

Obtaining and Using Visitor Feedback

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Why do a Visitor Study?

There are two fundamental reasons for studying your visitors. You want to broaden and diversify participation, or make sure more, and more diverse visitors come to your museum's exhibitions and programs. You also want to deepen the experience for those who visit so they will want to return to your physical site or Website, learn more about your collections, and become more involved in your programs (Adult Arts Education Project, 1998; McCarthy & Jinnett, 2001). Some of the reasons why visitor studies are useful are for:

- Attracting and targeting a range of diverse visitors or "publics," both local and tourist.
- Better understanding the complex behaviour of visitors and the multiple ways in which people experience museums
- Improving, enlarging, or building new facilities.

What do you want to know?

Four variables that are considered central to understanding the complexities of museum-going (Falk, 1998) are:

1. Demographics (variables that are descriptive, but not predictive, of museum-goers/non-goers, such as education, income, occupation, gender, age, race/ethnicity).
2. Psychographics (the psychological and motivational characteristics of individuals, such as a person's attitudes towards leisure and learning).
3. Personal and cultural history (individual experiences, interests, and cultural background, such as having a museum identified as a socially and culturally relevant part of a community).
4. Environmental factors (cues and experiences within an individual's environment that influence museum-going, such as word-of-mouth recommendations and advertising).

Why do you need or want to know it?

Evaluations of exhibitions and programs will help you with information at different stages of exhibition and program planning:

- Front-end evaluation tends to deal with plans that no one has yet tried to implement (e.g., Dierking & Pollock, 1998).
- Formative evaluation focuses on steering the design and implementation stage of a project to an optimally effective conclusion.

- Summative evaluation assesses the extent to which an exhibition or program is successful and determines adjustments that may be needed, and examines materials developed and participant response to programs and activities.
- Outcomes-based evaluation focuses on what a visitor who interacts with objects in an exhibition or participates in a program will know, do or value as a result of that experience, or the result of the visitor's experience at the museum.
- If outcomes are clearly articulated in exhibition and program planning they should provide success indicators that measure the success of the museum's exhibition program for visitors (e.g., Soren, 1999; Weil, 2001). Outcomes-based evaluation is very useful because if you articulate the outcomes you expect after a visitor's experience in your museum, you will be able to:
 - link your exhibition program design with outcomes evaluation
 - provide a succinct description of exhibition-related activities, which can be linked to program standards, benchmarks, and 'best practices'
 - document the actual exhibition program delivery
 - evaluate both your processes in planning for visitor experiences and the outcomes of your planning.

What are museum visitor-related Objectives, Outcomes, and Success Indicators?

Objectives for a visitor's experience are specific statements of what individuals will be able to do during their experience in an exhibition or program.

- Behaviours, performance, problems to solve, emotions, hands-on activities, and/or interactions with live interpretation.
- Evaluation strategies help you determine if you are achieving the objectives you have articulated for your exhibitions and programs to ensure continuous improvement.

Outcomes after a visit experience are what one ends up with, intended or not, after an exhibition visit or program.

- a new appreciation, sensitivity, understanding
- a strong feeling
- wanting to do something/find out more
- valuing an idea, topic, person, object

Success Indicators are signs or evidence indicating to museum staff that visitors have experienced what was expected during their experience in an exhibition or participation in a program.

- indications that individuals may use or apply knowledge gained, do something to learn more, or value their experience after they leave the museum
- serve as benchmarks to compare the success of your museum's exhibition program from year to year.

- help staff working across departments collaborate on how the museum can better reach visitors and program participants.

Important Starting Points for Your Visitor Study: Questions staff at your museum should ask

In smaller and larger museums, staff across all of your museum departments and at all levels should begin the process of studying visitors by asking some important questions, such as:

- What do you already know about your visitors and their experiences?
- What type of visitor studies have already been done? o What do you think is really important to know about your visitors?
- What do you think visitors experience in your museum? o What would you like visitors to experience?
- What could be improved so that visitors will have better understanding of your collections and exhibitions?
- How will your visitor study relate to your mission, mandate, or vision statement?
- What objectives would you want your visitor study to accomplish?
- What outcomes will there be for your exhibitions and programs after your visitor study?
- How will you know if your visitor study was successful and useful?
- Who will you report your findings and to whom?
- How will your museum use the results of your visitor study?

Types of Visitor Studies

Most visitor studies are an attempt to survey the people who currently visit or do not visit your museum. Surveys can be done using several different methods or instruments. For each of the following, you should develop protocols (i.e., forms or templates for your evaluation instrument including structured questions) in collaboration with the stakeholders or people who are going to conduct your visitor study and use your visitor study (e.g., Diamond, 1999; Hein, 1998; SMQ, 2001):

1. Written questionnaires, which can be used for example: - when people are ready to exit the museum - at the end of a special exhibition - at the end of a program - to find out more about members - to find out basic demographics of visitors (e.g., gender, age, ethnic or cultural group, local visitors vs. tourists, education level, group visiting with, how heard about museum or exhibition, reason/s for visiting)
2. Observations and Tracking of visitors to determine, for instance: - visitor's decisions about paths through the museum - in-gallery reading and looking behaviours - behaviours of people involved in programs (e.g., docent-led tours, family events, free evenings or weekends, arts performances, demonstrations) - experiences of specific groups (e.g.,

families, teens, singles vs. small groups, people with disabilities, seniors, cultural groups)

