Taking It To the Streets:
A Manitoban Process for
Gallery Development

George Wurtak
Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Larry K. Bremner
Proactive Information Services, Inc.
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Abstract

This paper describes a complex process being undertaken by a major Canadian institution. The evaluation process is systematic, multi-faceted and demonstrates the fruitful interaction between evaluation and gallery development.

The front-end phase is the focus of the paper. Discussion concentrates on the elements of the process which are unique to the Canadian experience, specifically the whole community aspect of this process (wherein input was from sources distant from the physical setting of the institution), and the mix of novel and "traditional" approaches used within the museum setting itself. Because of its unique features and its potential generalizability to a variety of settings, process aspects rather than institution-specific results are presented.

Context for the Evaluation Process

The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature is a 17,000 square meter (183,000 square foot) facility opened in 1970 by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. It is a major Canadian institution located in the geographic center of Canada, in the city of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Manitoba is a large and diverse province which, while commonly known as a prairie province, includes 700 km (450 miles) of coastline, and contains ecological regions which include arctic tundra, coniferous forest, aspen parklands, as well as desert and grasslands. The master plan for the Museum's permanent galleries is based on the concept of having one gallery of exhibits to represent the integrated human and natural history of each of these biomes or life zones.

During the past two decades, major galleries have been developed to represent each of these biomes, with the exception of one significant area. The final biome to be represented is the aspen Parklands region. It is the

development of this gallery which has spawned the evaluation process upon which the following discussion is based.

Rationale for the Evaluative Process

Because the area being represented in the *Parklands Gallery* is large and diverse in both geography and population, it was paramount to the Museum that its constituents, particularly the people of the Parklands region, participate in the development process. Therefore, the evaluation process was designed to reflect the Museum's mandate and strategic plan which in part states:

> "The Museum exists for the benefit of the community it serves, and it is the community that determines the value and success of the institution."

With this mandate in mind, the Museum's management believed that a fundamental goal of the *Parklands Gallery* planning and development process must be:

> "To provide information with respect to the needs, interests, and desires of the larger community as well as staff for consideration into the exhibit design process."

While Museum staff had some experience in program and exhibit evaluation, the scale and importance of this project were such that professional evaluators were required. With the support of the Museum Assistance Program of the Department of Communications, the Museum retained an evaluation firm (Proactive Information Services, Inc.) to conduct the front-end and formative evaluation.

In close collaboration with the evaluators a multi-faceted approach was agreed upon in order to address three general goals.

Goal 1: *To increase the probability of success of the Gallery in terms of satisfying the needs and expectations of visitors, and in general, to make the Gallery as effective as possible.*

It was necessary to involve the general public extensively, and to have multiple feedback sessions with Museum staff at inter-departmental strategy meetings. Input from special interest groups, such as seniors, the physically challenged, educators, ethnic associations, and others, was important at the beginning of *Gallery* design. Such information, if received sufficiently early, would allow design adjustments and corrections to be made while these alterations were still timely and economically feasible.

Goal 2: *To ensure that each component of the Gallery fairly represented the Parklands region according to perspectives of residents of the region, as well as the Museum's curatorial staff. The Museum also wished to include those aspects of the Parklands regions about which its residents felt most strongly.*

Goal 3: *To incorporate the "whole community" into the development process, including sources physically distant from the institution.*

As a provincial museum, the Museum of Man and Nature has a province-wide constituency. Since Parklands residents are important sources of information about their region, the provincial mandate of the institution includes these residents as part of the Museum's community. The process utilized in this evaluation represents an important step into the democratization of publicly-funded institutions.

Components of the Front-End Process

The front-end evaluation was divided into two distinct phases. The first, *Community Input*, entailed intercept (on the street) interviews with Parklands residents, as well as scheduled in-person interviews, coupled with a mail-out survey, to community organizations.

The second phase, *User Input*, concentrated on eliciting information from museum users. User sub-groups identified for inclusion in this phase were: adult visitors, children visitors, teachers, and volunteers. Data collected from these sources was supplemented by a review of school curriculum in order to ensure that *Gallery* content would include aspects relevant to teachers and students at all levels.

In keeping with the philosophy of utilization-focused evaluation (Patton, 1978), the evaluators concentrated on collecting and presenting useable and timely information.

