

## Using Research To Guide the Development and Marketing Of An African-American Exhibit

G. Donald Adams (1993). In D. Thompson, A. Benefield, H. Shettel, & R. Williams (Eds.), *Visitor Studies: Theory, Research, and Practice, Volume 6*. Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design.

Adams describes a project at the Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, a facility which offers both an indoor museum and many historic buildings. Among these buildings is the Mattox House, originally located near a Ford plantation in Georgia. It was reconstructed in Greenfield Village as the home of a white slave overseer, and placed near two slave homes, also moved from their original site in Georgia.

Nearby, visitors could also view a courthouse in which Abraham Lincoln practiced law. According to Museum documents, these structures were "to serve as monuments to Lincoln's emancipation of the slaves." However, during recent research of the Mattox House, it was discovered that, in fact, it had not been the home of a white overseer, but was built by a free black family who lived and farmed there until it was purchased by Henry Ford.

In addition, new information suggested that the interior furnishings and yard did not accurately represent the home's original state. It was decided that the slave houses and the Mattox House should be moved together to another location, in order to provide a description of African-American life during the last century. However, few African-Americans live in the city of Dearborn, and it was feared that an exhibition of black culture would not be well supported, due to long-standing tension between blacks and whites in the Detroit area. Village staff members decided that the process of developing this new area should include not only careful historical research, but thorough audience evaluation as well.

Adams briefly presents seven different types of research that were conducted, describing for each its purpose and the ways in which it influenced the development of the exhibit. These included the following: (1) a search for primary documentation, intended to help the staff understand the history of the buildings and their occupants; (2) discussion with a consulting panel comprised of people who were familiar with African-Americans of the particular culture to be represented, African-Americans living in Detroit, and specialists in the interpretation of African-American history; (3) consultation with a minority-owned public relations agency to help the Museum and Village most effectively involve the Detroit African-American community in the project; and (4) involvement of focus groups conducted by a minority-owned research firm to help shape both the exhibit and the promotional messages which would be released.

Focus groups were conducted with each of four audience segments: suburban African-Americans, suburban Euro-Americans, Detroit African-Americans, and Detroit Euro-Americans. All of those who were parents with children ages 8-15 who had participated in cultural activities during the previous three years. (5) Formative studies included random visitor interviews, true-false questionnaires completed by visitors, educators, children, parents and others, as well as reviews of exhibit audio tapes and an orientation label by visitors. The purpose of this phase was to help Village staff members understand the expectations and interests of visitors with regard to African-American history. (6) A sample of school teachers was asked to review proposed curriculum materials, to determine whether they would be useful and whether they would actually be used in 9th grade classrooms. (7) Finally, upon completion of the exhibit, fifth and seventh grade students were tested for knowledge of African-American history, both before and after a visit. This was used to assess the exhibit's influence on students. Overall, the Greenfield Village staff felt that the new interpretive area has been a success since its opening, but are continuing their evaluation.

Summarized by Don Thompson

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