

Chapter 4

THE USE, MISUSE, AND ABUSE OF CONSULTANTS, II: THE VIEWS OF AN EVALUATOR

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In addition to the comments made by Molly Hood, I would like to make the following points, with emphasis on the role of the evaluation consultant:

1. *Exhibit evaluation, when carried out in a traditional setting where previous formal studies have not been done (which is most museums), almost always opens up important and fundamental issues that were hidden before.* It is impossible to "just do a study" without revealing, in most cases, that something is amiss in the way the institution is doing exhibits. The question that is hard to avoid asking is, "How is it possible that a group of highly qualified persons (curators, designers, managers, directors, etc.) can work diligently on an exhibit effort and produce something that many, most, or even all visitors don't understand and/or ignore?"

The answers to this question can often be very creative, such as:

"We didn't expect the visitor to get anything out of that exhibit" or,
"We didn't have the time to do that exhibit the way we wanted to" or,
"The fabricators really messed that one up."

For the consultant, the worst answers, however, are the ones that attack the study itself and (perhaps) even the consultant. In the latter case the consultant is re-defined as a "problem-maker" rather than a "problem-solver."

In some circles this is called "Shoot the messenger." In psychiatry it is called "Denial." It is closely related to the notion that if you don't go to the doctor you won't get sick. The consultant can usually detect this condition by noticing a distinct cooling off of the relationship, with unanswered phone calls and letters being the more overt signs. Efforts to salvage such a situation are often fruitless and the consultant should concentrate on getting paid for the work he or she has already completed!

However, a not altogether uncommon and very reasonable client reaction to the realization that something is amiss in the traditional way of doing exhibits is to rethink the issue carefully and begin to examine alternatives. The consultant should be sympathetic to this response and try to help the staff reorient their thinking over a period of time. This can result in a long term "hand-holding" kind of relationship as the institution seeks to find its own rapprochement with this new way of looking at exhibits. If they decide to let the visitor into their tent, they might ask you to help with additional studies, to redefine procedures and techniques and even, on occasion, to help realign staff responsibilities.

The point is, in short, there is no such thing as a completely "painless" evaluation study if it is carried out in a responsible and professional manner. Which brings me to point number two.

2. When evaluation is carried out solely for external reasons, as, for example, to satisfy the terms of a grant, it is often given very low priority by the staff. There is little sense of ownership in the process and little opportunity for the consultant to make a real contribution to the institution involved. You can usually sense this situation when you are asked to lend your name to a proposal, but are given little time or funds to do a proper job, and little or no opportunity to contribute to the preparation of the proposal. I refuse to play this game. There are, of course, different levels or degrees of evaluation, and not every study can or should be a journal article, but we must know when and where to draw the line.

But let's be honest. There is not at this time an established and agreed-upon set of standards or criteria that articulate just where this line should be drawn. This is a weakness in our field that should be addressed in the not-too-distant future. Many of us, I am sure, have done what we sometimes call "quick and dirty" studies. But how "quick" and how "dirty" can they be before they are a disservice to the client and to the field of evaluation? Evaluation consultants must learn when to say "No" even when saying "Yes" keeps floppy disks in the computer. There needs to be much more discussion on this potentially sticky issue. (See Stephen Bitgood's [1989] article in this volume on "Professional Issues" for more on this subject.)

This brings me to my third point that relates to the role an evaluation consultant should play in exhibit or program development.

3. Evaluation is not a thing, it is a process. Evaluation-related thinking begins when the idea for an exhibit or program is first articulated and its impact is felt throughout the rest of the process. When you are asked to come into the picture after the exhibit is designed or worse, completed, it is too late to be really helpful. When asked to be part of a proposal for a new exhibit or program, I strongly suggest that I be involved in the

earliest planning meetings where the goals and objectives of the project should be defined and agreed upon. And I also strongly suggest that some type of formative evaluation study be carried out so that problems can be identified and changes can be made before the final product is sitting on the museum floor.

One of the most effective ways of convincing an institution to integrate evaluation concerns into the entire exhibit development process is through workshops, which brings me to my next point.

4. Workshops are, perhaps, the best way to introduce a group to the evaluation process and the tools that are needed to carry out that process. Even if some of the participants are not going to be directly involved in doing evaluations, a workshop sets the mental stage for what the evaluator needs to do and why it needs to be done (and also why it takes time and money to do it). In short, a successful workshop is both an attitude shaper and a skill builder. In fact, the attitude change often comes about on the last day of the workshop when it is demonstrated beyond a doubt that *real* changes made to *real* exhibits produce *real* improvements in *real* visitor learning and behavior. It can be one of the happiest moments for the evaluation consultant!

