

Note: The article by Shettel on this page and the one by Bitgood on pages 4 and 5 serve as an introduction to this special issue. The editors of this issue (Shettel and Bitgood) hope that readers will, after completing the articles in this issue, become more aware of the need to plan for institutional acceptance of visitor evaluation – it does not happen spontaneously!

Some Thoughts on the Politics of Evaluation

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If someone had asked me 30 years ago, when several of us became interested in systematically studying visitor behavior in museums, to use the words “exhibit evaluation” and “politics” in the same sentence, I would have assumed that either they did not know what the word “evaluation” meant, or what the word “politics” meant, or both. Since that time those of us who have actively promoted evaluation in the museum setting and demonstrated its value, have slowly, and perhaps reluctantly, come to realize that these two constructs are not only related to each other, they are inextricably intertwined. However one might try to put a nicer face on it (and one contributor to this issue even goes so far as to suggest that it would help a lot if we would stop using the word “evaluation”). Using the visitor as a major source of information about how well managers, designers, curators, educators, and interpreters are doing their job represents a major adjustment in thinking about what they do, how they do it, and even why they do it. I would argue that this use of visitor data to inform decision making at all levels qualifies as a genuine paradigm shift in the approach taken to museum public programming.

Historically, there are several rather predictable responses whenever a major shift in the “world view” is proposed. The most immediate reaction is some variation of “It is wrong!” and “You are an idiot!” Coming from high places, as it usually does, this can delay not only acceptance, but even acknowledgment of the idea for a good long time. As the evidence begins to pile up for the correctness of the new way of thinking, a number of accommodations can, and usually do, take place. The most pernicious and hardest to combat is the reinterpretation of the idea so that it appears to be accepted but really is not. It becomes co-opted by those in the main stream (the “old guard”) and sanitized to the point where it no longer challenges or threatens the status quo.

This often results in premature victory celebrations by the change agents, who think they have finally “won.” (The Greeks, as usual, had a word for this process - metonymy - meaning confusing the name for the act, the vessel for its contents. The military is the master of metonymy - e.g., “liberating villages,” and “smart bombs.”) A variation on

this theme is to isolate the idea and its adherents so that they can do their own thing without really interfering with the way things have always been done.

Of course, there are also the real converts who “see the light” and refuse to compromise. Depending on their political skills, they may be seen as real trouble-makers or minor irritants, at least until the force of their convictions finally moves the opposition into a defensive position, and perhaps finally into acceptance.

While the process is fairly well understood, the timeline is hard to predict. The validity of the work of Galileo, who died in 1642, was formally recognized by the Vatican in 1993! It took several hundreds of years for the ideas of Copernicus to reach universal acceptance (and it would not surprise me to learn that there are still holdouts somewhere). And Darwin’s ideas have only had a little more than a century of exposure with a very long way to go before his world view comes even close to being accepted by the main stream of public opinion.

Where is visitor studies in this evolutionary journey? It is, I believe, moving slowly in the right direction, but is actually spread out all along the continuum. There are few who are outright hostile to the basic idea, and there are lots who can think of many reasons why they can’t do visitor studies, as several of the articles in this issue point out. There are those who do them only because they “have to” (e.g., NSF says so), but do not pay much (or any) attention to the results. There are those who like the sound of the idea (in this day and age it is very “politically correct” to say that you are “very interested” in knowing what the public thinks!) and say all the right things, but don’t have a real clue as to what the implications are for accepting and using the idea. If and when they find out, they often devise ways to soften the impact so it doesn’t rattle too many cages or pull too many chains. There are even institutions that have full-time evaluators (some for many years) that still do not know what to do with them.

This issue of *Visitor Behavior* comes at a most appropriate time, when we know better than ever before how to be really helpful to the museum community, but the museum community at large has not decided whether or not it wants to let us be that helpful. The articles that follow contain inspirational shafts of light, compelling reasons for doing evaluations, some depressing but realistic thoughts about all the obstacles we face in trying to convince museums to “Just Do It,” (as Kathleen Wagner says in her paper), and lots of well-meaning ideas for overcoming those obstacles.

I would like to think that we can predict the institutionalization of visitor studies as going inexorably through the “casual dating, going steady, marrying” process that D. Perry et al, describe in their paper (summarized in this issue by Erica Reed). But I can’t help think of all the *Strum und Drang* that is associated with each of these stages in real life. We have often been “dumped” by various institutions and it is well known that half of all marriages end in divorce! But then again, most divorced people get married again...