successfully conducted by institution staffs after only minor instruction. As the focus on visitor-oriented exhibit design increases, museum staff experience should increase with it. Outside professional personnel may only be required when the scope of the evaluation is outside the expertise of the museum staff.