

Chapter 18: Visitor Data is a Three-Way Street

Sydney Donahoe
San Diego Wild Animal Park
Escondido, California

Visitor research—and with good reason

The Zoological Society of San Diego has many good reasons to conduct visitor research. As a non-profit organization, most of the financial support for the San Diego Zoo and the San Diego Wild Animal Park comes directly from visitors. Consequently, it is to our advantage to know as much as we can about why visitors come, where they come from, and what they like about our two facilities. As a major tourist destination, San Diego offers a wide variety of attractions which vie for visitation from both local residents and out-of-town visitors. Again, the more we know about those who come, the better we can serve them and others like them. Last, but certainly not least, the sheer numbers of visitors to the Zoo and Wild Animal Park merit our attention. Almost five million people chose to visit us in 1987. The wealth of data available is surely a professional evaluator's nirvana--or perhaps nightmare! Whatever the case, we have employed visitor research for three main reasons: advertising and marketing campaigns, to improve our product, and to assess visitor learning and enjoyment.

Visitor surveys point the way to effective advertising

At the San Diego Wild Animal Park, our share of this friendly invasion is 1.2 million visitors annually. To many zoos that attendance figure would be astronomical. The Wild Animal Park staff, however, is always eager to catch up with our flashy big sister Zoo who had a 56-year head start, not to mention a splashy neighbor who uses water to great advantage in our tropical climate. Consequently, the Wild Animal Park's Public Relations and Marketing Department has commuted regularly down Visitor Data Street to collect information about our visitors. Throughout our 16-year history, advertising campaigns have been planned from information collected through visitor self-report at our exit and by phone and mail.

The monthly random-sample exit surveys have yielded an interesting picture of our visitors (Crockett, 1987). Most of them are between the ages of 29 and 54. They are well-educated: in fact, more than 80% of visitors who define themselves as head of household have college experience or bachelor or master's degrees. Their income is higher than the national average, too. We know how they find out about the Wild Animal Park and what motivates them to come. We also know where they come from; more than half of our visitors come from areas outside San Diego County. In addition to the exit surveys, an annual Southern California Attraction Survey gives us another window into our visitors' behavior. This tracking study tells us how visitors perceive the Wild Animal Park in relation to Southern California attractions; it also gives us information about the kinds of people who did not choose to visit our facility. Our first venture down Visitor Data Street has taught us much about our visitors and has helped us reach other target attendance groups.

Focus groups sharpen our sense of direction

In 1985 we recognized the need to develop new strategies for reaching wider and deeper into our visitor potential. The Wild Animal Park staff set out to accomplish three major objectives.

- increase first-time attendance
- increase repeat visitation
- increase revenue

To accomplish these goals, we added a new lane to the traffic in visitor research, and decided to ask our visitors a very risky question: how can we improve? Eager to gather data quickly, we selected focus groups as a method of acquiring qualitative data about our visitors and potential visitors. These groups were composed of Zoological Society members, nonmembers, people who had never visited the Park before, and people who visit often. We even conducted two focus groups with children. The focus group participants told us they wanted five things to change about the Wild Animal Park experience:

- They wanted a more active experience; they told us there was a lot to see, but not enough to do.
- Visitors wanted to get closer to the animals. The majority of the Park's animals are in spacious habitats—wonderful for reproductive successes, but farther away than most zoo visitors are used to.

- They expressed a desire for changes. They wanted new things to do, and more things than they could do in one day.
- Visitors requested more cool areas in the Park; with temperatures of 85° and above fifty days of the year, shady spots are at a premium at the Wild Animal Park.
- Finally, visitors asked for more activities for children. This makes sense, since we know that visits to zoos are often prompted by family outings (Swenson, 1984; Hood, 1983).

The Wild Animal Park staff responded with a number of quick-fix enhancements. We put visitors closer to animals with a Wild Welcome, offering an animal close-up and touch experience. After our elephant show, guests are invited to feed and touch the stars of the show, and to ask questions of the trainers. We also developed a Gorilla Activity Center, adjacent to our gorilla exhibit, which offers a variety of interactive experiences to visitors:

- Telescopes help bridge the gap between visitors and gorillas.
- Youngsters and adults like to “measure up” to this graphic of a gorilla.
- Benches offer a spot to relax and watch a video about our behind-the-scenes activities with gorillas.
- In our first rendition of this area, we featured a craft station where visitors could “rub a gorilla the right way” and take home a brass rubbing souvenir. Formative evaluation, however, has indicated that this area is not cost-effective to operate. Consequently, we will soon replace it with a storybook corner for adults and children.
- Visitors of all ages seem to enjoy comparing their hand sizes with a three-dimensional mold of our male gorilla's hand.
- An award-winning horticultural plan immerses visitors in a cool, tropical forest-like environment.

With the completion of this visitor enhancement, we felt we had listened and responded to the opinions expressed in the focus groups; we had earned another lane on Visitor Data Street. One thing had been overlooked, however; we had neglected to build summative evaluation into our program design. It wasn't long, though, before we had an opportunity to remedy that.

