

## UTILIZING VISITOR SURVEYS TO IMPROVE MARKETING

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Most museums spend money on marketing, and most would like to improve the effectiveness of their marketing dollars. Accomplishing this can present a challenge, particularly for institutions serving complex markets. One way to approach the problem is through the use of visitor surveys.

The Iron Range Interpretive Center, a museum of mining history and ethnic heritage in Chisholm, Minnesota, conducted intercept surveys during July and August, 1986, to learn more about its visitors. Specifically, the Center sought information on:

- where the visitors were from,
- how they learned of the museum,
- when the decision to visit the museum was made, and
- certain details regarding the visit.

The survey identified three categories of visitors: local residents (defined as residents of the specific Iron Range communities), out-of-area day visitors, and overnight visitors. Local residents represented the smallest market segment, and overnight visitors to the area the largest. Other findings:

- an absolute majority had learned of the museum by word of mouth, chiefly from friends and relatives living on the Iron Range,
- most of the visitors had been aware of the museum for many years, but were not aware of specific programs and events,
- visits were planned well in advance by non-residents, geared to specific events at the facility,
- many overnight visitors attended the museum with local residents whom they were visiting, and
- repeat visitation to the area was fairly high.

Based on these findings, the Center made some changes in its marketing program. Among other actions, it:

- placed more emphasis on specific events and programs, and less on general awareness,
- increased local advertising, as a catalyst for tourist visitation,
- increased the lead time of specific event promotion, and
- shifted dollar allocations among media to respond more efficiently to their markets.

This applied visitor research was successful and useful for several reasons. First, the research project was focused on a relatively small area of concern. Second, the types of information sought were carefully considered and the questionnaire designed to provide definitive answers to the questions posed. Third, action based on the findings was expected, and the research was intended to provide the basis for specific decisions concerning the marketing program. Visitor surveys are not conducted at the Center on a regular basis. □

## MULTIPHASED ASSESSMENT OF VISITOR CENTER IMPACT

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The visitor center, Old Woman Creek National Estuarine Research Reserve on Lake Erie, near Huron, Ohio, the first such establishment within the Reserve System, serves as a model for other reserves that are planning to develop education programs. Research supported by NOAA, U. S. Department of Commerce, sought to determine the effectiveness of several aspects of the visitor center for providing public information about the value of estuaries.

Specifically, this study sought to answer four research questions: (1) Do knowledge and attitudes of adults change with the visit? (2) What factors contribute to differing visitor experiences? (3) How do types of exhibits, readability, and placement relate to knowledge changes? (4) Can a computer serve as a testing device in a visitor center?

### Methodology

Knowledge and attitudes were assessed by means of a multiple choice test administered in the library of the center, either by a microcomputer or paper and pencil. Knowledge items were related specifically to the content of the displays in the center, with questions representing the different display types present (hands-on, text with pictures, text with subheadings, three-dimensional, or only pictures) and testing of information identified as most important by estuary staff. Attitudes related to the importance of the estuary and to means of protecting it, as well as willingness to become involved in protection. Demographic information sought included reasons for visiting, number of visits, home city, and socioeconomic data.

In addition to the testing strategy, other forms of assessment were used: unobtrusive observation of visitors' activities and time at displays, readability

[cont'd on next page]