

EVALUATION OF AN OUTDOOR HISTORY MUSEUM

Hayward, D. G., Larkin, J.W. (1983). Evaluating Visitor Experiences and Exhibit Effectiveness at Old Sturbridge Village. Museum Studies Journal, 1/2: 42-51.

In this study Hayward and Larkin used a pretest vs. post-test comparison of visitor perceptions of a renovated historical house in Old Sturbridge Village, an outdoor history museum in Massachusetts.

Evaluation was divided into five major areas: (1) visitor preferences; (2) ratings of exhibit quality; (3) visitor reports of time in the house; (4) learning (exhibit themes mentioned by visitors); and (5) sense of community (where the man and woman of the house would go during their normal routines).

Preferences. Before changes 26 % thought the house was better or equal to other residences; after changes, 49 % thought it was better or equal.

Exhibit quality. Ratings of exhibit quality did not change significantly as a result of the renovation.

Time. Self-estimates of time decreased from an average of 8.8 to 6.4 minutes after changes.

Learning. Before changes only three themes were cited by 5 % or more of the visitors: furniture; cooking; and architecture. After the changes five themes were mentioned: furniture; cooking; architecture; family life; and work.

Sense of the community. Before changes in the house there was an average of 1.49 places named for the man and 1.73 for the woman. After the changes there was an average of 3.38 for the man and 3.20 for the woman.

This study shows the importance of using several criteria when evaluating exhibitions. Although the visitors' ratings of quality of the exhibit did not change as a result of the renovation, other measures (preferences, learning, and sense of the community) suggested a significant improvement in visitors' reactions.

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HANDS-ON EXHIBIT EVALUATION

Koran, J. J.; Koran, M.L.; Longino, S.J. (1986). The Relationship of Age, Sex, Attention, and Holding Power with Two Types of Science Exhibits. Curator, 29/3: 227-235.

Although much attention has been given in the past to the design of interactive museum exhibits, questions still remain as to whether or not such exhibits actually increase the educational value of a facility. Koran, et al, set out to address this issue by studying whether hands-on exhibits do, in fact, attract more visitors and keep their attention for longer periods of time, and whether a specific age group or sex is more attracted to them.

Data collected unobtrusively during studies involving seashell displays at the Florida State Museum led to the following observations:

1. A greater number of visitors was attracted to a display when touching was allowed, and in fact, many returned to the display several times during their visit.

2. Visitors spent a greater amount of time at hands-on displays. Females, however, generally stayed longer than males.

3. The percentage of visitors who actually manipulated interactive exhibits and the amount of time they spent examining them were inversely related to age.

EXHIBIT CATEGORIES

Harris Shettel (1973). Exhibits: Art Form or Educational Medium? Museum News, 52:9, 32-41.

Shettel suggests that exhibits can be classified into three major categories. These categories are not mutually exclusive.

1. Intrinsically interesting exhibits. Such exhibits include the Hope Diamond and moon rocks.
2. Exhibits with an aesthetic appeal. Objects of art, photographs, and mineral collections often have this type of appeal.
3. Exhibits with an educational role. These exhibits "tell a story, explain a process, define a scientific principle, etc."

This article concentrates on the educational function of exhibits. He argues that "exhibit effectiveness is conceptualized as a measurable change in viewer behavior produced by the exhibit and consistent with the stated aims or objectives of the exhibit."