

# Initiating a Do-It-Yourself Evaluation Model at the Canadian Museum of Civilization

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The Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation consists of two major national museums—the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), which combines national museums of history, ethnology, archaeology, folk culture, a postal museum, and a children's museum, all under one roof—and the Canadian War Museum (CWM), housed in a separate facility across the river that forms the boundary between the provinces of Quebec and Ontario.

Together, the two museums include two large public buildings (one very old, one very new), two large curatorial buildings, four additional off-site storage facilities (rented), five boutiques, two restaurants and a healthy catering business, a year-round, full-time professional theater company, the world's first combined OMNIMAX/IMAX theater, and approximately 57,000 square feet of empty exhibition space that the Corporation is only now assembling the funds to complete. There are approximately 650 staff in high season, of whom 200 are part-time. Of the 450 full-time staff, about 10% are at CWM, and the remainder are at CMC.

CMC alone attracts more than a million visitors a year—a rate that is still growing after four years of operation. Visitors come from all over the world, and recent surveys indicated that a significant portion of visitors would like to have services provided in Spanish, as well as in the present French and English. Both museums attract a very large number of school children, for whom admission is free. In fact, CMC has had more than 100 busloads in a single day, though in May and June, 70 or 80 is more typical.

Given the fact that much of the exhibition space was, from its opening in 1989, incomplete, the staff of CMC has maintained an extremely heavy program of changing exhibitions to continue to attract the public. Indeed, it has opened a new temporary exhibition every two weeks, on average, during this period. This has been a very significant area of endeavor, both in terms of the dollar costs involved, and in the wear and tear on staff struggling to maintain such a frenetic pace.

In the area of evaluation and visitor studies, the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation has very limited resources—a single evaluation professional (who is also responsible for internal audits), with no support staff, and a non-salary budget for evaluation of approximately \$80,000 per annum. This may sound like a significant amount, but it seems less impressive if one considers that a single major study can cost \$50,000 to \$60,000! It pales, as well, when the size, diversity, and requirements of the Corporation are considered. In the first two years of the Corporation's existence, the demand for auditing was such that no evaluation of any kind was carried out, though the Corporation's marketing officer did carry out two major exit surveys which examined visitor demographics and use of various services.

It was the growing realization of a need to evaluate the exhibitions and permanent galleries, fueled by the pressures of reduced budgets, that made evaluation come of age in the Corporation in fiscal year 1991-92. This is not to say that the staff had been disinterested in evaluation—it was rather that there had been no real corporate support for it.

### CMC's Approach to Evaluation

The Corporation's primary consideration was how to actually do evaluation, since it (a) had a lot of things it could evaluate; (b) hadn't the resources to contract out many evaluations, but (c) did have a lot of in-house research expertise and interest in evaluation, plus an evaluation professional new to the Corporation and eager to help.

The Corporation opted to classify its evaluations into essentially two types—(1) evaluations which are contracted out, and (2) evaluations done by its own staff ("do-it-yourself" evaluations). The priority, by far, is on the second. The contracting out of major projects is reserved for those cases where there isn't the staff time or in-house expertise, or where the study demands a level of independence and objectivity that overrides other considerations. Needless to say, the Corporation doesn't do many of these, typically one or two a year, usually consisting of an evaluation, and perhaps the planning phase of another one.

Instead, it relies on a program of what might best be termed "do-it-yourself" evaluations. These are evaluations where the inspiration, leadership and most of the hard work is done by a team of staff members—usually multi-disciplinary. There is limited technical and financial support from the Corporation's one evaluation professional, and that support is reserved for the stages of the evaluation such as design and data analysis where it is most cost-effective. It is a simple, practical and inexpensive alternative to contracted evaluation studies—though one that is both credible and useful.

## Implementation of “Do-It-Yourself” Evaluation

We conducted a do-it-yourself evaluation in two stages—a planning stage and an implementation stage. In the planning stage, we developed a model which provides for evaluation at five stages in the life-cycle of an exhibition, though the same approach can be applied to an evaluation of permanent galleries. The questions evaluation can help answer differ from stage to stage, as do the tools used to acquire the information to answer those questions. We first thought of developing several different models, one for each major type of exhibition. However, we found, in practice, that there was such variety in our exhibitions that this idea just wasn't very practical. Accordingly, we decided to go with a single general model.

There were four components to evaluation at CMC:

1. a description of the different stages of an exhibitions. Included for each stage was a set of evaluation tools and techniques that might be used, along with examples of how they would be used;
2. a two day training or facilitation session on evaluation techniques;
3. on-going support for several groups learning how to conduct evaluations; and
4. an analysis of how such learning might become a continuing part of the Museum.

### Exhibition Planning Model and Associated Tools

We saw five stages in the exhibition development process at which external or visitor evaluation could be useful:

1. audience research, where the purpose is to discover general attitudes, desires, behavior patterns, and other suggestions of the visiting and non-visiting public;
2. conceptual planning of a specific exhibition, to discover general reactions to the purpose, themes, story-lines, artifacts, etc. proposed in that exhibition;
3. pilot testing, where the purpose is to discover visitors' reaction to the overall exhibition experience in a prototype setting;
4. visitor reaction during the exhibition, to discover visitor reaction to any aspect of an exhibition; and
5. visitor reaction and “change” after an exhibition (i.e. any information learned, attitudes changes, etc.).

For each of these five stages, we customized a set of evaluation tools, providing examples of how each tool might be applied. For example, in the audience research stage we talked about visitor and non-visitor surveys, surveys of member/volunteers, focus group sessions, in depth interviews, and longitudinal studies—in each instance giving sample questions, and considerations of the administration toward the instrument and the analysis of data collected by the instrument.

