

The Role of Research in the Opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

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In April, 1993, the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) was heralded by the biggest media blitz a cultural institution has received in recent memory. As I was largely reactive to, rather than active in, the development of the Museum's marketing campaign, I feel quite comfortable in bragging. The Museum's public relations effort resulted in over 1,000 unique news stories, not counting the wire stories that ran in hundreds of publications, two documentary films and countless hours of national network news, public television and radio coverage.

Now, a new national museum in the nation's capital is news, no question about it. And the tragic situation in the former Yugoslavia probably cemented the relevance of this Museum's subject matter in the public mind far more effectively than any media campaign could. These factors may account, in some large measure, for the overwhelming extent of the media coverage. However, the quality of the coverage was truly noteworthy.

The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum was potentially a highly controversial endeavor. It is a federal institution, situated on valuable federal land, and the recipient of taxpayer dollars. Museum staff faced each new news story with our hearts in our mouths, waiting for the questions about why a Jewish museum? Why in Washington? And why with my dollars? We waited for the criticism, and what we got instead was exactly what we'd hoped—the story of the Museum as a critical lesson in civic responsibility and the terrible dangers of racism; the Holocaust as a world event, the lessons of which are relevant today; the exhibition program as a sensitively molded, compelling, and emotionally charged educational experience; the Museum as a building constructed exclusively with private donations and located not on, but adjacent to, the National Mall.

The Museum's success in delivering a consistent message was no accident. The public relations and media campaigns were rooted firmly in research. I want to talk about the two-year, three-part research effort that informed the Museum's marketing plan, where I think we made mistakes when we did not pay attention to the data, and what this visitor services professional needs from her colleagues in visitor studies.

The first part of the research effort began in the winter of 1990, when the Museum, with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), co-sponsored a

national telephone survey of Americans over the age of 18, to assess public awareness of the Holocaust and attitudes toward the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

Had this survey revealed that Americans know little about the Holocaust, and care even less, the Museum's communications campaign would have taken a very different direction. As it turned out, this survey found that a majority of Americans do know about the Holocaust, and view it as one of the most significant events in history; that Americans believe that the Holocaust has contemporary relevance; and that a large majority of those surveyed believe that people must keep hearing about the Holocaust so that it will never be repeated. Furthermore, in 1990, two in five Americans had heard about the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, and one in two expressed a high likelihood of visiting the Museum.

The Museum and the ADL immediately held a press conference signifying the launch of the Museum's opening public relations campaign. As the Director of Communications pointed out, a poll can be news in and of itself, and this study became a mechanism for broadcasting the Museum's popularity even though it would not open for over two years.

The second part of the research was linked to the Museum's planning for its opening week package (planning which began in 1991, two years before opening). A consortium of firms was hired to facilitate our public relations planning, including Peter Hart Associates—a well-known polling firm in Washington. The next step, taken in early 1992, was a series of focus groups held in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Raleigh, North Carolina and Washington, with Jewish groups, non-Jewish groups, and groups of Washington tourists.

The focus groups revealed the following six important findings:

- Jewish Americans were already inclined to support the USHMM. Our communications campaign would have to be geared toward attracting non-Jewish Americans, and a significant segment of that population harbored serious doubts about the necessity of this Museum.
- Visitors to Washington expect to be educated and emotionally engaged—not just entertained. They are attracted by the Vietnam War Memorial, for example, because it moves them. Potential visitors to the USHMM, particularly non-Jewish visitors, would need a personal motivation to submerge themselves in an event that neither they nor their families had witnessed.
- For focus group participants, the most compelling justification for the Museum resided in its ability to teach basic human values. They were persuaded by the suggestion that the Holocaust was a crime, primarily against Jews, but also against the other victim groups—the Gypsies, homosexuals, political prisoners, the handicapped, and others—indeed, that the Holocaust was a crime against humanity.

- After watching a brief video tape about the Museum's central exhibition, participants' fears about an overly graphic presentation were allayed. Many were more inclined to visit the Museum after watching the program, and they wanted us to provide age recommendations for parents bringing children, though they did not want us to prohibit children from coming.
- Participants believed that it was important for the Museum to talk about America's role in World War II, and this country's response to news of the Holocaust. And they were insistent that America's actions and sometimes inaction be recorded faithfully.
- Many participants had strong negative reactions to the idea that the United States government built this Museum and that it would be located on the Washington Mall, which is considered sacred ground for exclusively American events.

