

The following paper was part of a panel discussion, "A Look To The Future," that was scheduled as the final session of a recent visitor studies conference held in London. Since this paper is not included in the published proceedings of the conference (*Museum Visitor Studies in the 90s*, edited by Sandra Bicknell & Graham Farmelo, Science Museum, London, 1993; see page 17 for details on how to order this book), it is presented here for the benefit of those who could not attend the conference.

A Return to the Future

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I feel especially unqualified to speak to the subject of this panel because of my track record in making predictions about the future of visitor studies. My most single and public failure in this regard occurred way back in 1976 when the American Association of Museums asked several well-known proponents of visitor studies at that time to speak on the subject. On this panel with me, by the way, were Chan Screven and Ross Loomis, two names I suspect you know very well.

I was literally bursting with enthusiasm and optimism at that time, having completed over the previous ten years several large-scale studies in which the value of collecting information from visitors about their response to exhibits *as they were being prepared* was incontrovertibly evident. I had successfully carried out several mock-up validation studies (now called formative evaluation) and wrote them up in reports and articles – one of them (Shettel, 1973) being an article published in *Museum News*, the official publication of the American Association of Museums (AAM), that got a lot of attention – "Exhibits: Art Form or Educational Medium."

After extolling the virtues of doing such studies, I made a prediction at the end of my talk – namely that *within* ten years, *all* major exhibit development efforts would be carried out with the help of objectively obtained inputs from members, or potential members, of the target audience.

Well, needless to say, this prediction was in significant error, not only when 1986 rolled around, but will continue to be in error when 1996 rolls around.

So, given this little bit of historical trivia, I will let you decide how much predictive value there will be in what I have to say here.

First, let me say that I am convinced that this complex enterprise we lump under the general heading of "visitor studies" has reached a point in its short lifetime such that, in

some form, it will not only continue to exist, but grow. It will not go away – even though there are those at this conference, who think it should. I would love to debate those who dismiss what we do by tying both our research and evaluations wagons to the three bogeyisms of modern philosophers of science – positivism, empiricism, and behaviorism – but that is not what this panel is about. In any case, I thought that Roger Miles (1993) did an excellent job of addressing these issues in his earlier presentation.

The field of visitor studies, as I see it, has two large "arms" – a basic research arm and an applied technology arm, and, while they relate to each other in interesting ways, we would do well to make this distinction more apparent in our various discussions. The research-based arm is the least developed and has had, and still has, the greatest number of challenges facing it. The reason for this is simple. Visitor studies is fundamentally about human beings of all ages, types and backgrounds as they occasionally exist in and respond to a very special and rather strange environment we call a *museum*, with all the attendant complexities that this scenario suggests. We will not have a comprehensive "handle" on people in their roles as visitors and non-visitors until we have a better "handle" on people in their roles as adults, parents, children, teachers, learners, loafers, thrill-seekers, risk-takers, and so on. Why people make the decisions they make, how they weigh alternatives, how they attach meaning to their experiences, why some of them prefer watching a soccer game on TV while drinking a can of beer rather than going to the Victoria and Albert Museum to look at 18th century tapestries – these are all questions, the answers to which will require careful, long-range, programmatic, and interdisciplinary study. In fact, I predict that we will get to completely understand and model the visitor in all of his and her individual and social completeness only when we can understand human beings in general – which is probably never.

I think we will have to look to universities for much of this kind of basic work, and to government granting agencies to support it financially, which they do not now tend to do, at least in the U. S. I do not see any major breakthroughs in this area, and, in fact, I do not see very many people in positions to do much about it. Our basic research arm is very weak and has little prospect of getting a steroid injection in the foreseeable future.

Lacking the answers to these profound and fundamental research-based, programmatic, interdisciplinary questions, should we stop what we are doing out in the real world? Do we have to know everything before we can do anything? I don't think so. The medical profession did not, and does not, wait until it knows everything about the human body before it applies what it does know to help us. While research workers back in the labs are trying to find out exactly what makes the heart beat, surgeons are replacing hearts. The

recipients of these hearts do not say, "Wait a minute, you can't give me a new heart until you know everything there is to know about the heart." They say, "Thank you for letting me live awhile longer."

Which brings me to the second arm of visitor studies – the applied technology arm. It is here, I think, where most of the future action lies because this area deals with real problems encountered by real people trying to prepare exhibits and programs that will be used (or ignored) by real visitors.

This arm has two main branches – one devoted to audience surveys and the other to exhibit/program/facility evaluation. That these two sub-specialties are two sides of the same coin is obvious but not always acknowledged by practitioners. As in all marketing and public relations efforts, getting more people to use your product *should* be tied to making sure that that product is what you claimed it to be. Visitors are only going to be fooled once when they find that the old, dark, unfriendly, incomprehensible, hard floored, no place to sit, sexist, white, Euro-centered place that they experienced on their first visit many years ago is still essentially that same place, despite what the nice person on TV said about the Museum of Obscure Information being "An enjoyable and fun place to take the whole family!"

The dialogue between these two branches needs to be strengthened in both directions so that we are not selling visitors the sizzle before we are sure we have a steak to offer them when they come through our doors. I cannot predict that such increased dialogue will be forthcoming, but I can predict that if it does not improve, we will be disappointed at the results of our efforts to attract more diverse and traditionally under-represented audiences to our institutions.

Getting back to the exhibit evaluation branch of our applied technology arm – there are four opportunities in the exhibit development cycle where we can tap into the visitor directly for information (see Screven, 1990; Shettel & Bitgood, 1993), and one where we can do so indirectly. Let me say a word about how I see the future of each one of these opportunities – but NO dates!