3. Interviews before, during, or after museum visits using: - informal conversational interviews can be conducted with visitors using general topics but the nature of the conversation directs the questioning - semi-structured interviews after observing visitors with a standard set of questions, but allowing for flexibility in the way questions are asked during interviews - structured interviews in which each visitor or group is asked the same questions with the same probes.
4. Focus groups with ideally 8-10 people and no longer than 1½ hours are facilitated by a moderator and there is honest, frank discussion based on a written script and protocol, and incentives to participate. Groups may meet to find out: - why people do and do not visit the museum and/or attend programs - attitudes of target groups towards the museum (e.g., cultural groups, young adults, members and non-members) - responses to preliminary concepts and prototypes for exhibitions and programs
5. Telephone interviews to find out, for example: - why people in your community do not visit your museum - memories of experiences, significant events during visitors' time at the museum, or things they have done since to find out more during follow-up interviews
6. Website questionnaires, guestbooks, comments, feedback, etc., such as:
 - on-line written questionnaires to find out about people visiting the Website, if they have visited the physical museum, what they think about the look of the Website and information and what other features of the Website they accessed
 - comments and questions about the on-line service related to a subject with space for comments and e-mail address
 - a guestbook with contact information and whether the on-line visitor is a member of the museum, as well as a user name and password to access restricted parts of the Website

What Types of Information does each Type of Visitor Study Provide?

Most important in a visitor study are the questions you ask. Different types of questions give you more or less information about visitors. The types of questions you ask depend, in part, on whether you want your visitor study to give you more qualitative results, more quantitative results, or a multiple method approach, which uses both qualitative and quantitative methods (Patton, 1997; Soren, 1999 & 2001).

- Qualitative methods provide depth in that selected issues can be studied in rich detail with a smaller number of people and situations.
- Quantitative methods provide breadth in that they require the use of a standardized approach and predetermined response categories, measuring the reactions of many individuals to a limited set of questions.

Qualitative data offer detailed description, and often take the form of anecdotes or narratives. The methods commonly used in qualitative approaches are:

- firsthand, intensive, long-term observation
- informal conversational interviews, semi-structured interviews, or focus groups
- reporting using details that vividly describe the context of the visitor's experience with direct quotations from observations, interviews, and written questionnaires.

Quantitative data facilitate comparisons because all participants respond to the same questions on standardized scales within predetermined categories. Key factors in quantitative studies are:

- prediction in terms of behaviours
- control of variables
- reporting involving descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency, measures of central tendency such as mean, mode, median, variability, etc.) and most often presented in tables and charts.

Types of Questions to Ask

Questions can be, for instance:

- closed, expecting 'yes' or 'no' answer or fill-in information (e.g., a brief reason for saying 'yes' or 'no,' contact information)
- open-ended, with an opportunity to elaborate on a response or multiple choice (e.g., please circle one or all of the following that apply...)
- rankings or rating scales (e.g., "on a scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being low and 5 being high ...")

Who Should Do a Visitor Study?

Who should do a visitor study depends on the type of visitor study and the stakeholders who are interested in knowing more about visitors and non-visitors:

- 'Insiders' who plan for or interact with visitors and are involved in program improvement should do the visitor study, for example, if they have expertise in evaluating programs and visitor experiences, target marketing, collecting and analyzing attendance statistics. *'Insiders' could be staff in Education, Public Programs, Communication, Public Relations, and Marketing.*
- 'Outsiders' should do the study: *if it is for the Board of Directors, Trustees, or Senior Management; if the study is funded by an external agency; or if museum staff lack the time and/ or expertise to conduct visitor studies. 'Outsiders' could be outside consulting firms, independent consultants, or faculty and students interested in conducting research or evaluation projects at universities or community colleges.*

Comparative Studies: What is "Out There?"

There are several publications that provide examples of visitor studies, as well as some excellent how-to-do visitor studies books. Museum-related professional groups have annual meetings and publish visitor studies, such as:

- AAM (American Association of Museums): CARE (Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation) publishes *Current Trends in Audience Research and Evaluation* (proceedings of posters and papers presented at the annual meeting)
- CMA (Canadian Museums Association) publishes *Muse* (a quarterly magazine) and *Museogramme* (a newsletter six times per year)
- GEM (Group for Education in Museums) publishes *Journal of Education in Museums* (an annual journal)
- MER (Museum Education Roundtable, Washington) publishes the *Journal of Museum Education* (published three times per year) and *Network* (a newsletter published two times per year)
- MERT (Museum Education Roundtable of Toronto) publishes an online newsletter and journal
- OMA (Ontario Museum Association) publishes bi-annually the *Colloquium on learning in museums proceedings*
- SIGEM (Special Interest Group for Education and Museums) publishes annual conference proceedings from the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) annual conference
- VSA (Visitor Studies Association) publishes *VISITOR STUDIES Today!* (published three times per year)

Some Other Useful Museum Journals

- *Curator: The Museum Journal*
- *Daedalus*, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (e.g., *America's Museums*, Proceedings of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Vol. 128, No. 3, Summer 1999)
- *International Journal of Museum Management and Curatorship*
- *International Journal of Arts Management*
- *The Informal Learning Review*

Some Useful Internet Sites

Museum and Informal Education Listservs. (2001, May-June). *The Informal Learning Review*, 48 (pp. 16-17).

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<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2001/sessions/index.html>.

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