

Chapter 15: The Visitor Survey: Front-End Evaluation or Basic Research?

Ross Loomis, Marc Fusco, and Ruth Edwards
Colorado State University

Melora McDermott
Denver Art Museum

Purpose

The visitor survey is a highly adaptable tool for both basic research and front-end evaluation. This paper illustrates how one survey of visitors to an art museum was used to increase staff awareness of different levels of audience commitment, while at the same time yielding evaluation information about a specific exhibit to guide planning of new interpretation materials. The research purpose of the survey was suggested by the work of Hood (1983), while the front-end evaluation effort was adapted from Klein (1985).

Method

A stratified/random sample of 1012 visitors to the Denver Art Museum was completed during the spring and early summer of 1986. The survey instrument was administered by museum staff and volunteers and asked for visitor background information, preferences for different sources and kinds of both orientation and interpretation information, visit expectations, individual approaches to art and self-reported involvement with art. A subsample of the survey was collected on the Asian exhibit floor with part of the subsample collected before viewing the exhibit and the other part as they exited. This subsample answered additional questions about the Asian exhibit. Results were analyzed using SPSS statistical and TRYSYS cluster analysis programs.

Results

Cluster analysis. Nine clusters were found with reliability coefficients ranging from .67 to .84. The first cluster emphasized visitor interest and involvement with art. As shown in the computer-

generated diagram displayed in Figure 1, questions asking for self-ratings of interest in, enjoyment of, and knowledge about art formed this first cluster with additional questions about collecting and making art showing up near the cluster. Other clusters that emerged emphasized information on how to look at art, the importance of physical orientation aids, information about collections, interpretive aids, contexts for viewing art, visit experience values, individual approaches to experiencing art, and visit planning orientation.

Descriptive analysis. Front-end evaluation needs were served by performing a series of descriptive analyses on survey results. Two examples are shown here, both taken from the subsample drawn on the Asian Art floor of the museum. Table 1 displays perceived value (determined by ratings on a four-point scale) of different kinds of information that could be interpreted in the exhibit. The subsample was divided into those indicating that the Asian floor was a primary stop on their visit (destination) and visitors seeing all of the museum (touring). The Asian floor subsample was asked to indicate their interest in specific kinds of objects that were on that floor, with half the subsample rating what they were interested in seeing (pre-visit) and half rating their interest in learning more about different objects (post-visit). Table 2, N=165 contains some examples of the object interest ratings.

Discussion

The initial plan for this survey was to emphasize front-end evaluation through generating descriptive data about visitor interest in specific exhibit content and methods for presenting orientation and interpretive information. As the survey was developed, it was decided to add a number of general art interest questions to explore audience segmentation by interest and involvement. This more basic research effort has proven very useful in identifying meaningful differences between visitors. In particular, the importance of a large segment of visitors who are interested in art, but rate their knowledge as low to moderate, has been brought out by survey results. More in-depth interview studies have been undertaken to learn more about this kind of visitor (see McDermott, 1988) and more planning has been directed toward anticipating the needs of interested art novices.

References

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Footnote

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Figure 1. General Art Interest Cluster
Cronbach's Alpha = .84)

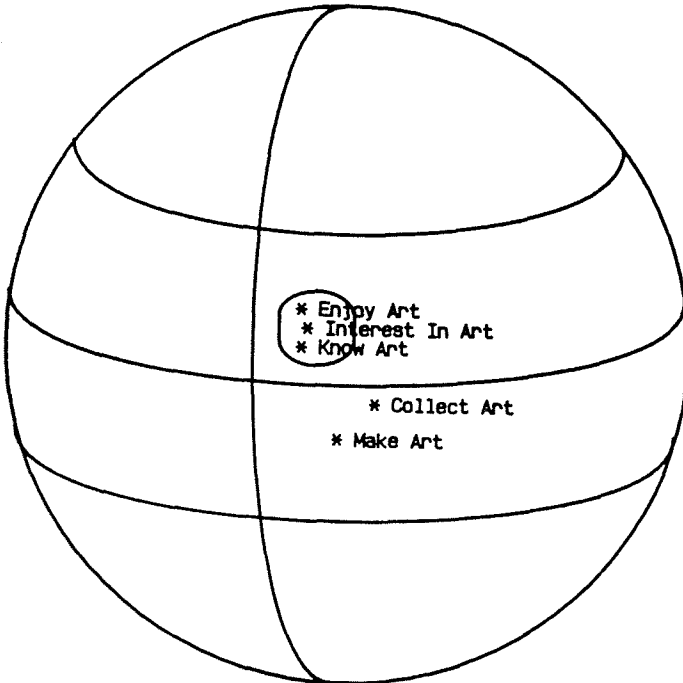


Table 1. Perceived Value of Different
Kinds of Exhibit Information
(Touring N=120; Destination N=160)

Mean Ratings of Level of Importance

<u>Item</u>	<u>Touring</u>	<u>Destination</u>
How objects used	3.0	2.8
Things to look for	2.8	2.8
Meaning of art work	2.8	2.8
Formal elements of work	2.6	2.7
Things in specific work	2.4	2.5
How collections formed	2.4	2.3
Expert judgements	2.1	2.3

Table 2. Visitor Interest in Oriental Objects

[Interest in seeing object (pre-visit sample, N=166) and interest in learning more about object (post sample, N=168)]

Percent of Responses

<u>Objects</u>	<u>Not Interested</u>	<u>Some Interest</u>	<u>Interested</u>	<u>Very Interested</u>
<u>Furnishings</u>				
Pre-visit	0	30	47	22
Post-visit	8	29	41	20
<u>Silk Robes</u>				
Pre-visit	0	28	46	25
Post-visit	12	29	34	23
<u>Screens/scrolls</u>				
Pre-visit	0	19	49	30
Post-visit	8	24	33	33
<u>Ancient</u>				
Pre-visit	3	15	41	41
Post-visit	4	21	41	33
<u>Ceramics</u>				
Pre-visit	3	24	44	29
Post-visit	6	28	43	22
<u>Adornments</u>				
Pre-visit	7	40	31	22
Post-visit	14	31	31	23