Front-end evaluation has been, and will continue to be, the fastest growing of the five areas because it makes intuitive sense and it is the least threatening to the exhibit development team. There is none of the "you made a mistake" flavor to it since it precedes having done anything substantive. It is also *preventive* in nature, rather than *corrective*, and thus has the potential for giving the biggest bang for the buck. It will, I predict, continue to be a growth industry.

Next in temporal progression, formative evaluation must be given the gold star historically for being the first methodology specifically designed to improve the effectiveness of exhibits that was (slowly) accepted by a number of

museums, some of them prominent enough to be noticed by other museums (the Natural History Museum here in London being a prime example). That those who use formative evaluation proclaim its effectiveness and usefulness almost without exception (and we heard and saw some excellent examples in Alan Friedman's keynote address) says that it must give a good return for the money and time invested in it. Some government funding agencies in the U.S., and I believe also here in England, look for formative studies in the exhibit projects they support. I will say it again: *Someday*, all major exhibits will be formatively evaluated.

The new kid on the block, methodologically, is critical appraisal. Carried out on existing exhibits that may need to be or are going to be modified, this method is, strictly speaking, not a visitor input but a *professional* input. Since this approach is based entirely on the findings of previous visitor studies, only those knowledgeable of the considerable body of literature that has been produced over the last thirty years or so should conduct such appraisals – preferably, in my opinion, by persons NOT connected to the institutions for whom the study is being done.

Such studies do two things rather well. They document what it is about the current exhibit that should be corrected as soon as possible (texts that cannot be read because of glare and reflections, objects hidden from view, labels placed in places where no one looks, technical words beyond the comprehension of the typical visitor, etc.). Secondly, the appraisal identifies those areas that would most benefit from visitor-based remedial evaluation.

Remedial evaluation is similar to summative in one sense because it is carried out on the completed exhibit, except that it is specifically targeted at problem areas and how to fix them, areas that were perhaps identified in the critical appraisal. However, remedial evaluation is methodologically more related to formative evaluation because it usually involves making temporary changes or "fixes" to the exhibit, then data collection from visitors, and perhaps another round of changes before the exhibit is ready to be "permanently" fixed. (Perhaps it is this Janus-like quality that leads Roger Miles to dislike the term "remedial," even though he has carried out such studies in his own institution.)

I predict a slow trend in which museums that have major investments in existing problematic exhibitions, but do NOT have the funds to get rid of them and do something else, will look to both critical appraisal and remedial evaluation to significantly upgrade these exhibits. I think they will be surprised at how much better their existing exhibits could be with a relatively small investment of time and funds.

Historically, summative evaluation tended to be a management tool used to assess the overall effectiveness of an exhibition to see if its goals and objectives were met and the

expenditure of funds worth the effort. However, well-conceived, comprehensive summative evaluations that address not only how visitors use and respond to the exhibit, but such seldom looked-at variables as long-term visitor impact, have contributed and still can contribute to the research base that I noted earlier needed to be nourished and maintained if we want to have more than an ad hoc, applied technology. Without outside sources of support, however, I see such studies slowly disappearing, at least in the U.S.

We will pay a price for this trend in terms of the long-term health of the field of visitor studies. I wish I had an answer to this problem, but I see nothing on the horizon that suggests a way out.

A final prediction: As a field of study, but especially in the applied area, we will have to come to grips with the question of quality control. I have seen those whose only exposure to the methods of exhibit evaluation was attending a one- or two-day evaluation workshop being given the sole responsibility for carrying out evaluation studies when they return to their home institutions. I have seen museum directors making major decisions on the basis of the results of a few focus group sessions.

There is real danger that the field can be subverted by those who claim to be our supporters and advocates, but who unknowingly do, or allow to be done, sub-standard evaluations that masquerade as the real thing. It has happened before in many areas—well-conceived ideas are taken over by those who grasp the outward trappings, but lack an understanding of the inner workings that make those ideas truly viable. Exhibit evaluation is by no means completely “out of the woods” on this issue. Progress and growth are not necessarily the same things. We would do well to keep our eyes on the former while we applaud the latter.

References

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.....ANNOUNCEMENT.....

When Science Meets Culture An International Congress on Scientific and Technological Culture Montréal, Canada April 10-13, 1994

Around the world, public communication of scientific and technological concepts — sometimes called “public understanding of science and technology,” sometimes called “science and technology literacy,” sometimes called “culture scientifique” — depends on various activities undertaken by individuals, organizations, and government agencies. The people and groups try to:

- bring the public closer to science and technology,
- educate the public about the various scientific and technological subjects, and
- help the public understand the impact of scientific discoveries and technological advances.

Most important, these groups are usually committed to helping the public realize that science and technology are at the heart of contemporary culture, that science and technology are essential for progress, for improving the quality of life for each and every one of us. Sharing scientific and technological culture among all citizens is a requirement for any society that plans to increase its competitiveness in order to continue to assure economic development and the quality of life to which its citizens aspire.

But, to be effective, actions promoting scientific and technological culture must be guided by a global strategy that coordinates and integrates them. The actions must acquire meaning within a global context. To help develop that strategy, various groups around the world are participating in a dialogue about key issues and concepts, including:

- Mastering scientific knowledge is today, more than ever, a strategic factor in economic competitiveness.
- Mastering scientific knowledge is today, more than ever, necessary for full participation in a complex society.
- No one approach to developing scientific and technological culture can succeed, because of the important variety of publics, themes, and objectives being pursued.

To continue the dialogue, an international conference on “When Science Meets Culture: Public communication of Science and Technology” has been scheduled for April 10-13, 1994 in Montréal, Québec, Canada. The meeting is designed to bring together journalists, government policymakers, NGO managers, scientists, researchers, and others who care about scientific and technological culture.

The Objectives

- Set a high value on descriptions of how to develop scientific and technological culture, and on thoughtful analyses of those descriptions.