Looking Back at Front-End Studies

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"Front-end study" has become a popular phrase in visitor research. In only a few years, it has become an accepted term among museum professionals and is increasingly common as a type of visitor research. But what is it? Is there agreement about what constitutes a front-end study? ... about *when* it should be conducted?... about what makes for a *good* front-end study?

The guiding idea for this type of visitor study—an analysis of the audience and their perceptions in order to inform the major conceptual decisions in exhibit development— is a good idea, but there has been very little discussion about the strengths and limitations of this type of research. Therefore, the purpose of this session at the Visitor Studies Conference was to present a meta-analysis of the concept of front-end studies—reviewing its goals, approaches, and relationships to planning. The session was organized into four parts of analysis:

- The term itself ("front-end" studies);
- Its relationship to an exhibit development process;
- Quality of the research;
- Impacts and applications.

For each of these topics, one of the co-chairs summarized our perceptions of the issues and then opened the discussion to the audience for reactions, comments, and other opinions.

The Term Itself: "Front-end"

The co-chairs pointed out some of the difficulties involved with the term "front-end"— such as the ambiguous connection with marketing, the jokes about front-end analysis being done by auto mechanics, and the variety of terms including front-end *analysis*, front-end *evaluation*, or front-end *study*. For some, the term *analysis* is used when non-data based reviews are made during the exhibit or program planning stage. When empirical data are

collected with surveys, interviews, etc., the term *evaluation* or *study* is preferred. There are clearly some positive features of the term, including the implication that some type of visitor research should be done *early* in a planning process, and that the term is an imaginative one rather than technical jargon.

Audience discussion revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the term, but a recognition that common usage will dictate that we continue to use it. For example, the statement was made that "It's an unfortunate choice of terms, but what it represents is fortunate and important: that 'front-end' *work* is valuable." Among the criticisms were the difficulties with implying a fixed point in a planning process, the idea that all terms have value-laden connotations, and awkward international translations of the term. Several people thought that the term "planning study" would be more appropriate than "front-end study," but it wouldn't have the same appeal to exhibit developers and designers. One of the co-chairs uses the term "concept planning study" and there was some favorable reaction to that.

Relationship to Exhibit Development

The co-chairs' review continued with an analysis of the timing, objectives, and scope of "front-end" studies.

Timing

The acceptance of front-end studies has reversed a conventional problem in planning: decision-makers have high interest in information in the early stages of planning and tend to have lower interest in information at the conclusion of a project. Researchers (and especially "evaluators") have tended to focus on the conclusion or end point of a planning process, with less interest or confidence in the early stages of planning. The shift to reasonable expectations for "front-end" studies has stimulated better partnerships between decision-makers' questions and researchers' methods of scientifically-defensible inquiry.

Objectives

Although the commitment to doing a "front-end" study means an acknowledgment that audience perceptions are important, the co-chairs suggested that the objectives for "front-end" studies are usually determined by the client, and that the process of defining objectives deserves more attention by researchers. Obviously, the client needs to supply the primary objectives for the study (why it's needed, what issues are important, what conceptual decisions need to be informed), but researchers also have responsibilities. Researchers could: (a) advise the client about a range of objectives (e.g., concept refinement, marketing, media choice, title testing), so that clients can consider the priorities and options; and (b) conduct

research in a way which allows the flexibility for visitor perceptions to re-evaluate some objectives.

Scope

The co-chairs suggested that it would be useful to develop a "menu" or "palette" for the scope of front-end studies, so that researchers could consider a comprehensive approach to concept planning. Five categories of issues for inclusion in this menu were suggested:

1. Audience expectations and impressions of the subject;
2. Knowledge (including popular conceptions, images, and misconceptions);
3. Interests in the subject as a whole and various aspects of the subject and how it might be presented;
4. Ability to understand key concepts; and
5. Motivation to visit (impact on visiting the institution, or other aspects of visiting an exhibit on this subject).

Existing Exhibits

One variation of this concept that may be confusing occurs when evaluation of existing exhibits or programs is used in a front-end study. It may be instructive to use existing exhibits to assess public reaction to planned renovations or new exhibits. Some might argue that any evaluation of existing exhibits is summative in nature. Others contend that doing *status quo* assessments of related current exhibit settings is a tool of front-end evaluation. Obviously, one of the great benefits of requiring summative evaluation of exhibits or programs is to provide information for future planning of reinstallations or new exhibits on similar topics.

