

ATTITUDES TOWARD EXHIBIT EVALUATION

Steve Bitgood & Gerald Carnes (1987). Professionals' Attitudes Toward Exhibit Evaluation. Technical Report No. 87-80. Jacksonville, AL: Psychology Institute, Jacksonville State University.

We mailed a survey to over 250 professionals who deal with visitors in exhibition-type facilities. Half of these professionals were museum or zoo directors and the other half were subscribers to Visitor Behavior. It was assumed that subscribers would be more knowledgeable about, and place more value in, exhibit evaluation than a group of nonsubscribing professionals. Although the sampling techniques can be questioned on a number of issues, the results provide some interesting findings concerning attitudes toward evaluation. About 50 percent of the surveys were returned, probably from persons more enthusiastic about evaluation than those who did not return the survey. A very brief summary of some of the highlights is described below. Because of the limited space, it is impossible to give a detailed description of all the findings and comments made by respondents. See the complete report for greater detail.

RESULTS

How important is exhibit evaluation? All respondents agree that evaluation is important. There was little difference between facility directors and nondirectors.

What are the goals of evaluation? Five goals were offered. The percentage agreement for each goal by directors and nondirectors is listed below.

Goal	Agreement	
	Directors	Nondirectors
Education	97 %	93 %
Entertainment	72 %	72 %
Visitor Comfort	91 %	95 %
Conservation	100 %	89 %
Realism	49 %	54 %

It is interesting that directors all agree that conservation is an important goal of exhibition, while only 89 % of nondirectors agree. Both directors and nondirectors appear to agree that the major goals of exhibition are: education; conservation; and visitor comfort. Entertainment and realism are considered less important.

Who should evaluate? The results of responses to three questions suggest some attitude differences between directors and nondirectors on this issue.

Item	Agreement	
	Directors	Nondirectors
•Paid staff can do its own evaluation	53 %	57 %
•There is not enough time for staff to do evaluation	14 %	44 %
•Evaluators must have sufficient knowledge	54 %	76 %

Nondirectors are usually the ones to do the evaluation and are more likely than directors to feel that the staff does not have enough time. Nondirectors who are assumed to be more involved in evaluation are more likely to appreciate the skills and knowledge necessary for evaluation.

From where should funds come? Nondirectors were more likely to agree that funds should come from the regular facility budget than directors. Percent agreement for nondirectors was 89; and for directors, 58.

Whose reactions should be measured in evaluation? Directors were less likely to agree that visitors should be considered.

Group	Agreement	
	Directors	Nondirectors
Visitors	89 %	98 %
Experts	86 %	85 %

What are the benefits of evaluation? Nondirectors were more likely to see beneficial effects of evaluation.

Item	Agreement	
	Directors	Nondirectors
•It can determine the best way to display	93 %	95 %
•It can help improve an exhibit	100 %	100 %
•It can help to increase attendance	72 %	82 %
•It can help to decide where to allocate resources	80 %	90 %

Conclusions. While directors and nondirectors both appear to recognize the importance of exhibit evaluation, nondirector respondents appeared to be more likely to believe that: evaluation requires facility funding; involves time and knowledge of methodology that staff may not have; and evaluation is beneficial. Since facility directors control the resources, it is critical that those of us who believe in exhibit evaluation communicate its importance to the directors in order to convince them of the importance and complexity of exhibit evaluation.