



The Local Network

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Manfred Heritage Museum, Harvey, ND

A Practical Guide to Integrating the Visitor Voice (Continued)

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.

Integrating the visitor perspective into all stages of planning, development, and implementation is more important now than ever.

Who Should Do Evaluation?

Many museums want to do evaluation on their programs and exhibitions but are not sure how to

proceed. Sometimes the first question is, "Should I hire an outside evaluator or try to do it myself?" There is no simple answer to that question. An outside evaluator usually brings a greater degree of objectivity to a project, and their wide range of experience provides a broader perspective. Professional evaluators also will have greater experiences and skills in designing studies, framing questions, selecting methods, and collecting and analyzing data. On the other hand, the process of doing evaluation as a museum practitioner provides excellent professional development opportunities for the staff. There may also be times when familiarity with an institution and its programs is especially desirable.

Doing it Yourself

Whether you are a large institution or a small historic house, conducting evaluation internally can be beneficial. While smaller, in-house evaluation studies do not necessarily replace comprehensive evaluation studies with an outside evaluator, there are numerous low-cost ways to keep your fingers on the pulse of the visitor experience and involve staff in more deeply connecting to and valuing the visitor experience.

In-house evaluation can also be a nice opportunity to involve program participants. An urban historical utilized members of their Teen Council to gather front-end data for a new teenage youth-related exhibition. The benefits were three-fold: 1) using volunteer teens saved the institution money; 2) the teen data collectors gained valuable interviewing experience; and 3) teens who were interviewed for the study likely felt more comfortable sharing their thoughts with a peer than an adult.

Helpful hints for conducting in-house visitor studies:

1. **Make sure your goals are clearly defined and agreed upon.** The most essential first step in conducting evaluation, whether on your own or with an outside

evaluator, is to have a clear understanding of the project goals, and to develop consensus among the stakeholders. All should agree on the desired outcomes of the exhibition or program to be evaluated, and the questions you would like to have answered by the evaluation.

2. Place reasonable expectations in yourself. It will take time for you to develop evaluation skills. Do not expect it to come all at once. Look at this process as a long-term learning experience, keeping in mind that you are not a professional evaluator, and you are not expected to become one. There are many benefits to doing evaluation on your own. One of them is to use evaluation as a process through which you gain greater understanding of your professional practice and grow in your skills and knowledge.

3. Be realistic about the scope of your project. It is common for museum practitioners, excited about doing evaluation, to take on evaluation projects beyond their ability, time, and resources. Avoid getting overwhelmed. Select a small, focused question rather than a broad one. Start with a small group of visitors (twenty to thirty) to identify key trends and issues without using a lot of time and resources. Keep the number of questions to a minimum, and focus them specifically on what you want to find out. Last, evaluate only issues that you have the ability to change.

4. Seek the support of other staff in the museum. Do whatever you need to do to gain internal recognition for your evaluation project. Start small and use other staff members' questions/issues to form the basis of your initial evaluation. Have an initial group meeting in which staff can discuss what and how to evaluate from the very beginning. Evaluation is often seen as a negative process, one that will reveal what people have done wrong. Do not be disheartened at initial resistance or disinterest; it is common. You will need to educate others on the benefits of evaluation.

5. Embrace the process more than the product. Evaluation is not so much about a final finding as it is about informing the process of design and implementation. It reveals lessons we need to learn, and requires that we revisit our objectives and keep matching our actions to them. Remain open to learning about your practice. Use evaluation as an opportunity to capitalize on individual and institutional strengths, and to help increase buy-in and ownership among staff at all levels.

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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.

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Two New Interpretive Centers Opening This Spring

The grand opening ceremonies for two new interpretive centers managed by the State Historical Society of North Dakota will

take place April 26 at the Chateau de Mores State Historic Site in Medora, and at Fort Abercrombie State Historic Site near Fargo on May 18.



An extraordinary dinosaur arrived February 5 at the North Dakota Heritage Center. The 67-million-year-old fossil of an Edmontosaurus is covered with mineralized skin and was found near Marmarth, North Dakota. Nicknamed "Dakota," the exhibit will open to the public on June 14 at the Heritage Center in Bismarck.



Bismarck's Northridge and Will-Moore schools' fourth grade students participated in the "Abe and Mary Lincoln" look-alike contest during the launch of the *Lincoln's Legacy in North Dakota* exhibit at the North Dakota Heritage Center on February 8.

The original 1862 Homestead Act document signed by President Lincoln, on loan from the National Archives, will be on display as part of the exhibit May 16 through November 10, 2008.

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

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