

# Issues and Answers

Marilyn G. Hood, Ph.D.  
Hood Associates  
Columbus, Ohio

We often learn as much, if not more, from the projects, programs, and plans that don't work as well as we hope or expect, yet we are often loathe to confess that we have had problems with unsatisfactory exhibits, miscommunication, or minimal attendance.

In our professional meetings and publications, we tout our successes, which may not be as valuable to our colleagues as explaining what went wrong and what we learned in hindsight. Examining "what we learned when everything didn't go as expected" would be a valuable contribution to the research field.

Sometimes the missteps are merely glitches over which we have no control. Before any data gathering took place in a year-long visitor study at the Chicago Botanic Garden, I set up a calendar of data-collection dates for the entire year. Eight months later, Lisa Roberts called to tell me that they had been unable to conduct the survey on one designated morning because First Lady Barbara Bush had come to visit—an event which I could not have anticipated. Since we could not schedule another day that month for data gathering, I could only acknowledge the omission in the final report.

At Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village, we had to scratch one data-gathering day when an ice storm closed the institution. Again, I had to explain this unexpected event in my report. One lesson to be learned from such experiences is that we should expect there will be glitches, and, therefore, plan ahead to meet all contingencies.

More importantly, by not sharing information on situations that went awry, we are impeding overall progress in research. For instance, by not reporting on studies that don't produce statistically significant results—which may be as important as the significant findings—we prevent knowledge of those results from being disseminated. By not explaining how our assumptions were not borne out, we deny our colleagues the knowledge they need to keep from exploring the same nonproductive path.

In my workshops on questionnaire development, I show examples of poor questionnaire design and explain why these designs are faulty and won't produce the results that museums need. I have been chided by some workshop participants, who assert that they can't learn anything from others' mistakes. I heartily disagree.

If we identify ourselves as true researchers and evaluators, we should expect to have failures as well as successes. A research project is a test to

find out whether our hunches, our assumptions, our hypotheses will be supported. When those hunches are not supported, it is as meaningful, as worthwhile, to report that to our colleagues as to laud our success.

Let me cite a recent example: a rural sociologist at The Ohio State University surveyed farmers in Ohio to learn what prompts them to adopt conservation measures to protect soil and water. His assumptions were that the farmers most likely to use protection measures would be younger, more knowledgeable about potential pollution problems, and more concerned about their personal health.

However, his findings did not support his hypotheses. In fact, the more knowledgeable that respondents were about ground-water problems, the less concerned they were about pollution. This is extremely important information for environmentalists who hope to persuade farmers to change their behavior. The professor concluded that traditional educational approaches won't motivate farmers to adopt environmental practices. Instead, they responded best when the government forced them to adopt conservation practices or enticed them with financial incentives.

Last year at this conference, staff members from two major museums for which I have directed audience research projects, outlined how difficult it had been to change the mindset of the staff and volunteers after the research results indicated new approaches to audiences and interpretation were needed. They found that developing in-house consensus and helping staff and volunteers feel comfortable with the research results were the most important initial steps in implementing the findings—and it was a process that could not be rushed. It was helpful for the conference attendees to hear that these two sophisticated museums had to carefully lay the groundwork and had to patiently work through a prolonged process to ensure widespread support for change.

On the 1992 American Association of Zoological Parks and Aquariums program, several topics dealt with things that didn't go as had been hoped. *The Zoo That Didn't Run Very Well* was the title of one paper. Another covered the controversy over sending a beloved animal out of state on breeding loan, and how the zoo handled this very sticky public relations situation. A third concentrated on "understanding staff concerns about volunteers," acknowledging that healthy volunteer-staff relationships are not necessarily endemic.

When something goes wrong, we should emphasize how we learned and what we learned when everything didn't go perfectly. What disappointments resulted when you evaluated your exhibits, tried to mesh differing staff expectations, or endeavored to involve neighborhood or multicultural groups in planning? What did you learn from these experiences that you can pass along to help your colleagues avoid the pitfalls you encountered? How will reports of your experiences add to the body of knowledge of our profession?

The research process expects that negatives will occur, hypotheses may not be supported, and hopes for positive results may be dashed. Our

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conferences and publications offer avenues for talking about our difficulties, to help colleagues avoid the same problems. By not reporting these circumstances, we are impeding advancement in our field. After all, confession is good for the visitor studies discipline, as well as for the soul.