Formal evaluation helps keep us on course

Eighty-six percent of the visitors to the Wild Animal Park ride the Wgasa Bush Line, a 50-minute narrated tour. Visitors ride five miles, see

600 acres of enclosures, and encounter 175 species of mammals and birds on this monorail. Therefore, it was a perfect target in our quest to improve the visitor experience—we could make 86% of our visitors happier in one fell swoop. And we could also communicate our conservation message more effectively, thus meeting staff goals. An added bonus is that the monorail is a major source of revenue for the Park—the project was very quickly approved by our administrators! In this project, we learned to travel yet another way on Visitor Data Street by including formal evaluation in our program design.

The multifaceted Monorail Enhancement Project was driven by the feedback which we had obtained from focus groups. As a result, exhibit designers took a fairly sterile queue area, gave it a welcoming entrance, added an attractive and cooling water element, landscaped the aisles with interesting plants, and included an aviary filled with active and beautiful African finches. The interpretive plan includes six major graphics sprinkled throughout the waiting area. These panels prepare visitors for the upcoming experience—to remind people that they like and care about wildlife. The text includes stories and quotations which add to its appeal and readability. Just before visitors board the monorail itself, their guide greets them and introduces a 5-minute video tape. The video touches on the plight of wildlife today and prepares visitors for the monorail tour. The monorail tour itself required a solid year of preparation. With the help of Tim Despond, a presentation consultant from Active Environments, we designed and implemented a unique interdisciplinary information system (Donahoe, 1988). The expected result of this project is a ridership that disembarks the monorail having been entertained, educated, and inspired and who are eager to do their bit for wildlife.

The services of an evaluation consultant, Claudia Derwin, were contracted to develop and implement the formal evaluation of the monorail's interpretive plan. We expect to complete this evaluation by midsummer, 1988. To date, we have completed pretests of the queue area and the tour (Derwin, 1987).

In order to obtain the most accurate information possible, we contracted the evaluation so that we could triangulate the data (Bitgood & Benefield, 1986). Our evaluators collected data through observation, by recording candid comments, and by conducting short interviews with visitors. 310 interviews were conducted during busy holiday periods. Predictably, preliminary findings contain some data that we expected as well as a few surprises.

- Our visitors displayed a fierce loyalty to the Wild Animal Park—a loyalty which exceeded the expected behavior of giving socially acceptable responses. Refreshingly, the children's responses were much more honest. They didn't hesitate to tell us that our former queue area was boring! (see Table 1)
- Visitors' suggestions for improvements to the waiting area closely paralleled our focus group data and validated our exhibit and interpretive designs. (see Table 2)
- An amazing 70% of children and 64% of adults could not only state reasons for wildlife endangerment, but cited specifically the two main reasons—poaching and habitat destruction. (see Table 3)
- Likewise, our visitors are quite clear on how the Wild Animal Park helps wildlife. 70% of children surveyed and 80% of adults could correctly give two ways in which the Wild Animal Park contributes to conservation. (see Table 4)

As you can readily see, it will be a challenge to increase the high retention scores in these last two areas. We are counting on formal evaluation to come to our rescue here; because we have quantified our visitors' responses, we can measure increases even if they are incrementally fairly small.

From one-lane road to visitor information freeway

As we continue exhibit and program planning at the Wild Animal Park during future years, visitor feedback is becoming more available and more important to us. The Zoological Society of San Diego has just completed the Values and Lifestyles Study, commonly referred to as "VALS", developed by the Stanford Research Institute. Based on the information from this psychographic segmentation study, we will continue to mold our product to reach our selected target markets. Our future will be shaped by two main forces: our visitors and our mission statement which reads:

"The Zoological Society of San Diego is dedicated to increasing understanding and appreciation of the inherent worth of all life forms by exhibiting animals and plants in natural settings and applying its efforts and influence to the conservation of the earth's wildlife" (The Diamond Edge, 1985).

From my own perspective, formal evaluation will be a component of all future educational and interpretive programs. As an educator in an

institution where conservation is our most important message, a quotation by Baba Dioum sums up my professional mission: "In the end, we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; we will understand only what we are taught." Evaluation can be the flint on which we sharpen that teaching; it can keep us close to our audiences and true to our messages.

References

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Table 1

Children's opinions of the monorail queue area

Do you think the waiting area was boring or fun?

Boring	72%
Fun	26%
Neutral	2%

Would you like to spend some time in this area again?

No	51%
Yes	21%
Not sure	28%

Table 2

"If we changed this area, what would you like to see here?"

<u>Children</u>	<u>Adults</u>
more animals	information (signs)
monkeys	shade
birds	animals
more shade	shorter line

Table 3

Responses to why animals become endangered:

<u>Response</u>	<u>Children</u> N = 179	<u>Adult</u> N = 371
hunting & killing	79 (44%)	115 (31%)
loss of habitat	31 (17%)	76 (21%)
killed for trophies	16 (9%)	30 (8%)
changes in environment	--	15 (4%)
Totals	126 (70%)	236 (64%)

Table 4
**Responses to how the Wild
 Animal Park helps wildlife:**

Responses	Children N = 168	Adult N = 374
breeding and reproduction	29 (17%)	115 (31%)
protection and preservation	45 (27%)	66 (18%)
education	12 (7%)	53 (14%)
safe, natural environment	8 (4%)	32 (8%)
reintroduction into the wild	-----	21 (5%)
saving endangered animals	24 (14%)	15 (4%)
scientific study and research	-----	18 (5%)
care and feeding	-----	17 (4%)
visibility, awareness and exposure	-----	15 (4%)
Totals	118 (70%)	299 (80%)