

Making Visitors Part of the Exhibit Development Team

Melissa Gaulding and Amy Weissman
National Zoological Park
Washington, D.C.

At the beginning of this talk, members of the audience were asked the following questions:

"I'll say some words to you. Tell me what animals, if any, are suggested by each word:

- dirty
- playful
- useless
- sexy

We're going to vote on which animals should and should not be used in carrying out important medical research on cancer.

Raise your hand: How many of you think the following animals should be used? How many of you think the following animals should not be used?

- monkeys
- rats
- cats
- insects
- dolphins

This tends to be a highly emotional issue and we would like you to think about why you feel some animals should or should not be used.

Something else to think about: In your opinion are there some animals more important than others? Why?"

Audience responses were recorded as questions were asked.

These questions were part of a questionnaire that was developed with Harris Shettel that was used to assess visitor knowledge and opinions of animal related issues. The information gathered was used to help focus the direction of *The Good, the Bad, and the Cuddly: Attitudes Toward Animals* exhibit, which opened at the National Zoological Park in Washington, D.C. in September, 1991.

Using such a questionnaire is part of the front-end evaluation process which is quite popular these days. Front-end evaluation is designed to find out what the intended audience for an exhibit already knows and does not know about a topic, as well as their beliefs, attitudes, and opinions related to the topic. Generally, front-end evaluation is a formal method of researching on what level to develop the exhibit. As has been discussed already at this Conference, it is important to consider and incorporate visitors interests and ideas in the exhibit development process. This has been found to be critical for this exhibit, which is about people's attitudes and experiences toward animals.

Now consider another way of thinking about and doing visitor evaluation: making visitors part of the exhibit development team. "Making visitors part of the team" is a phrase that has been knocked around a lot lately; but what are we really talking about when we say it? How would you feel if you were left out of a development meeting for a project you were working on? You wouldn't want to be left out of a single step of the development process, so do not leave the visitor out either.

Here we offer some examples from *The Good, the Bad, and the Cuddly: Attitudes Toward Animals*. Since this exhibit is about people's attitudes and experiences toward animals, it is critically important to be sure that the exhibit gets people thinking about their own experiences. The only way we know that the exhibit is doing just that is by talking to people throughout the development process.

One section of the exhibit explores how misperceptions of animals interferes with understanding what the animals are actually like. We could not assume what misunderstandings existed about animals; we had to ask people. So we did. We left our safe little desks and went into the park to approach visitors with questions like:

"When I say 'pig,' what do you think of?"

Let's try it here:

"When I say the word 'pig,' what do you think of? When I say the word 'rabbit,' what do you think of? How about 'cat'? ... 'crocodile'? ... 'wolf'?"

Just like what probably happened with you, visitors told us that pigs were dirty, fat, but good to eat. Visitors told us that rabbits were oversexed, adorable, and harmless. The responses we got from visitors provided us with the stereotypes we used in the exhibit.

~~When you're trying to write text that you hope visitors will read, and they are right outside your door, why not use them?~~ For this exhibit, the script was not meant to be a lecture, but rather it was intended to be conversational and to encourage dialogue amongst visitors. There was no way to know if the script was doing that without asking the audience.

Three versions of the panel text were taken out to the visitors who were asked to read each version. The visitors were observed reading and asked what they got out of each one. Which version was clearer? Which version made them think about their own opinions and experiences? The panel text which visitors responded to best was enlarged and pasted onto cardboard with photocopies of the objects and quick line drawings to represent photographs and illustrations. Visitors were observed and interviewed again. Whenever the placement of images and text was not clear, something new was tried, making changes right on the spot.

Something really striking happened in doing this. Members of the public said things like: "Oh, is this a new exhibit?" Parents, dropping their children off for classes, stopped and explained things to their kids. An air-conditioning repair man read every bit of text even though it was taped to a hallway wall. On the other hand, museum professionals who were a part of the development team remarked that what we were doing looked messy, like something a seven-year-old had done.

Making visitors part of the team and offering some ideas about why this is not done more often is the heart of what we wanted to discuss here. Making visitors part of the team means being willing to run out the door and talk to them, or put some text on a sheet of cardboard and show it to them, and then listen with respect to what they tell you. This kind of informal, and on some levels crude, formative try-out can do many things:

- Help solve problems encountered during development —

This exhibit was organized to support three main points (i.e., your attitudes come from your cultural background; your biology as a human; and your personal experiences). We found out that those points were not apparent and that creating large bold headlines right on the spot helped people better understand the way the exhibit was organized.

- Give inspiration —

We were struggling with a certain panel that dealt with information about attitudes which we considered important, yet dry. People, looking at the mock-ups said: "If you want me to understand that these ideas oppose one another, lay them out that way." These responses also inspired us to find photographs that went with each attitude to make the opposition even more obvious.

- Be a reality check —

We thought we had done our best to be short and concise, but when we enlarged the text to 36 point type and stuck it on the wall, we were amazed by how much was there. Could we really ask visitors to stand on their feet and read all of that?

- Most importantly, this method can show visitors that you care about what they think.

Even though we believe in the value of such informal testing, some of our colleagues don't buy it. This is not, by any means, the first time that colleagues have suggested that this technique of exhibit development is untrustworthy, a waste of time, "just messing around," and is invalid because it isn't statistical information. More formal evaluation has its place, and we recognize that; but here we are talking about something different. We are talking about having a conversation with the visitors during the development stages of an exhibit that pays attention to what they need and what they understand.

Why are some of our colleagues against this?

- Some colleagues think the information is untrustworthy because there is no statistical support.
- Museum professionals generally still hold an elitist attitude that "we're the experts" and we don't want to show the public anything that might make them think that we don't know everything.
- If it does not look perfect and polished, visitors will not take the time to look at it.
- At the bottom of it all is fear. Fear of admitting that we do not know everything; fear of finding out that we might not write or think as clearly as we want to believe; fear that the public might not be interested in the things we think are important; fear of the extra work that is involved in talking with the public and accommodating their needs.

We cannot tell you why informal formative evaluation is not more widely accepted. You need to figure out why your own institution does not use this process on a regular basis. If we are not including our audiences in the development process, are we really doing our jobs?