



The Local Network

Volume 18, Number 1

2008



Litchfield Community Museum, Litchfield, ND

A Practical Guide to Integrating the Visitor Voice

The history museum field is facing critical concerns: declining attendance, financial difficulties, and general uncertainty about sustainability. Yet this is also a time of tremendous opportunity, with increasing use of digital communication, expanding interest in free-choice learning, and people's trust in history museums as sources of information about the past. One proven strategy that can both maximize these opportunities and address critical concerns is better understanding visitor needs, expectations, and motivations. Integrating the visitor perspective into all stages of planning, development, and implementation is what we call "evaluatively thinking," and it is more important now than ever.

Thinking evaluatively means walking a mile in the shoes of our visitors in order to understand and respond to their needs, perceptions, and experiences. The visitor experience is not simply an outcome to be

considered only at the completion of an exhibition or program; it should be a guiding thread interwoven through all stages of development. Although evaluation has played an increasingly significant role in museums over the past decade, much work still needs to be done to integrate evaluative thinking into organizational culture and practice.

What follows is a guide to the basic principles and practices of evaluation, along with a set of useful strategies for involving your institution in thinking evaluatively.

What is Evaluation?

The basic process of evaluating is a natural human endeavor. We observe, reflect, note what is not working, and adjust our actions accordingly. These natural, adaptive human activities are not the same as evaluation but do form a basis for it. When the reflective process is expanded and made systematic, it then moves into the realm of evaluation.

Evaluation is also much more effective when thought of as a collaborative process. It is not something to be done to people or programs, but rather a process that enables museum staff to be more aware and effective in their work. Evaluation can then be highly satisfying for all involved, helping us clarify goals, be more focused in our work, and accomplish our objectives.

Why Do Evaluation?

Many museum professionals agree that evaluating exhibitions and programs is a good idea. It is intuitive that getting feedback from visitors and other stakeholders will contribute to the success of a particular project. However, these reasons are not often clearly articulated or the purpose of evaluation is viewed too narrowly, such as simply to rate a program as "successful" or not. In fact, there are many benefits to

conducting evaluation that are not often emphasized or well understood. Becoming aware of these benefits can encourage more involvement and buy-in from staff and board members, to support evaluative thinking throughout your institution.

Evaluation helps you define goals.

Before beginning any evaluation effort, it is essential to define goals and outcomes. Only then do you have something to measure. Too many museum exhibitions and programs fail to identify their outcomes and measures of success. For example, goals and objectives are often simply intuitive rather than articulated; defined and written down without seeking consensus; or too broad, unrealistic, and/or not measurable. Consequently, staff often tries to implement the project without a clear sense of focus, which naturally poses challenges in conveying specific messages or creating appropriate experiences for visitors. Evaluation supports museum staff in collectively thinking about and articulating what would constitute the success of a project. Staff tend to become more focused, moved beyond personal agendas, and concentrate on the quality of the visitor experience. As a result, the project has a much greater chance of being more effective.

An evaluation conducted at the Maryland Historical Society on their *History Explorers* Program, for example, revealed a discrepancy between how the project team members perceived the goals of the program and how they articulated those goals in the initial grant, as the project had changed over time. In order to get a more realistic and shared view of current goals, researchers conducted focus groups with staff and participating teachers. The organization was then better able to agree upon and articulate the key elements of the program, and evaluators could clearly focus on what to measure.

Evaluation can save time and money.

Many institutions avoid evaluation because they feel it requires too much time and/or money. This is often a result of thinking short- rather than long-term. For example, detecting problems early in the planning allows changes to occur before an exhibition is fabricated, copies of a curriculum are printed, or a new docent training model is implemented. There are also multiple ways of conducting small, low-budget evaluative projects in-house.

Evaluation can help leverage funding and support for projects.

Many funders now require evaluation as part of the granting process, and many more are moving in that direction. Boards want to know what the institution is really accomplishing, and funders want to know what impact their money is having. They increasingly want clear and systematic documentation that the institution's programming efforts are positively impacting visitors. Institutions are increasingly tasked with presenting convincing evidence that their efforts are effective. All sizes of institutions need to know the basics of evaluation to compete for funds in this era of accountability.

Evaluation can enhance staff communication and curiosity.

Staff involvement in an evaluation project is an excellent professional development strategy. When staff members are asked to think carefully about the desired outcomes of a project, they must come to consensus about goals. The very act of working through the issues involved in designing and conducting an evaluation establishes an intellectually-stimulating environment whereby staff can view their work and the visitors from a variety of perspectives.

Evaluation can increase the institution's responsiveness to the community.

Implementing a process of evaluative thinking requires staff to step back from their work and begin to see the museum experience from the visitor's viewpoint. This may mean that a strongly-held belief about visitors or long-running programs will have to shift when the program no longer meets visitor's needs. Museum staff do not have to sacrifice responsibility for selecting and interpreting content, or upholding quality, but they will have to think more deeply about how visitors approach and understand that content. In sum, evaluation can empower staff to design the richest and most accessible experiences for their visitors.

Evaluation can be a stimulus for change and growth.

Evaluation is a political process that can affect change and enhance institutional growth. If an institutional environment consistently supports evaluative thinking, then projects will begin to align themselves more closely to the institutional mission. Any disconnect between

mission and action will be more glaring in light of focused, systematic evaluation. It can help an institution push the edge of their thinking and move out of repetitive, sometimes defeating practices.

