

UTILIZING VISITOR SURVEYS TO IMPROVE MARKETING

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Most museums spend money on marketing, and most would like to improve the effectiveness of their marketing dollars. Accomplishing this can present a challenge, particularly for institutions serving complex markets. One way to approach the problem is through the use of visitor surveys.

The Iron Range Interpretive Center, a museum of mining history and ethnic heritage in Chisholm, Minnesota, conducted intercept surveys during July and August, 1986, to learn more about its visitors. Specifically, the Center sought information on:

- where the visitors were from,
- how they learned of the museum,
- when the decision to visit the museum was made, and
- certain details regarding the visit.

The survey identified three categories of visitors: local residents (defined as residents of the specific Iron Range communities), out-of-area day visitors, and overnight visitors. Local residents represented the smallest market segment, and overnight visitors to the area the largest. Other findings:

- an absolute majority had learned of the museum by word of mouth, chiefly from friends and relatives living on the Iron Range,
- most of the visitors had been aware of the museum for many years, but were not aware of specific programs and events,
- visits were planned well in advance by non-residents, geared to specific events at the facility,
- many overnight visitors attended the museum with local residents whom they were visiting, and
- repeat visitation to the area was fairly high.

Based on these findings, the Center made some changes in its marketing program. Among other actions, it:

- placed more emphasis on specific events and programs, and less on general awareness,
- increased local advertising, as a catalyst for tourist visitation,
- increased the lead time of specific event promotion, and
- shifted dollar allocations among media to respond more efficiently to their markets.

This applied visitor research was successful and useful for several reasons. First, the research project was focused on a relatively small area of concern. Second, the types of information sought were carefully considered and the questionnaire designed to provide definitive answers to the questions posed. Third, action based on the findings was expected, and the research was intended to provide the basis for specific decisions concerning the marketing program. Visitor surveys are not conducted at the Center on a regular basis. □

MULTIPHASED ASSESSMENT OF VISITOR CENTER IMPACT

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The visitor center, Old Woman Creek National Estuarine Research Reserve on Lake Erie, near Huron, Ohio, the first such establishment within the Reserve System, serves as a model for other reserves that are planning to develop education programs. Research supported by NOAA, U. S. Department of Commerce, sought to determine the effectiveness of several aspects of the visitor center for providing public information about the value of estuaries.

Specifically, this study sought to answer four research questions: (1) Do knowledge and attitudes of adults change with the visit? (2) What factors contribute to differing visitor experiences? (3) How do types of exhibits, readability, and placement relate to knowledge changes? (4) Can a computer serve as a testing device in a visitor center?

Methodology

Knowledge and attitudes were assessed by means of a multiple choice test administered in the library of the center, either by a microcomputer or paper and pencil. Knowledge items were related specifically to the content of the displays in the center, with questions representing the different display types present (hands-on, text with pictures, text with subheadings, three-dimensional, or only pictures) and testing of information identified as most important by estuary staff. Attitudes related to the importance of the estuary and to means of protecting it, as well as willingness to become involved in protection. Demographic information sought included reasons for visiting, number of visits, home city, and socioeconomic data.

In addition to the testing strategy, other forms of assessment were used: unobtrusive observation of visitors' activities and time at displays, readability

[cont'd on next page]

[Multiphased Assessment- cont'd from page 4]
measures of display text, attracting power of displays,
and knowledge gain in relation to certain display types.

Results and Discussion

Visitors randomly selected to take the test upon entering (170 persons) scored 48% correct, while those taking the same test at exit (160 persons) scored 56% ($p < 0.0$). Greatest knowledge gains were in relation to questions answered on the very first panel at the entrance to the visitor center: What is an estuary? Why are estuaries important? Why is Old Woman Creek an estuary? Why preserve Old Woman Creek? What are the problems of estuaries? Exit knowledge scores were related to amount of time spent in the visitor center, but no other demographic variables were consistently related. Displays having text with pictures were the source of items that achieved the highest increase in scores on the exit test.

The reading level and attracting power of displays varied greatly within the center although all the displays were designed and implemented by the same group of individuals. It appeared that placement of the displays had as much to do with their ability to attract and hold attention as did any other attributes.

Attitude differences between entry and exit indicated that visitors had acquired a greater feeling for the importance of estuaries and a greater willingness to be involved in protection.

Administration of the questionnaire by computer, while initially intriguing to participants, tended to slow the progress of the survey. The computer program could not respond quickly to answered items, producing the next item without delays. It therefore took nearly twice as long for participants to complete the computer version even though it was identical to the paper and pencil form.

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INTERPRETING AND EVALUATING WITH MICRO-COMPUTERS

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Use of micro-computers to present basic cultural concepts and to assess visitor learning has been underway this year at the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus. When the Society decided in 1983 to renovate its 13-year-old archaeology exhibits, the planning team under the direction of Martha Otto, curator of archaeology, chose to focus on a humanistic approach -- emphasizing the universal basis of culture as a response to human

needs and stressing comparisons between modern and historic societies.

An advisory team of university professors and curators from other museums was assembled to suggest methods for infusing more humanism into the exhibits. They recommended development of an orientation exhibit using micro-computers to accomplish three tasks:

1. to assist visitors with the cognitive development of some important cultural concepts;
2. to allow visitors opportunities to interact with artifacts, and
3. to measure what visitors knew about the content of the exhibit before they entered.

The group also advised that a second set of computers be installed as an exit exhibit to:

1. provide information about Ohio's current native American population, and
2. measure what visitors knew as they left the exhibit.

The Programs

Four computer programs were developed, three for the orientation exhibits and one for the exit exhibit. The orientation programs deal with the concept of physical, social and spiritual needs. Visitors were asked questions about objects that are in cases in front of the computers. The questions help the visitors construct generalizations about the objects and their relationships to specific human needs. These generalizations establish a frame of reference for viewing artifacts in the main exhibits as cultural responses to human needs.

In addition to its interpretive function, each program records all visitor responses to each question. These responses provide the museum staff with some demographic information, but more importantly, they can be used to measure learning through comparison with visitor data at the exit exhibit.

Results

One result of the micro-computer experience is that the Society staff, as well as the visitors, are learning. The extensive archaeology exhibit, "The First Ohioans," opened in September, 1986, and data collecting started in April, 1987. Data analysis, which began in May, showed that refinements were necessary. Impediments were identified as: flaws in the programs that contaminated the data, a significant number of visitors not finishing the somewhat lengthy programs, and visitors casually trying out a micro-computer.

On the positive side, this information allowed the staff to make improvements. The data collection flaws were eliminated and all of the programs were shortened. Because such changes can be made easily without disrupting or closing the exhibit, this process can serve as
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