Community Input

As previously discussed, the Museum had a high commitment to the involvement of Parklands residents in the development/evaluation process. The process for resident input involved first the selection of regional centers – towns where people from the surrounding rural area would go to access goods and services. An introductory letter was sent to the mayor of each of five communities signed by the Executive Director of the Museum explaining the purpose of the proposed interviews and introducing the evaluators. The evaluators then contacted each mayor, eliciting information on the most appropriate site for the interviews.

The evaluators then travelled to each community (within a six week time frame). Armed with Museum signage, Museum literature, identification tags, and incentives for respondents, the evaluators randomly stopped individuals or small groups (pairs or triads) for in-person interviews. (It should be recognized that the interview instrument and process were pilot tested prior to widespread use.)

A total of 140 interviews were conducted in five communities. Interview length ranged from 10 to 40 minutes. Respondents were eager to cooperate (once they believed that the province's "urban" museum really did want to hear from them), and supplied evaluators with a range of information from what flora and fauna from their area should be represented, to approaches for the portrayal of controversial environmental issues.

"Thank you" letters were sent to mayors and community contact people following the interviews. Within the Museum itself feedback was given to curators through both formal and informal presentations. Handouts on "key findings" were distributed to Museum staff and a formal presentation was made to Management staff.

Further emphasis was given to the concept of community input through the inclusion of 95 **community organizations or associations**. Based on initial interviews with the curators and on their own knowledge of the Manitoba setting, the evaluators compiled a list of community organizations or associations which might warrant inclusion. This list was shared with curatorial and programming staff and was revised based on their input. Organizations included environmental groups, cultural/ethnic organizations, heritage organizations, and a variety of other special interest groups.

Fourteen organizations were contacted for interviews. The interviews provided the evaluators the opportunity to test out questions which would make sense to the range of respondent types selected for this aspect of the evaluation process. Questionnaires were mailed to 81 organizations/ associations (of which five could not be contacted). Overall response rate for this component of the evaluation was 85% – one indicator of the interest and support evidenced by the organizations/associations.

As with the community interview process, potential respondents were sent an introductory letter signed by the Museum's Executive Director. A map of the Parklands and a postage-paid business reply envelope were included with the mailed questionnaire. Second and third mail-outs were used to increase the response rate to its high level.

It should be mentioned that some concern was expressed by Museum staff that surveying and interviewing these organizations would create "unrealistic expectations." However, discussion with the interviewees confirmed that they were pleased to have their say, but realized that not everything on their individual "wish lists" were possible. Rather they were appreciative that the larger issues of inclusiveness, representativeness, and

appropriate portrayal of aboriginal people were and would be supported by Museum staff in the development process.

These two aspects of the Community Input phase have been described in some detail as this level of community involvement at this phase of *Gallery* development is novel in the Canadian experience. The enthusiastic reaction of most "people on the street," as well as the understanding and support of community organizations and associations speak to the importance of this type of process. Respondents had specific suggestions, as well as perspectives of broader issues to contribute to the "nuts and bolts" of *Gallery* development.

User Input

Many of the data sources and methods utilized in this phase are familiar to researchers and evaluators. Therefore, a brief description giving the scope of the phase will suffice, supplemented by more detail on one particular method which may not be as familiar to the museum context.

First, a **self-completing questionnaire** was used with visitors in order to document their preference to a variety of *Gallery*-related issues and to discover their level of understanding of proposed *Gallery* terminology. Systematic data collection occurred within a three week period wherein 280 questionnaires were distributed and 205 were returned (73% response rate).

To supplement information provided by adult visitors and older children, children (aged 5 to 11) visiting the Museum were asked to draw their "favorite thing" seen during their visit. They were also interviewed in order to gain a better understanding of their **drawings** (fourteen children were involved in this activity). Despite the relatively small number, students drawings did confirm and extend a number of the other trends in the visitor data.

The proposed *Parkland Gallery* storyline includes many areas where integration with existing Manitoba curricula is possible. A "curriculum scan" was conducted identifying areas for integration at early, middle and senior years grades, particularly in Social Studies/History/Geography and Science. As visits from classes of Senior Years students are less common in the Museum, attracting teachers and students from this level would increase the school audience.

The teachers participating in a front-end **focus group** raised possibilities for curriculum integration, identified areas for *Gallery* emphasis, assessed proposed methods of information presentation, and suggested directions for support materials. As one teacher focus group was scheduled for this phase, an attempt was made to select a group of teachers teaching across a range of grade level and specialties. The fifteen teachers selected had all made class visits between October, 1990 and January, 1991.