But workshops can also be a source of frustration for the consultant. I will mention several of the more negative aspects of the experience that I have encountered on more than one occasion.

- Senior-level people do not attend nor, at the very least, lend their support to the workshop. Real institutional change must come from the top down. If the workshop is made optional and has no high-level support, the chances that you will have any lasting impact on the institution are small. Getting staff members enthused and then having no way for them to implement what they learned is a good formula for producing real frustration among the staff.
- Adequate time and resources are not devoted to the workshop. I have had what was originally planned to be a four-day workshop reduced to a one-day "workshop." I told the client that I could not carry out a real workshop in one day but that I would be willing to provide a one-day seminar on evaluation. Workshops are intensive and fast-paced. They must be "hands on" to be effective, with the testing, revising, and retesting of exhibits ("real" or mockups) the signal event. When the class realizes that exhibits are not icons to be worshiped but are changeable and testable manipulanda that can be fine-tuned to produce predictable results in the response of visitors, the excitement can be palpable. This cannot normally be done in one or two days.

- Given the above, it is obvious that attendance at workshops must be close to 100%. However, when they are conducted on home turf, there often are erratic patterns of attendance, especially among higher level personnel. This can be very difficult to deal with, and often puts the consultant in the awkward position of having to make compromises in the quality of the workshop to try to accommodate those who exercise authority in the client institution.

- No workshop, no matter how effective it is, can do the job by itself. Workshops plant seeds, the exact propagation of which can depend on a wide host of factors. Only if you are asked (or take it upon yourself) to remain in touch can you have any reason to believe that your Garden of Eden has not turned into a barren desert or an unrecognizable jungle. The opportunities for misunderstandings are endless. In one case, an institution thought that a mock-up of an exhibit must be a full-scale replica of the finished product, and spent almost all the evaluation money allocated to them in producing such a magnificent simulation of the exhibit. Then they tested this so-called "mock-up" with casual visitors, even though it was supposed to be a cued testing study. While this is an extreme case in which several levels of communication were involved, it is different only in degree and not in kind. In short, try to stay in touch, even if you have to do it informally and on your own nickel.

5. I will end this review of problem areas for the evaluation consultant on a somewhat more philosophical note. *What, I think, we are really trying to do in most of our consulting relationships is to convert our clients from what I call a "stimulus/presentation" frame of mind to a "response/receiver" frame of mind.* This change, I have slowly realized over many years of trying to get intelligent people to embrace evaluation, requires a fundamental shift in one's world view. The shift is reflected in the kinds of questions people ask when they want to find out if an exhibit is any good. The stimulus/presentation people ask, "Who did it, how did they do it, what's in it, how much did it cost, and how does it look?" The response/receiver people ask, "Who uses it and does the user get the intended message?"

In the response/receiver world, credentials, certificates, accreditation, degrees, and years of experience all become hostages to the visitor through the evaluation process.

Some, it seems, based on my own experience, will never give up the belief that the best way to judge the skill of a marksman is to examine his or her rifle. This is especially true of those who own expensive and admired rifles. Those of us who, while also admiring well-made things,

still insist on looking at the "target," seem to represent some kind of a threat to those who really believe that they already know how to hit the bull's-eye. In a profound way, this is the worst kind of "abuse" for it is not direct and open but deep and often unspoken. (Those of you who would like documented evidence that the examination of exhibits by experts is an unreliable way of assessing their effectiveness may want to look at my 1968 Curator article [Shettel, 1968], "An Evaluation of Existing Criteria for Judging the Quality of Science Exhibits.")

I suppose one might characterize this point as an example of the abuse of logic. In the face of overwhelming evidence that exhibits and programs can be significantly better than they are, and that there are proven methods that will enhance these educational experiences, we still find the vast majority of exhibits and programs being developed and made available to the public without any evaluation input at all. I take this not so much as an insult to all those who have done study after study, published the results, and spoken at endless conferences and meetings, but as a rejection of rational thought. Knowledge is hard to come by. I cannot help but feel that the disuse of such knowledge is our most serious challenge.

But, to end on a somewhat cheerier note, I can also recount the times when there seemed to be a true acceptance of the value of evaluation, and a commitment to embrace its tenets. I have seen not a few of my clients, on their own, actually interviewing visitors, doing mock-up testing and otherwise behaving as if the visitor really matters. It is at these times when all the misuses and abuses I may have encountered over the years seem small and insignificant.

References

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