

- Regarding content objectives: "Some of us want just facts and some want mostly ideas. It seems we'll have to have both." (a curator)
- Regarding appearance: "I want it to look like a place to find out things but not to look like a classroom."

We will continue to use the rating scales where appropriate and to refine them from our experiences and as the medium of exhibition continues to change. At the end of one session, a participant said, "Does this mean there won't be an 'Oh my God!' phase?" The answer is, we still hope to hear that but out of joy rather than horror for what has been created.

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## Hopping To It: Evaluations of *Frogs!* Exhibit, Special Event, and Products

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### Introduction

By the end of 1997, more than one million people will have visited *Frogs!*, a special exhibit at Shedd Aquarium that opened in May of 1996 and will close in December of 1997. Shedd Aquarium staff and outside consultants set up a plan to conduct a multifaceted series of audience research and evaluation studies on the exhibit, related special events, and products related to the exhibit. The data from the studies has proven useful in a number of areas: planning, developing, and assessing exhibits; fine-tuning the accompanying interpretive programs; and providing input into the master planning process. This wide use was possible, in part, because four previous exhibits and two previous special events had had similar summative evaluations.

Shedd Aquarium has produced and presented special exhibits for fifteen years on a variety of aquatic-related topics, including undersea treasure, folk art, native cultures, and animal-related subject matter. Two major changes have occurred: In 1991 the MacArthur special exhibit hall was completed, and all subsequent special exhibits were staged there and, in 1995, the aquarium made a commitment to integrate live animals into the featured special exhibits in that space.

In addition to school, family, and regularly scheduled public programs, many institutions also devote considerable resources to multi-day special events or festivals as a marketing tool and as a means to reinforce important messages. Prior to 1994, Shedd Aquarium had put on an occasional festival, but in 1994 the aquarium made this a regular part of the year's planning with a Shark Weekend. At least two large-scale, themed special events are now conducted yearly. The special event for *Frogs* was the first associated with an exhibit to be evaluated.

As with previous events, the *Frogs!* program was a mixture of performance arts, craft activities, displays, and interpretive activities designed to serve a wide range of ages and backgrounds. These took place throughout the aquarium and were free of charge. The publicity for the event was merged with what was planned for the exhibit.

Although the aquarium had produced an occasional retail product, the mugs, shirts and posters designed for *Frogs!* were the first that related not only to the topic, but to the design and messages of the exhibit.

### The Evaluations

Shedd Aquarium has conducted a number of evaluation or audience research projects over its sixty-five-year history, but only recently has it approached the topics in an integrated, somewhat comprehensive, manner. This coincided with a change to a team-oriented management style and the development of a specific customer service philosophy. One result was a concentrated effort to revise and expand the planning and assessment process for a number of facets of the aquarium's operation, including events and exhibits.

### Formal Summative Evaluation

Beverly Serrell had done the summative evaluation of the four previous exhibits in the MacArthur special exhibit hall. This gave us the ability to compare and contrast results based on the type of exhibit and made the data available for use in a larger database. *Frogs!* became the fifth exhibit to be integrated into her meta-analysis (see *Visitor Behavior* Volume X, no. 3, 1995).

The aquarium was pleased to be a part of the research and gained the additional benefit of using her study as a means to directly compare the five exhibits. The data for the *Frogs!* exhibit put orientation, traffic flow, and loading capacity for the space in a quantifiable form, which will be useful in the process of developing the next generation of special exhibits, as well as in the planning process for specific future exhibits.

### Selected Results

Random visitors were timed and tracked through the exhibit. Additional visitors were interviewed about the main messages in the exhibit. Results were reported as mean time in the exhibit, an index of sweep rate, and percentage use of the exhibit components.

While the four previous exhibits were all considered successful, visitors to *Frogs!* "scored" highest among them on Serrell's suggested criteria. Visitors moved rather slowly, with an average time of twenty minutes in the 3490-square-foot exhibit. Expressing this as a unit to describe the rate at which visitors used the space, the "sweep rate" in *Frogs!* was 175. The four previous exhibits ranged from 581 to 225 in the others which means that visitors spent considerably more time in *Frogs!* than in any other special exhibit so far. Visitors interacted with a majority of the exhibit elements.

