
The Quandaries of Audience Research

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With federal agencies requiring evaluation plans as part of exhibit and program proposals and corporate and foundation funders increasingly interested in accountability, the audience research field is experiencing a growing demand for services. Suddenly, there is more work than the handful of trained professionals can keep up with. We are faced with a need to train additional practitioners, specify minimum standards of competency, define a museum staff evaluator position, and sharpen our focus on the central questions for this work.

Standards of Practice

Since social science research involves talking to people, it might seem that anyone can conduct a study. Yes, anyone can talk to visitors and get a sense of what they think about an exhibit, program, or the museum as a whole, but the construction of a research study to uncover basic truths about the museum experience, or the development of an evaluation plan that gives actionable information about the effectiveness of museum presentations, requires formal training in research techniques.

The Visitor Studies Association and the American Association of Museum's Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) offer short, one- or two-day workshops to museum professionals. The intent of these workshops is to give participants a general overview of the evaluation process, to enhance their interest in conducting audience studies, and to enable them to work more effectively with research professionals. Unfortunately, these workshops have also produced a group of people who feel that they have become "instant evaluators," and the profession is now facing a serious problem of quality control. Some of the work that is being done does not meet acceptable standards of practice.

While we certainly do not want to limit access to the visitor studies field or to make its practices seem abstruse, it is important to point out that some basic training is required before you can conduct meaningful evaluation or research. Specifically, courses in experimental methods, interviewing techniques, and statistics are necessary in order to know how to set up a study, talk to visitors, and analyze and interpret data. This is not to say that a full graduate degree is

required; on the other hand, it does take more than a one- or two-day workshop.

Good research design, sampling, validity, reliability, statistical testing, and content analysis procedures are critical concerns of research and evaluation. Experimental design—the plan for a study—determines whether the data you collect will yield the information you seek. Proper sampling procedures ensure that the study group will represent the larger population you want to describe. A validity test looks to see if you are measuring what you think you are measuring. A reliability test tells you the likelihood that two independent observers will score the same event in the same way.

Statistical testing allows you to determine whether the relationships you observe are "significant" or likely to have occurred by chance. A judgment of "practical significance" considers whether the statistical difference is meaningful in the context of the questions being asked. The ability to judge practical significance comes only with experience. Finally, careful content analysis uncovers patterns in descriptive data obtained through open-ended interviews with visitors. All these procedures require training in research methods. If careful procedures are not used in the collection, analysis, and interpretation of data, you cannot have confidence in the results of a study or in any recommendations based on the results.

Training

Closely related to the question of standards of practice is the issue of training future visitor studies professionals. If the visitor studies field is to grow and flourish, it needs a way to train new practitioners. In the past, the field has attracted primarily psychologists, with a few anthropologists and sociologists in the mix. These individuals have been through lengthy and expensive graduate training in social science research. One of the few alternatives to an advanced graduate degree in social science is to apprentice with one of the relatively small number of senior researchers in the field.

In 1986, Harris Shettel and Mary Ellen Munley conducted a survey of museum education and training programs and found that only 5 out of 56 graduate-level programs offered a course in evaluation techniques.¹ Since

their study, there has been some increase in the number of museum evaluation courses offered, but they are rarely required for a degree in museum studies or museum education. There is no degree program or even concentration in visitor studies for the would-be practitioner.

Clearly, we need to begin laying the groundwork for a program of graduate training in audience research that will allow students to acquire the necessary skills and experience to carry on and expand the visitor studies field.

In-House Evaluators and the Organization Plan

Increasing numbers of museums are hiring in-house evaluators to assist with audience research and evaluation. These new staff members can fit into the museum's organizational structure in a variety of ways.

Ideally, evaluators should answer to a high-level, neutral staff member who is not aligned with any one department or project but who has the best interests of the museum in mind. If evaluations focus on products of the education or exhibits department, an evaluator should not report to the head of exhibits or education. The evaluator ought not to have a stake in the product being evaluated or be influenced, even unconsciously, by his or her supervisor's involvement with the product. Under no circumstances should the individual in charge of the project being evaluated be the individual responsible for writing the evaluator's performance review. It is best if the evaluator works in a neutral department—one removed from the planning and production of the product—and reports to a museum director, associate director, or vice-president.

Asking the Right Questions

Museum researchers are continually challenged to design and implement studies demonstrating that people learn in museums. A few decades ago, when educational researchers were trying to measure cognitive outcomes in classrooms, museum researchers were doing the same with casual visitors in the museum exhibit environment. Measuring learning and understanding its complexities were stumbling blocks in both settings.

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What is it that we want to know about visitor experiences? The experience researchers and evaluators have accumulated over the years contributes to and supports the methodological shift many of them have made from information to meaning, from measuring to understanding, and from results to process. This shift necessitates creative data collection methods and asks alternative questions. We are learning what not to ask visitors and are experimenting with new questions as we piece together the complexities of the visitor experience.

Concerns about asking the right questions are in part related to another methodological problem: most often, budget and time constraints demand that exhibit and program evaluation occur immediately after a visit, before visitors have time to process, internalize, or reflect on their experiences. Museum experiences, however, may not be fully realized during a museum visit, nor do they end when the visit ends. Even though evaluators continue to make important contributions to the visitor studies field, one must wonder

what we may be missing by not being there to ask questions when visitors reflect on an experience they had in a museum a month ago, a year ago, or five years ago. Only recently have museum researchers begun to examine long-term effects of museum visiting.

Over the next decade, with enthusiasm and determination, researchers and evaluators will work together to meet the challenge of framing the questions that will move us closer to understanding the visitor experience and to measuring multiple outcomes.

Research and Planning Strategy

Issues surrounding the audience research field will continue to evolve. This is true for any profession. Whatever the issues, they should not prevent any museum from including research in its planning strategy. Evaluation findings can be used to identify the qualities and shortcomings of particular programs and to determine whether learning and experience objectives are being met. If the museum community is concerned about its public image and the effect of its programs on visitors, these concerns should be reflected in a research and evaluation program.

NOTE

1. Harris Shettel and Mary Ellen Munley, "Do Museum Studies Programs Meet Evaluation Training Needs?" *Museum News* 64, no. 3 (February 1986): 63–70.