

Museum Programming and Public Promises – Are You Keeping Yours?

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Program Goal and Public Accountability

When someone takes the time to design and develop a museum program, he/she does so with a specific goal in mind (e.g., to teach children about wildlife conservation, to help visitors understand the concept of color, etc.). These goals or purposes, which describe the program's expected outcomes, are typically written down – in part so that they can be interpreted and translated into a plan of activities. Goals are, therefore, important because they allow everyone to focus on the same, clear intended outcome. That is, they provide guidance for designing program activities.

Program goals (see Note 1) are also sometimes used to help determine whether or not a program is worthwhile or valuable. That is, if the stated goals were achieved within the time and resources available, the program is said to be valuable or effective. Such programs are also said to be accountable. However, this use of program goals to establish worth or value sometimes presents a problem for evaluators because a program may or may not be "valuable" simply because it met its stated goals.

Translating Consumer Needs into Program Goals

In this writer's opinion, one of the most difficult lessons for evaluators to learn is that stated goals are written by program designers or developers and, therefore, reflect *their* desires. They do not, however, always represent the needs and/or wants of the visitor. Stated goals are sometimes not valuable to consumers/visitors and, when this is the case, it is not always useful to determine whether or not they were met. To use an example from product evaluation, no one evaluates a computer *based on whether or not it met the goals of the designers*. Instead we judge the computer's value on *whether or not it met the consumer's needs*. The reader should recall that the true aim of all evaluation is to determine the value or worth of a product, exhibit, personnel, or program. Implicit in this determination is the notion of the consumer; i.e., to whom is the program valuable? The primary consumer in leisure time settings is, of course, the visitor and the major focus of visitor study professionals.

Unfortunately, program goals are seldom, if ever, established with input from those visitors whom the program intends to serve. Instead they are usually established and articulated by program developers, education curators, exhibit designers, etc. who may have little idea about or, worse yet, appreciation for visitor needs. Therefore, a program or exhibit is not necessarily good, worthwhile, or effective simply because it meets a goal which was stated, most probably, by the museum staff. It is effective or good only if it can be shown that *it meets the visitors' demonstrated needs*.

Those of us who conduct visitor studies engage in a lot of rhetoric about ensuring that the visitor is included in the program design and development process; however, by conducting goals-based-evaluation, we *behave* as though visitor opinion is unimportant. Museum evaluators must make it their business to determine visitor needs *before* a program or exhibit is developed and to incorporate those needs into the program's stated goals. For example, in designing an exhibit and associated programs about saving the rain forest, the museum staff may believe that the goal is to acquaint visitors with several conservation methods being tried. Visitor studies, however, may indicate that visitors have a greater need to understand the reasons for saving the rain forest. It should be clear that the activities which are designed to meet the *visitor* need are not the same as those which could be developed to meet a designer or curator need. The program would look very different depending on which goal was used. To reiterate, evaluators must help ensure that stated goals incorporate visitor needs as well as curatorial needs. Most of us, however, determine whether or not a program's *goal(s)* were met without this consideration of the value of the goal itself to the visitor.

One alternate approach to evaluation, known as **Goals Free Evaluation** (GFE), focuses not on stated program goals, but on actual program effects (Scriven, 1976). Under GFE, a program's goals are not known to the evaluation team. Instead the focus is on a program's actual effects. Clearly this is an approach which ensures that programs are evaluated with the visitor in mind!

Locating and Translating Program Goals

Let us assume, however, that a program's stated goals have been evaluated and it has been established that they do, in fact, reflect important visitor needs. Where can these goal statements be found? Goals are found in several places and usually can be easily located by some rather casual means. For example, information flyers often describe a program or exhibit and delineate exactly what a visitor or participant can expect to learn or have happen as a result of participating.

For example, in describing a one-day visit to a nature center, a flyer might assert that the visitor will:

- Learn to recognize various trees;
- Participate in a natural wreath-making workshop;
- Gain an appreciation for local flora and fauna;
- Create conservation awareness in our visitors.