Sixteen of the twenty-six elements had a usage rate above 50%, and visitors stopping at those elements talked, pointed, and read the labels. In fact, about half the visitors were overheard reading labels out loud to each other! By comparison, percentages in the other exhibitions were lower. Two-thirds of the random sample of cued visitors expressed general or specific attitudes or concepts related to frog diversity and environmental conditions (the exhibit's communication objectives) immediately after viewing the exhibition.

### Other Exhibit and Event Studies

Maximizing the effectiveness of increasingly scarce institutional resources requires consistent, accurate information. The overall evaluation plan sought to serve three focus areas:

1) Customer service has been a major emphasis in recent years. How well were these exhibits, events, and products working? What could the data tell us about how well this philosophy can be implemented into the event and the exhibit?

2) Related to this emphasis was a decision to select a limited number of key ideas and projects for the year and to concentrate institutional resources from a number of aquarium sectors to support them. Special exhibits and events can impact the overall perception of the aquarium, its visibility, and attendance. Did these components have the desired effect?

3) One of the checkpoints in the team planning process was looking at consistency of messages, images, and visitors' reactions to the various components. The planning process required detailed internal communication and the results needed to serve all users.

A series of focus groups and small-group interviews were conducted during the planning process for the exhibit. The results were shared with retail and programming people who were involved in the exhibit and the special event program development. During the six-day opening event, visitors were observed attending the activities, and interviews were conducted as visitors left the aquarium. After the event, surveys were distributed to a random selection of visitors as they exited the exhibit. Data was collected on demographics, perceptions of the exhibit and programs, and visitors' ability to articulate the main messages. In addition, questions regarding the knowledge of the exhibit and the impact of advertising were added to the entrance surveys being taken during the summer. Finally, the aquarium initiated a year-long audience study and a traffic flow study in 1996. Each provided additional data on the exhibit.

### Selected Results

Surprises in front-end evaluation (how visitors reacted to conservation issues, what they already knew or wished to share with children, and what questions they had) effectively guided us in making selections within the exhibit and determining the tone of the information. Visitors reacted most

positively to the extensive variety of species on display; the color, poison, and sound sections of the exhibit; the event; and the activities within the exhibit or the event. They gave the exhibit high marks for fun, attractiveness, enjoyment, and "ability to learn neat stuff," but ranked it lowest in comfort, stating that crowds and lines were the most negative aspects.

Many people were able to recall quite specifically where they had seen or heard something about the exhibit or the event. We exceeded our expectations on how many people were visiting specifically or partly because of the exhibit or the event.

The special event enhanced the visit for all ages of visitors, whether or not they had children with them, and whether or not they actually visited the exhibit (additional fee required).

### Product Evaluation

Evaluation of the products developed was deferred due to time constraints and rapid development of a broader retail philosophy. The study may be re-instituted in 1997 after the opening of a new shop in the main aquarium and conversion of the shop adjacent to the exhibit to all frog-related items. The purpose of the study remains the same. We will look specifically at products developed by the Shedd, examining their relationship to the exhibit, the themes, and the main messages rather than conducting a market survey. We have planned a series of small, short focus groups with new and repeat aquarium visitors and with those who visit with children and those who do not.

### Impact on the Planning Process

Some results of the studies were used immediately and some will be used in the future:

1. The information was used during the first few months of the exhibit as a planning tool for the guest services and interpretation department, who staffed the exhibit. We had anticipated that, as an exhibit area became crowded, visitors would skip some sections and go on to the rest of the exhibit. When visitors waited to see each animal in turn, long lines resulted. Staff who greeted visitors as they entered the area were instructed to modify directions to visitors and signage was adjusted to accommodate the change. In addition, interpreters were assigned to interact with visitors as they stood in line. See also remedial evaluation.
2. The information was used as a part of the design and implementation of this exhibit. Comparisons to the previous year's exhibit, *Secret of the Swamp*, which had also used live animals as a focal point but had a very different style, was especially valuable. The discussion centered on how to determine the holding capacity of the exhibit area under different exhibit regimes. The new exhibit style was developed in part to serve a larger audience. We now had a graphic demonstration of what interactions occurred among the area of usable space, the

numbers of people served, the number of stops made, and individual's time in the exhibit.

