

The Whole Visitor Experience: An Introduction to Three Papers about Visitor Services

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The collection of three papers (Stokes, Hill, and Simmons) that follow is about the emerging field of Visitor Services, and why there should be a much closer relationship between Visitor Studies and Visitor Services, for mutual benefit.

In the last few years there has been increasing use of the term Visitor Services in museums. It is a welcome development, and I hope the trend continues. Museums and aquariums that are thinking about their visitors have realized that they have to think about all aspects of a visit, from the visitors' point of view—not just the exhibitions, but also: “Where can we eat?” “Is there a coat check?” “Where’s the children’s room I heard about?” Visitor Services departments are charged with thinking about all of these questions, with responsibilities ranging from operations and admissions, to security and maps.

In Visitor Studies, we’re also concerned with the experiences of museum visitors. However, much of our work falls primarily into three categories: audience analysis, exhibit evaluation, and program evaluation. We’ve seen big strides in these areas and made useful contributions to the planning processes at many museums. However, if we continue to operate out of only these categories—which seems likely since they are closely tied to the channels of funding—then I think we will be missing an opportunity to make an impact on the whole visitor experience. We might continue to deal with segments of experience, such as attracting people to come to the museum, but not follow through on what the experience is like when they get in the door.

The term “whole visitor experience” is not yet a common one, but I have high hopes that it will soon be a fixture in our language as much as terms such as formative evaluation. To help stimulate awareness and discussion of this perspective, and its implications for Visitor Studies, I’ve invited three people to speak at this session. These are people who have the whole visitor experience on their minds all the time—it is their job. They are Directors of Visitor Services at major institutions and they are concerned with understanding and serving their visitors in every detail. Ellen Stokes will tell us how she defines the challenges for Visitor Services by focusing on the Saint Louis Zoo as visitors see it. Kathryn Hill reviews how audience research played a role in the marketing and opening of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum, and how her agenda for Visitor Services grew

out of those research findings. David Simmons completes the session by proposing that Visitor Services must make audience research an integral part of management and planning in the same way that his museum, Old Sturbridge Village, relies on historical research about the people's lives which they interpret.

We in Visitor Studies need to find some ways of building relationships with these and other Visitor Services professionals, because they are truly our colleagues. In spirit and in practice, they are natural allies in our efforts to improve the experience of museums for a visiting public. They ask questions like we do; they need to understand their audiences, and we could collaborate on that; and ultimately they put into practice—every day—the idea that if you do a better job of understanding visitors, you will do a better job of serving them.

Editor's Note: The following three papers by Stokes, Hill, and Simmons were originally presented at the 1993 Visitor Studies Conference and were inadvertently not included in the 1993 collected papers from the conference.