Two of the goals are quite clear; however, the other two require translation and/or modification. While each of these goals is laudable, which of them can we actually expect to accomplish in one day? We can clearly offer visitors the opportunity to participate in the wreath-making activities and perhaps teach them to recognize some types of trees. However, the last two goals may be somewhat ambitious for a one-day visit – and they are probably the most important in terms of actually achieving valuable visitor outcomes. Additionally, the last goal is what is sometimes referred to as a “save the world” goal. That is, while it is clearly a good goal, it may be too ambitious for this single exhibit/program.

Mission statements, which can be found in all museum business plans, are also an excellent source in which to locate program goals. Additionally, membership packets often contain overarching, institutional goals. In its new member packet, the Animals R Us Wild Animal Park describes itself as providing “a unique opportunity for visitors to learn about animals and their environment by interacting with them in their natural environment.” This statement, in fact, embodies and alludes to the park’s mission to increase public awareness of fragile ecosystems.

Goals set for schools can often be found in materials such as curriculum guides to various museum programs. Additionally, teachers typically develop lesson plans which incorporate learning objectives. These learning objectives should, of course, be consistent with those found in museum materials about the program and can be considered program goals.

Unfortunately, once many goals are written, that is the end of it. No one seriously evaluates them to determine whether or not they were met – unless they are mandated to do so by some external means such as a funding source from which grant monies are sought. Goals set for casual visitors – especially adults – are almost never evaluated. This is an interesting, albeit troubling situation. Such behavior by museum professionals could be interpreted to mean that, even though they pay lip service to visitor studies, museum professionals only evaluate those programs which mandate such studies. Or it could be interpreted to mean that museum professionals are not equally dedicated and obligated to meeting both adult and children’s programming needs. However, museum resources are just as certainly expended to meet the needs of adults as they are to meet the needs of children. Museum professionals should be aware that neither of the interpretations offered above to explain the lack of evaluation for adult

programming sheds a flattering light on those who are responsible for doing so.

Perhaps, as resources continue to dwindle and cannot be squandered on trivial programs (adult or children), as our nation continues to age and more visitors come from their ranks, and as our culture becomes more diverse and public institutions must help inculcate national values in such visitors, it will become evident that adult programming must also be systematically evaluated to determine its value in serving museum publics.

Using Summative Evaluation to Establish Public Accountability

In order to determine a program's effectiveness for external decision-makers at the end of the program, a summative evaluation should be conducted. Although the difference between formative and summative evaluation will not be discussed herein, it is important to note that novice evaluators often confuse the two types of evaluation and, as a result, encounter many unnecessary problems. Some years ago, a young evaluator reported to this writer that she had been engaged early in a museum program development to conduct a summative evaluation of that program. To her surprise, she was contacted and roundly chastised by the program staff for not supplying "helpful hints" about the program as it was developing. Such ongoing advice about program improvement was, of course, not what she had been contracted to provide. While she may have been able to provide some "helpful hints" about the program to the staff as it developed, that was clearly not her primary responsibility – her responsibility was to help justify the expenditure of program resources.

The distinction between the two types of evaluation is, therefore, important since it allows evaluation users and practitioners to understand one another using a common terminology. Additionally, a clear understanding of these basic evaluation tenets helps evaluators determine and effectively execute their responsibilities.

Who Uses Summative Evaluation?

Government and Corporate Sponsors

Users of summative evaluation include funding sources which must decide how resources must be allocated; e.g., foundations, government agencies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Science Foundation (NSF), etc. who have specific missions and want to ensure that resources are spent in accordance with these missions. Additionally, many corporations underwrite programs and want to know if their exhibit or program actually had the desired impact on visitors. This is important information for sponsoring businesses who often want to ensure that their corporate mission and activities are understood and accepted by the

public – especially today – when being socially, environmentally, and politically correct is an important consideration to a business' bottom line.

Schools

In an increasing number of situations, summative evaluation is *imperative* for justifying the receipt of public funds and ensuring the receipt of future funds. For example, schools *must*, by law, be able to justify their activities by demonstrating that kids actually learn something worthwhile during their tenure in educational institutions. This edict extends to museum programs which school children visit on field trips. As we all are aware, failure to demonstrate that children do learn functional skills in the schools is currently the subject of much lively and well-deserved attention. Those of us who work in museums and other leisure-time learning situations should expect – and welcome – *more* demand for summative evaluation from school decision-makers. This is our chance to show that the informal learning situation is as valuable as formal ones in helping our kids learn important concepts!