3. The baseline data is being used to track seasonal changes in the exhibit audience. This will be added to other data in preparation for the next marketing plan.
4. After the initial planning was complete and the exhibit opened, the aquarium decided to continue the exhibit for an additional year. The summative data was not designed specifically for remedial planning, but ended up being used in that way. For example, we reached the limit of what could be improved in adjusting the visitor entry line, and we decided to move an underutilized video from inside the exhibit to the waiting area, in a sense extending the exhibit footprint.
5. Planning is underway for the next special exhibit/special event/products combination. We now have from one to five years of data on the various components.
6. Portions of the data from the studies and the meta-analysis have relevance to large-scale planning, such as way finding and planning for a new special exhibit hall as the aquarium implements a new master plan.

We continue to weave together the threads of information from a variety of sources to give us a clearer picture of our visitors and the exhibit experience at Shedd Aquarium, to assess larger, more complex combinations of exhibits, activities, and services, and to provide baseline data to be able to document our progress.

We'd love to hear about other "suites" of studies and share ideas. If you would like to contribute, please call or write.

### [VSA Elections - Continued]

As required by the VSA bylaws, only members who have paid their dues for the current year were eligible to vote, meaning that those who don't pay their membership until the conference registration lose their chance to vote.

There were 105 ballots received by the April 11 deadline, constituting a 46% return out of the possible 227 members who were eligible to vote as of April 11. The nominating committee greatly appreciates the willingness of everyone who participated, especially those who were willing to give their time and energy to the organization by accepting nominations for these positions and we commend the elected persons for their commitment to serving VSA.

Molly Hood, Chair of the Nominating Committee; Jeff Hayward and Steve Bitgood, committee members.



ChanSpotting # 2

He's working on a chapter for a new book to be published by MIT Press called *Information Design*.

## New Audience Research and Development Efforts at Shedd Aquarium

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In the fall of 1996, Shedd Aquarium launched a new initiative for audience research and development. Over the past five years, the institution has commissioned a number of visitor surveys, but the use of various consultants and methodologies made it challenging to compare and interpret the data we collected. As staff began to develop a number of key plans for the future, we saw the need to formulate a comprehensive plan for a consistent approach to audience research.

Accordingly, the aquarium contracted with Jeff Hayward and Marilyn Rothenberg of People, Places & Design to help us develop a strategy and program. We presented them with a rather ambitious program goal: to incorporate visitor and community input into all aquarium planning on a broader, deeper, and more systematic scale and to accurately assess the impact of our plans and operations.

On a more down-to-earth level, we listed specific needs for the next two years: to build data on current visitors on a regular basis; to solicit visitor response to our facilities and programs; and to solicit both visitor and community response to plans for major new programs and exhibits.

In October of 1996, we began surveying of general visitors. Our goal is to complete 2,700 of these questionnaires over the next twelve months. The survey consists of several sections, with some data, such as demographics, collected for the duration of the survey. Other sections help us focus on specific issues of concern, from our ticketing procedures to the cleanliness of our restrooms.

Preliminary data has been fascinating; the first month's surveys showed that two-thirds of our audience came from out-of-state, a figure we normally expect to see in summer. One-third of our visitor groups were families, while two-thirds were adults without children. (It will be interesting to compare this with our summer demographics.) Some visitors stayed for less than one hour, while others stayed for more than six hours. The median stay was about 2.5 hours. We also collected many responses on topics from exhibits (they loved our whales and *Frogs* special exhibit) to staff interpreters (enthusiastic and positive) to food service (needs some help).

All these comments will be critical to helping us improve our services and move forward with new plans. We also began a "wayfinding" study to see if and where problems exist with our traffic flow. In addition, we're working on ways to evaluate our existing community programs, to help us develop long-lasting partnerships and use our resources most effectively.

We've had a challenging but rewarding struggle to get this program off the ground. We're delighted to have started, and we look forward to sharing information with our colleagues as the program continues.