

EVALUATION DURING THE PLANNING STAGE: TWO STUDIES OF NATIVE AMERICAN EXHIBITIONS

The two studies described on the next three pages are examples of front-end evaluation, or evaluation during the planning stage of a project. While both deal with the subject of Native Americans, one is focused on the Plains Indians and the other, Southeastern Indians. The study by Bitgood & Benefield was able to incorporate some of the ideas from the previously completed Thompson study. As is always the case, previous literature provided a useful foundation for evaluation.

FRONT-END ANALYSIS OF THE PLAINS INDIAN EXHIBIT AREA OF THE MILWAUKEE PUBLIC MUSEUM

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Introduction

A front-end evaluation was conducted on the Plains Indian Exhibit Area at the Milwaukee Public Museum. There are plans to renovate this exhibit area in the next couple of years and information from this evaluation will be used to plan changes in exhibits.

In the current study, front-end evaluation was used: (1) to assess visitor knowledge of concepts which the curatorial staff considered to be of primary importance; (2) to understand the role of the existing exhibits in fostering this knowledge; and (3) to identify other unforeseen successes or shortcomings of the exhibits.

Initial observation showed very few visitors spending the time necessary to read labels or closely examine artifacts. With the exception of the attractive bison hunt diorama, most exhibits received only a casual glance as visitors strolled past. Most conversations among visitors dealt with concrete objects (e.g., "Look at that gun.") rather than broad conceptual information being acquired.

Method

Interviews with 40 visitor groups were conducted at the current Plains Indian Exhibit Area using the following four

topic areas:

Topic 1. How do you think the Indians were affected by coming into contact with white Europeans? (If further prompting was needed, they were asked whether it helped or harmed the Indians' culture, or whether it really had any immediate effect at all.) If they answered that it had either a positive or negative effect, they were asked: Can you give me any specific examples of this?

Topic 2. How do you think Indians live today? Do they remain separated from other Americans, or are they reasonably well-assimilated by this time? Do they consider themselves to be different than other Americans? Do they value their heritage more than other Americans?

Topic 3. Have any of these exhibits raised questions in your mind concerning objects or information which they presented, which they didn't answer?

Topic 4. Do you have any other comments or suggestions concerning these exhibits?

Results

"How were Indians affected by contact with whites?"

The majority (25 of 40) focused on negative consequences of how Indians were affected by contact with whites. Only 5 emphasized positive outcomes. Eight suggested that there were both good and bad aspects, while 2 simply stated that they didn't know.

When asked for specific examples of the ways in which Indians were affected, most replied that the whites took Indian land (9 responses) and brought diseases for which they had no immunity (9 responses). Other common answers were the importation of more deadly weapons (4) and alcohol (3) and the decimation of the great herds of buffalo (1). Only one person could give an example of a positive effect, noting that some of the beautiful handiwork of the Indians was strongly influenced by European contact. Eleven were unable to give any specific examples of how Indians were affected.

"How do you think Indians live today?"

Responses to this question were also one-sided, as 23 of 40 respondents suggested that Indians are not assimilated into modern society, and are living on reservations instead. Only 4 felt that they are well-assimilated, while 2 saw them as having remained relatively separate until this time, but increasingly mingling with those of non-Indian backgrounds. Another 10 believed that while some of them are blended in with other Americans, some choose to remain on reservations.

Most visitors were unsure how modern Indians compare themselves to other Americans, and how much they value their heritage. Indian heritage was a sensitive, much discussed topic at the time these interviews were taking

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place, as tribes in northern Wisconsin were actively attempting to practice treaty-guaranteed spear-fishing, while a number of whites were as actively seeking to put an end to the practice. Many of those interviewed made reference to the controversy, some suggesting that the Indians were not as interested in catching fish as in showing that they were different than other U. S. citizens.

"Did the exhibits raise any questions which they didn't answer?"

Most respondents couldn't think of any. Four, however, requested additional information on the way in which Indians live today, while two asked for more information on beadwork. Others suggested the inclusion of more discussion of ceremonial rituals, and more detailed explanation of every object in each display case.

"Do you have any other comments or suggestions?"

This question brought mostly praise from visitors for the beauty, realism, and informativeness of exhibits. In fact, a number of respondents were concerned that future changes might hurt exhibits, since they felt the displays were adequate in their current state. One critical comment did come from an individual who found the display of a shirt taken from an Indian killed in battle to be in poor taste.

Discussion

The most immediately obvious finding of this study was that very few visitors to the Plains area spend enough time examining exhibits and reading labels for their experience to appear to be even moderately educational. It seems likely that this is due in part to the overall size of the Museum, the consistent quality of the exhibits throughout the facility, and the large number of Indian displays on the second floor. That is, while none of the Plains Indian exhibits have glaring inadequacies, to the casual visitor they are merely "more of the same."

PLANNING FOR A NEW SOUTHEASTERN NATIVE AMERICAN MUSEUM

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This study was conducted as part of the planning for a proposed museum on The Southeastern Native Americans. For purposes of this project, the following information was

considered important:

- Determination of what captures visitor interest at other museums with Native American exhibitions.
- An analysis of the general public's knowledge, interests, and misconceptions about Native Americans, particularly those from the Southeast U. S.
- An assessment of Native American exhibition facilities in the surrounding area of the proposed museum.
- An analysis of the potential audience for the museum.

Method

Survey of other Native American exhibits. Phone calls to several museums in the Southeast suggested several topics that visitors find particularly interesting. Suggested topics were used as the basis of an interest survey described below.

Public's knowledge, interests, and misconceptions. Two questionnaires were used in this study. One questionnaire, a general survey requiring about 10 minutes to complete, attempted to tap the respondents' current knowledge, interests, and possible misconceptions about Native Americans of the Southeast U. S. A second questionnaire that required only 2-4 minutes to complete was administered to early-arriving patrons of a high stakes Native American Bingo hall. Since the proposed museum would be adjoining a bingo hall, the purpose of the second questionnaire was to determine the probability that bingo players would be attracted to the museum.

An assessment of area exhibitions on Native Americans. Visitor facilities containing Native American exhibits in the surrounding area were visited to determine whether the proposed museum would complement or overlap the storyline of these other facilities.

An analysis of the potential audience. It was assumed that the proposed museum would have three major audiences: the general museum-visiting public, school groups, and early-arriving bingo players. Each of these audiences were analyzed in terms of information that could be obtained from various sources.

Results

Phone interviews with other facilities. Interviews with Southeastern Native American interpretive specialists in Alabama and Georgia suggested that visitors are interested in a number of topics including Indian burials, arts and crafts, unusual facts of daily life, how Indians live today, and the everyday life of Indians in the past.

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