



Knowing Your Audiences

The Role of Evaluation in Exhibit Planning and Design

Over the past thirty years it has become increasingly evident that exhibitions of all kinds and in a variety of venues (including visitor centers) can significantly benefit from the use of a variety of evaluation activities carried out during the development process. A recent bibliography lists over 600 studies that have demonstrated the value of getting inputs from target audience members to help inform decisions about both the content and presentation methods being considered, thus avoiding serious and costly mistakes discovered only after the work has been completed.

Traditionally, there are three stages during which formal visitor studies are conducted.

1. **Front-End Evaluation:** during conceptual planning when themes, story lines, and program ideas are being considered;
2. **Formative Evaluation:** during early fabrication of exhibits when mock-up testing can be carried out;
3. **Summative/Remedial Evaluation:** conducted after final installation, when the total “package” can be evaluated and final adjustments can be made.

Front-end evaluation concentrates on getting inputs from potential visitors by means of interviews and/or focus groups, to find out what kinds of information they need and would like to know, and how this information could be presented in a meaningful, interesting, and cost-effective way. Misconceptions about the subject matter are also revealed at this stage, often leading to specific content and presentation elements designed to counter them.

Formative evaluation is intended to “catch” design and/or content problems before they become a part of the final exhibition, when they are often difficult and expensive to “fix.” Especially critical to test at the mock-up stage are interactive exhibits, where feedback from users almost always reveals flaws or weaknesses in the program that can be easily corrected.

In a comprehensive evaluation program, the conduct of summative/remedial studies often reveal problems that were not, or could not be, identified during the earlier stages of development. For example, crowd-flow problems are often revealed only when the actual configuration of all the elements of the exhibition are in place. Similarly, orientation and signage problems become “obvious” at this point, and can often be corrected by relatively minor adjustments to wording and/or placement.

The media evaluation process requires the planning team to identify the intended exhibit target audience in terms of their ages, educational levels, and levels of entering knowledge of the subject matter of the exhibit. The team must also have clearly defined objectives – both cognitive and affective. Cognitive objectives relate to the intended impact of the

exhibit on the target audience in terms of knowledge of the subject matter (e.g., facts, concepts, controversies, comparisons). Affective objectives relate to the intended impact of the exhibit on visitors' beliefs, interests, feelings, and attitudes as related to the exhibit content. These explicit and agreed-to objectives guide not only the way the exhibit is tested at the formative and summative/remedial stages, but the entire exhibit development process, including decisions about content, sequence, media, interpretation, and presentation techniques.

*From the personal writings of evaluator **Dr. Harris H. Shettel**, Rockville, Maryland, and used by his permission. Edited by **Neil Mackay**, Harpers Ferry Center, Department of Exhibits and Interpretive Media Institute*

Resources and References

Books on media evaluation (with excellent references and bibliographies for additional sources of information):

Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach, by Beverly Serrell, published by Alta Mira Press (a division of Sage Publications, Inc.), Walnut Creek, 1996.

Introduction to Museum Evaluation, by Minda Borun and Randi Korn, Editors, Roxana Adams, Series Editor, published by the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation of the American Association of Museums, Professional Practice Series, 1999.

Questioning Assumptions: An Introduction to Front-End Studies in Museums, by Lynn D. Dierking and Wendy Pollock, published by the Association of Science-Technology Centers, Washington, DC, 1998.

Try It! Improving Exhibits through Formative Evaluation, Samuel Taylor, editor, and Beverly Serrell, assistant editor, published by the New York Hall of Science and the Association of Science-Technology Centers, Washington, DC, 1991.

The Effectiveness of Nonpersonal Media Used in Interpretation and Informal Education: An Annotated Bibliography. Wells, Marcella and Lisa Smith. National Association of Interpretation. 2000.

NPS web sites of interest

NPS Social Science Program
<http://www.nps.gov/socialscience/>

Component for Module 340: Advanced Knowledge of the Audience (KA)
<http://www.nps.gov/idp/interp/340/ka.htm>

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Professional organizations

The following professional organizations are concerned with exhibit evaluation and can provide additional information on the subject:

Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE)

American Association of Museums (AAM)
1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20005
tel.: (202) 289-1818
<http://www.aam-us.org/index.htm>
CARE publishes *Current Trends in Audience Research and Evaluation*, and the *Directory of Evaluators*

Visitor Studies Association (VSA)

8175-A Sheridan Blvd., Suite 362
Arvada, CO 80003-1928
303-467-2200
303-467-0064 fax
<http://www.visitorstudies.org/>
VSA publishes *Visitor Studies Today*

American Evaluation Association

American Evaluation Association
16 Scoticut Neck Rd #290
Fairhaven MA 02719
Phone/fax 888-232-2275 (toll free in US and some Canada)
<http://www.eval.org/>
AEA publishes *American Journal of Evaluation* (published three times/year).