Another focus group was conducted with selected Museum program volunteers. It was felt that the volunteers were a committed and knowledgeable group and that their experiences delivering educational

programming would allow for insights to supplement the teacher input. The Coordinator of Volunteer and Public Services contacted volunteers having a variety a programming experiences. The group discussed possibilities for information provision, materials and layout options.

The other method which was used in the User Input phase to explore visitor attitudes, likes and dislikes was a **photo sort**. This technique (used in similar forms in market research and educational assessment) is a procedure of determining visitor preferences and reactions using visual stimuli.

Approximately 135 pictures were taken of existing Museum exhibitry, objects and display methods. The pictures were then sorted and 50 selected on the basis of subject and clarity of the photograph. The 50 were used in a field test. In order to ensure ease of use 5" x 7" color photographs were used. Where pictures were not of acceptable quality Museum postcards were substituted. (It should be noted that the photographs were used to summarize the object and not to illustrate details.)

Field testing pointed to the need for reduction of the number of photographs. The number was limited to 38 and the structure of the accompanying record form was revised to facilitate ease of completion on the part of the interviewer.

The actual photo sort occurred at the exits from the Museum galleries. Fifty visitors took part. Two tables were set up and visitors were asked to participate in the development of the new *Parklands Gallery*. They were offered a chair and presented with the randomly ordered photographs. They were asked to sort them into three groups: ones which represented aspects of the Museum that they "really liked;" ones which were "o.k. — they could take or leave;" and ones which they "did not like." (Each photograph was numbered on the back for identification purposes.)

Upon completion of the sorting process the visitor was asked to talk about those exhibits in the group of photographs which he/she had placed in the "really like" pile. What did these have in common? Why were these favorites? The visitor was also asked some basic demographic questions for analytical purposes.

This process was able to marry affective visitor responses to quantitative recording. The trends in the data supported other research on visitor preferences (e.g., importance of object size, importance of multiple stimuli, problems with print heavy displays), however, the visitor had the opportunity to deal with the realities of his/her visits and to interact in a largely non-verbal and non-print bound medium. Both older children and adults participated gladly in this process.

As with the information collected in the Public User Input phase, feedback on results was given to curators, other museum staff and management team representatives in both verbal and written form. A comprehensive report was produced at the end of this phase.

Conclusions – What Have We Learned?

Apart from the results specific to the *Parklands Gallery*, there are a number of things to be learned from the process. First, people love to be asked – and they have some important things to say. For example, the comments of mall shoppers in Dauphin, Manitoba provide insights into what they think is important about where they live. In keeping with proposed *Gallery* themes, residents ably described the environmental damage which past agricultural practices have produced, and debate the use of current methods. The theme of interaction between humans and the environment is real.

Therefore, respondents confirm the importance of suggested themes and directions for the *Gallery* storyline. They can also introduce or re-introduce other aspects. For example, widespread interest on the part of residents in all communities regarding the Carberry desert has argued for its re-inclusion in the *Gallery*.

And, the process provides an effective and visible way to reach out to the community. The institution is shown to be concerned with community issues, such as those of aboriginal people or environmental groups. It is anticipated that these organizations will view the Museum as a community partner and, as such, will be more willing to support the institution.

This process has also confirmed that using a range of methods with a variety of respondent groups solidifies and extends the findings. Themes in the results emerge across respondent groups.

Furthermore, the evaluation process does not have to be costly, nor does it have to be excessively time-consuming. All activities described in the front-end process occurred within a six month time period (and could have been done more quickly had the development schedule so dictated). This allowed the evaluation process to provide timely, as well as relevant, information.

Finally, the evaluation results can be both informative and reassuring. For example, it became apparent that some terminology which was to be used in the *Gallery* was not understood by the visiting public. Other evaluation activities shed new light on issues or proposed *Gallery* content, while others reassured Museum staff that they were "on the right track." It appeared that the themes they had proposed for the storyline were appropriate, were of interest and, were relevant to people's lives.

The evaluation process continues to move in concert with the *Gallery* development into the next stage – formative evaluation. The linkage of evaluation with development not only provides information important to decision-making, it also acts as a vehicle to connect the institution more closely to its public. As with evaluation itself, process creates outcomes.

Reference

Patton, M. Q. (1978). *Utilization: Focused evaluation.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.