The audience at this session reacted favorably to the framework for a generic scope of front-end studies, and to the notion that more thought should be given to defining objectives for these studies. Also, audience members agreed with the general perspective on timing, but pointed out some difficulties such as researchers being called in too late (after long range planning is done, or after major conceptual decisions are made). Although timing can vary with institutional goals, and there may be more than one perspective on when to do front-end studies, the general consensus was that visitor research should be considered as early as possible. It would be wise for museum professionals to have a conversation about the research process with an experienced researcher before deciding when and how to introduce a front-end study.

Quality of Research

Since front-end studies are somewhat exploratory, there are a variety of research methods which can be used to address the objectives. In general, a good model for this type of research would be to start with qualitative methods (to raise questions, explore reactions, identify misconceptions) and then move into quantitative methods (to assess the strength of those reactions or misconceptions across various audience segments). However, with the rapid expansion of visitor studies, experienced researchers are raising questions about whether some methods (especially qualitative methods) are being properly used and applied. Although qualitative methods such as focus groups or analysis of children's drawings may be stimulating and fun, the methods are designed to be rigorous, not casual. There must be an outcome *analysis* of qualitative work, because these methods are easy to "corrupt." Without such analysis, people can find some shred of data to support their own opinions. Qualitative methods, such as running a few focus groups or letting visitors write comments on a scratch pad, can raise serious questions about sampling. It is important to qualify results when sampling limitations exist.

A different set of concerns arises with quantitative methods such as surveys. Researchers should have a strong commitment to representativeness of sampling, rates of cooperation/refusal, and pre-testing of all survey questions. Unfortunately, "quick and dirty" often means accidental and haphazard. It needs to be recognized that time and cost factors often work against completing a true scientific survey (sometimes called a probability sample survey). That is, it may be necessary to use convenient sources of respondents such as visitors in the museum during the time period when the planning phase is underway. Results may or may not apply to visitors coming at other times of the year. It is important with these convenience or non-probability samples to carefully specify who was in the sample and not over-generalize results. Focusing on specific target groups, such as families, older visitors, or repeat visitors, can also be helpful when a larger-scale probability sample survey is not possible. Having a good idea of visitor profiles from basic visitor surveys completed earlier can define who needs to be included in a representative sample. Multi-method studies should be more common because they are valuable in providing cross-checks on the sampling method and on the content of the results.

Since front-end studies may influence major conceptual decisions, may be referred to repeatedly during the course of a planning process, and may be expected to serve as a baseline for later summative evaluations, the early studies should be done well. Researchers should inform clients that a front-end study warrants a substantial amount of work to serve the client's needs. Funding for front-end studies can also be substantial, as agencies and foundations recognize the value for the overall project.

Audience comments on this part of the analysis were thoughtful and based on considerable experience. Other researchers, too, were concerned that many front-end studies do not meet basic criteria for good survey research, and that focus groups are seen as a substitute for survey work. Some people were not bothered by the idea of "quick and dirty," but said that such studies should be prefaced with clear disclaimers that caution clients not to over-generalize the results. Other researchers felt that such disclaimers put the client in an awkward position because they seem to say, "Here are some results, but don't use them too much." There was general agreement that we need to inform the museum community about the advantages and disadvantages of different kinds of research (considering the project's needs, the skills required, and the budgets and other resources which may be necessary), and that this is a major educational task.

Impacts of Front-End Studies

In this final section of analysis, the co-chairs observed that clients find considerable value in front-end studies. Teams of exhibit developers and designers tend to act on the information, and to apply it to decision-making over a period of time, not just once. However, the *need* for the information is so strong that the results may be applied with little or no concern for the *equality* of the data (and it is unrealistic for most clients to be able to critically evaluate the *quality* of the data, so researchers are ultimately responsible for producing information of the highest possible quality). Another long-term question about front-end studies is whether they inhibit the client's interest in other stages of evaluation. If they think they have all the *answers* from a front-end study, can they also see value in the overall process of formative and summative evaluation?

Audience members were very supportive of the value of front-end studies, agreeing that this stage of research/evaluation can help energize a team effort and bring team members into a better relationship with the audience. Numerous comments about the value of thinking about visitors during the early stages of planning underscored the tangible and intangible benefits of systematic and thorough front-end studies. Future prospects for improving the value and impacts of this kind of research included de-emphasizing quick-and-dirty studies when major planning decisions are at issue, and conducting more theoretical work (e.g., examining how to study and analyze attitudes) to supplement the increasing amount of applied research.

The co-chairs wish to thank the audience who attended and participated in this session. We hope the unconventional format was useful and responsive to your level of experience.