The communications campaign drew from the findings of the focus groups, and each brochure, news release, and media tour was carefully crafted. As no material advantage accrued to the Museum's situation on the Washington Mall, we described the Museum's convenient location near the Mall. We stressed the fact that the Museum was built exclusively by private donations. If the exhibition itself most eloquently illustrated the Museum's message—conveying the fact that Jews and non-Jews were targeted by Hitler's maniacal machine, that the Holocaust was a crime against humanity and a terrible lesson in the inevitable results of institutionalized racism and bigotry—then the focus of our efforts became describing the permanent exhibition to the American public. We talked about the ways the Museum would strive to personalize the experience for visitors. We also developed a family guide for parents planning a museum visit.

The Department of Communications published a briefing book, providing staff and board members with important information about the Museum, and with language to answer the tough questions. This book went not only to senior staff for whom it was required reading, but also eventually to floor staff to help them answer the questions they would encounter from visitors.

In the summer of 1992, the Museum executed the final piece of pre-opening research: a poll of tourists visiting the Washington Mall. The poll asked a random sample of tourists to rate their interest in several exhibitions they might visit in Washington. Without having heard a specific description of the Museum, two in five visitors said that they would be attracted to "a museum devoted entirely to the Holocaust" (25% said they would be very attracted; 33% were neutral). When participants were read a description of the Museum, over 64% said that this information made them much (27%) or somewhat (37%) more likely to visit the Holocaust Memorial Museum. In fact, about half (48%) said they would definitely (24%), or would very likely (24%) visit.

The more people knew about the Museum, the more inclined they would be to visit. With this information, the Museum continued its aggressive campaign to alert the world of its impending opening—a campaign that has yielded the Museum over 500,000 visitors in fewer than six months. This is not to say that we did not make mistakes around the Museum's opening. We made mistakes when we did not believe in the research, and when we did not directly apply the data to decisions made in the operation of the Museum.

Although both the 1990 telephone survey and the tourist poll done in 1992 indicated that, sight unseen, the Museum promised to be a popular Washington attraction, we continued to be nervous that no one would visit. We did recognize the fact that we would need a ticketing system of some kind. However, we spent much time debating the ticket distributor, and generally dragged our feet in making decisions. When asked what advice they might give us in publicizing the Museum, participants in the Mall survey overwhelmingly suggested that we provide them with logistical information—location, cost, parking, etc. We should have paid greater attention to this. Because we delayed decisions, we missed prime opportunities to spread the word about the ticketing procedures. The fact that visitors need tickets to get into the permanent exhibition is still not universally understood.

Through our research, we were able to predict that 20% of Washington tourists would definitely come to the Museum. We also knew that of the nearly 8 million people who visit the Mall each year, many come in organized groups. Based on this information, it seemed logical to assume that many, many groups would seek Museum tours. We did add an almost-full-time staff person to assist the sole reservationist during the opening season. Despite the research, that's all we did, and when requests for group tours began to come in at a rate of 200 per day, we were overwhelmed and ill-prepared. Consequently, we have heard our constituents' bitter disappointment loudly and clearly.

We made other mistakes, and our next round of research will help us to understand them and to define our successes in more specific ways. This research will tell us a lot about what our next marketing effort should look like, and, if we're smart, how to structure our service and operational programs around visitor needs. Our research program has really just begun.

Here's what I think we in the visitor services field need from our colleagues in visitor studies:

Visitor studies professionals have largely succeeded in convincing museums that we need to evaluate exhibitions from the concept stage, through development, and after opening. Now we need you to lead us to see the forest for the trees. We need your help in finding out who our audiences are and who we're not attracting; we need you to help us figure out what our visitors are thinking, what is important and persuasive to them; and you need to help us learn how to interpret these data and translate them into real

policy and operational changes. If automakers and financial institutions cannot afford to introduce new products into the market or describe existing products without testing, museums can't either.

You are in the perfect position to help us do this. While the USHMM's experience with a market research firm was highly successful, not all such partnerships are. At Field Museum, where I was previously employed, an ad agency tried to help us re-position the Museum for the '90s and, toward the end, suggested that we re-name the institution the Exploratorium. We told them it had been done. Another outside consulting firm tried to evaluate our exhibit development process, and we spent countless hours with them explaining why developing an exhibit is different from launching, say, a breakfast cereal.

We don't have to explain "appropriate" to you. You already have the right sensibilities to work with museums—you are museum people. If the Holocaust Memorial Museum teaches this profession anything, the most important lesson may be that museums do not have to aspire to be Disneyland in order to succeed. The American public expects museums to deal with serious issues in serious ways. They are willing to spend their leisure time learning difficult lessons—or, at least, they would be if we figure out how to speak a language they understand and convince them they should. And speaking their language does not mean playing to the lowest common denominator. The entire marketing campaign for the USHMM was nothing if not dignified and serious. As my friend at the helm of the communications effort told us, you do not do research in order to dilute your program, you do research to influence public opinion about your program.

Finally, we need you to help us interpret the data, in order to understand real public need, to spend our dollars in the right places, and to tailor our programs in order to meet those needs.