One example from the living history field is the Opening Doors Visitor Engagement initiative implemented at Connor prairie. Based on extensive visitor research that used audio and video recordings of visitor experiences with interpreters, staff discovered that visitors were not absorbing educational messages and were not having a quality experience essential to the museum's mission. This research launched a major overhaul of institutional culture, practices, and interpreter strategies, including developing conversations based on visitor interests rather than following a standard script or monologue.

When Should You Do Evaluations?

For many years, museums conducted evaluation only upon completion of an exhibition or program, and generally focused on the question, "Did we do a good job?" Recently it has become more common practice to incorporate evaluation throughout all stages of a project, asking multiple types of questions along the way - What do visitors already know about this topic? What will motivate them to attend the exhibition or program? What are their expectations for the experience? What types of personal and social learning may occur?

To answer your most important questions, think strategically about the most useful stages in which to conduct evaluation and what you need to know at each juncture. Evaluation is generally divided into three main stages: 1) **Front-End** - The planning and conceptual design phase; 2) **Formative** - When the program or exhibition is up and running; and 3) **Summative** - Near the end or after the program or exhibition is over.

Front-End Evaluation

Studies that begin in the earliest stages of developing an exhibition or program are often called front-end evaluation. This stage can be thought of as the start of a continuing conversation among museum staff, designers/advisors, visitors, and the subject matter itself. Evaluation at this point occurs after the broad concepts and goals of a project are established but before much time or money has been invested in

expanding the concepts into an actual program or exhibition. These studies are exploratory in nature and typically seek information about visitor interests, expectations, and understanding of proposed topics.

Formative Evaluation

The purpose of formative evaluation is to assess ongoing project activities at several points in time to provide feedback for program improvement. Formative evaluation takes place while an exhibition or program is still being planned or during the early stages of implementation. The results of such studies are intended to offer direct, concrete, and practical ways to improve a project. Staff can make informed decisions about project development in order to better meet the needs of visitors and achieve the goals of the project and/or institution. During formative evaluation, researchers are often focused on how visitors are using a program or exhibition, how they behave (e.g., social; interaction, time spent, quality of engagement), what visitors respond best to and what they struggle with, as well as the extent to which their learning outcomes compare to intended outcomes.

Formative evaluation means that you must be open to making changes midstream based on something that does not seem to be working.

Summative Evaluation

The purpose of summative evaluation is to assess whether or not a project achieved its goals and objectives. This type of study is conducted at or near the end of an exhibition or program. Did the program do what it was intended to do? What specific aspects or components of the exhibition or program led to these outcomes? In some cases such studies provide staff members information they can use to further modify the exhibition or program. When modifications are not possible because of limitations, summative evaluation results are still valuable as lessons learned for future projects.

(Continued next quarter.)

* * * * *

This information was compiled by Jill Stein, Marianna Adams, and Jessica Lake and originally offered in the *AASLH Technical Bulletin* number 238 and *History News*, volume 62, number 2, 2007.

The Local Network

Simple and Inexpensive Evaluation Activities:

Try these simple, low-cost activities to keep your finger on your audience's pulse. Use multiple methods: observing what people do, listening to what they say, or analyzing what they leave behind (such as comment cards).

1. **Spend time on the floor.** Spending time observing visitors provides valuable insight into how visitors use space, engage with exhibits, read labels, and have conversations. Draft a checklist of behaviors you are interested in, or simply write down what you see and hear.
2. **Distribute simple survey cards.** Use simple survey cards to gather basic information about your visitors, such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, education, prior visitation, and residence. Design a half-page, attractive survey card to hand out to visitors or use as a tool for a quick interview.
3. **Create multiple opportunities for visitors to leave comments.** Many museums have comment books

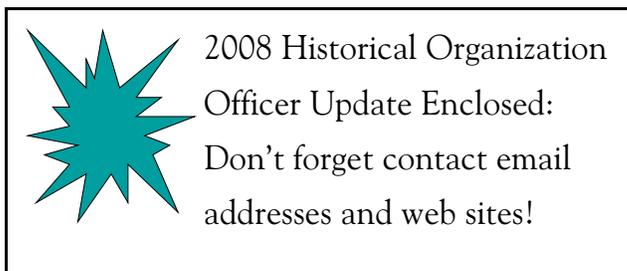
available, but they are often easy to miss. Be creative with the media you use - such as cards in a variety of shapes and colors, or anything visually compelling. To avoid assembling random information, consider using prompts for specific feedback.

4. **Talk to your visitors.** If you have a question about visitors, ask them directly. Talking with visitors does not necessarily require a detailed protocol, a long interview, or a large sample. Talking with visitors can range from a quick, ninety-second interview that is extremely simple

and focused (e.g., did they notice a particular sign or interactive that you suspect is not well-placed?), to the "four-minute interview."

5. **The "piggyback" focus group.** Think about opportunities when visitors, teachers, and/or students are at the museum for another event --

a professional development workshop or family event, for example. Spend ten to fifteen minutes getting feedback on a particular program, exhibition, or concern. This saves the time and effort of gathering people together and can make for a nice break in the regular agenda.



Address Service Requested

Bismarck, ND 58505-0
612 East Boulevard Av
North Dakota Heritage

58501
BISMARCK, ND
Permit #170
PAID
U.S. Postage
NON-PROFIT ORG.