Casual Visitors

A final group of important summative evaluation audiences which deserves attention are casual visitors. If visitor needs are not met, they simply don't return for the next program or exhibit! They are, therefore, the ultimate decision-maker in terms of the value – or lack thereof – of our exhibits and programming. By returning or failing to return, visitors are clearly evaluating our programs and holding us accountable for whether or not we are meeting their needs.

What Kinds of Data Should We Collect to Establish Public Accountability?

In order to determine a program's value, information about visitor needs and the program's ability to meet these needs must be collected. Several types of data are useful.

Knowledge

One of the most obvious types of data which can be collected is a change in the level of visitor knowledge. This type of data is also easy to obtain. If it can be demonstrated that visitor knowledge has increased because of visitor participation in a museum program, we can assert that the program or exhibit was successful or valuable in this regard. For example, it is clearly valuable that society's knowledge about recycling or conserving natural resources is important to the preservation of our planet and its resources. Therefore, if it can be shown that knowledge about these things increased following visitor participation in a museum program, the program

was valuable. Pre- and post-tests covering the program's content are often useful to assess such changes in visitor knowledge.

Behavioral

A program designed to facilitate man's interaction with and appreciation for snakes can be said to be effective if observation of program participants demonstrates that they interact with these reptiles on a more frequent or intense basis than non-program participants.

Attitudinal

If it is desirable that visitors have a more tolerant attitude towards AIDS victims and it can be shown that program participants develop such attitudes following program participation, the program was effective in this regard. Attitudes, of course, can be measured with paper-and-pencil tests, interviews, simulated role-plays and in other ways.

Visitor Counts

Another type of information which is occasionally used to establish program "effectiveness" is a simple head count of the number of visitors who attended or participated in something. This data, however, is not an acceptable measure of effectiveness since it has little, if anything, to do with a program's value in *meeting consumer needs*. If the primary intent of the program was simply to get people to come, then a case might be made for asserting that the program was effective solely on the basis of the number of participants. Fortunately, this is seldom the case. Or, at least, it is seldom *admitted* that simply attracting large numbers of participants is the major purpose of a program or exhibit! "Counting" information tells you nothing about whether or not the program or exhibit had any value to any of the visitors.

It is even difficult to infer that visitors participated in a program because they enjoyed it. Although they will show up in the "count," maybe some visitors came and, as soon as they saw what was in store, left and, perhaps more importantly, never came back! Or maybe they were dragged to the museum by a friend, did not feel the program was valuable and, again, never came back. The only program which can be judged to be effective based on its ability to attract large numbers of visitors is the marketing program!

Satisfaction

A second kind of effectiveness information which is sometimes, and sometimes not, appropriate for evaluation purposes is visitor "satisfaction" data. If a program's *primary expected outcome* is that visitors will be satisfied or happy with their experience, then such information is indeed useful in determining the program's value. And, of course, this is sometimes a perfectly acceptable and laudable goal. If, however, the intent

of the program is to change the visitors' behaviors or level of knowledge about something, then data about visitor satisfaction levels are insufficient to establish the program's value. Think back to your own school days – were the classes or teachers you learned the most from those with which you were most satisfied or pleased? Not always.

Conclusion

Evaluation – especially formative evaluation – of museum programs is increasing. While this is a welcome development, museums must also become more involved in conducting summative evaluation in order to establish their accountability – to businesses, the government, schools, and to the public. Reasons for this imbalance in the two types of evaluation conducted may include the fact that museums are infrequently mandated to conduct summative evaluations and because they see little value in conducting evaluations of completed programs. This oversight, however, can result in a decrease of interest and/or funding from school systems, foundations, agencies, and corporations who must increasingly demonstrate that their resources are being spent in the best ways possible.

Additionally, failure to conduct summative evaluation can also result in a museum's naivete about the reasons for lack of visitor support for a program. Finally, a summative evaluation can lead to what Screven terms "remedial" evaluation in which summative evaluation data can be used to identify and initiate improvements in programs (1990). Sooner or later, museums will be called on to justify their programs. Via summative evaluation, we'll be ready with the evidence!

References

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- Screven, C.G. (1990). Uses of evaluation before, during, and after exhibit design. *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, 1(2), 36-66.

Note

1. For the most part, everything said in this paper about programs can be applied to exhibits.