### **Two-Day Facilitation**

During the first day, we gave an introduction to the purpose and steps involved in an evaluation. We talked about the design of an evaluation, covering topics such as purposes, data collection, analysis, and write-up. We also gave brief introductions to several evaluation tools, including focus groups, surveys, and in-depth interviews.

In the second day, the participants were divided into four groups and given the task of designing an evaluation. These groups had been organized before the session, and were selected because of a common interest in a particular stage of the evaluation process. The teams typically were composed of representatives of the design, curatorial, and program branches of the Museum.

### **Ongoing Support to the Pilot Studies**

Subsequent to the two day session, and covering a period of six months, we gave support, wherever needed, to the pilot groups. This support was designed to ensure that the conducting of the evaluations was not hampered unnecessarily by the participants' lack of experience with the tools and techniques. Basically, what we wanted to do was ensure that each group and each participant was able to understand and experience, as fully as possible, the potential of evaluation to answer their questions. We gave help, for example, in the design stage (e.g. questionnaire design, statistical sampling); in the implementation stage (e.g. data collection, data entry, and analysis); and in the reporting stage (for example, by having each group use a common template for evaluation reporting).

### **Organizational Change, and Creating a Learning Organization**

We wanted this exercise to be more than just an interesting educational opportunity—we wanted people to not only learn how to do evaluation, but also to use evaluations to improve the design and implementation of exhibitions. Further, we wanted evaluation to be an integral part of the organizational culture of the Museum.

Accordingly, we were careful to ensure that a variety of barriers to evaluation were overcome. For example, before the assignment started, we ensured that there was visible support from the Executive Director and the Board. The Executive Director opened the two day training session, and the results of the evaluations were reported to the Board, through its Audit and Evaluation Committee (who pronounced themselves delighted with the experiment and its results). We made sure that there were successful evaluations with minimum effort, by ensuring there was the appropriate amount of technical and administrative support to the groups, and we also made sure that we communicated our successes to all the staff in the Museum.

The barriers to implementation required explicit analysis and action. In our workshop, we not only identified those barriers, but we also made sure that solutions to each barrier were addressed to the extent possible.

## The Results of The Project

Looking back at the project from the perspective of a single year, it is clear that we have obviously lit a fire that is burning brightly. Since completion of the pilot projects, another 15 have been completed in a variety of divisions—a very promising indication of continuing interest. Not all of these do-it-yourself evaluations have been conducted in exhibitions or galleries. The Hosting and Protection Division, for instance, has conducted a major evaluation of its hosting program. The Public Programmes Division has evaluated its “cultural excursions” programme, and the Children’s Museum has evaluated its children’s advisory committee.

Second, and far more important to the development of the management culture of the Corporation, management has confirmed its commitment to building evaluation into the planning and management process, especially with respect to exhibitions, which are our single largest program element. For example, it is the Corporation’s intention to move a significant portion of the collection into areas where it can be examined by the public—as open storage or study collections. Senior management, in approving construction of the first module of such storage, required that an evaluation be conducted on its completion, before construction of other modules would be considered.

Third, we have had a lot of interest from other museums, particularly in our prototype handbook, developed originally to accompany the two-day workshop, which we are considering turning into a commercial publication. We have distributed more than 400 copies of our evaluations, and one—*The Evaluation of the Live Interpretation Programme*—is being reprinted by American Association of Museums. We co-sponsored a one-day seminar in evaluation at the National Gallery in April, that attracted 40 participants from our Corporation alone! Our approach to evaluation is being adopted by another major Canadian museum, as well as by a major government department in one of the western provinces.

But, by far the most heartening result is that management, throughout the Corporation, is actually using the results of evaluation. Examples are:

- the design of Phase II of the Children’s Museums and the History Hall;
  - interactive components in archaeological and folk culture exhibitions;
  - signage throughout CMC;
  - the selection of exhibitions;
  - continuation and change in the live interpretation program;
  - the decision to expand the cultural excursions program;
- and more and more divisions are willing to “test the water.”

It has not been entirely a bed of roses. It has become clear that the input of a professional evaluator is critical at a few points. These are:

- the delineation of the evaluation objectives;
- the selection of appropriate methodologies (and emphasizing the need to secure multiple lines of evidence);
- the development of instruments; and
- the inputting of data and its analysis.

Much can be done by line staff, and, as they become more experienced in evaluation, they can do more and more by themselves. However, the use of a professional evaluator does much to prevent wasted time and effort, and, perhaps more importantly, adds the degree of independence and objectivity (particularly in terms of data analysis and interpretation) necessary to render the study credible.

Some of the studies have been very good, others comparatively weak, but each has been a learning experience that has resulted in the next study being that much improved. In a learning organization, this counts for much.

We have trained a cadre of our uniformed hosts/hostesses in administering standardized surveys. These enthusiastic staff (of all ages) have now become the more severe critics of the instruments developed by their colleagues! We are instituting a change in procedure requiring their involvement in the development of instruments—a tangible indication of the continuing development of our approach.

### **What Has Made Evaluation Work for Us?**

We conclude that a few prerequisites are required:

- a commitment by management;
- an interest on the part of staff, both to try something new and different, and to do it in multi-disciplinary teams;
- a modicum of technical support, targeted at the most critical points in the evaluation process; and
- a very limited amount of resources (staff time and/or money).

It is difficult to prioritize among these prerequisites, but our feeling is that, if they are not present, evaluation will either not take place or, if it does, its products may not be used.