Institutional Acceptance of Evaluation: Review and Overview

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More and more exhibition centers are conducting visitor evaluation. While it is not yet an everyday activity, evaluation is no longer a rare exception. Despite this increasing popularity of visitor studies, there are serious concerns about the impact that these studies have on the culture of the institution and on the exhibitions and programs offered to the public. Many questions remain unanswered. Once conducted, are visitor studies being used effectively? Are they being used inappropriately? Are they being used to guide the development of programs and exhibitions? Are they being used to improve the institution from the visitor perspective? In order to have an impact, is it necessary for the institution’s director to accept evaluation?

A Brief Review of Literature

The problem of institutional acceptance has received greater concern of late than in the past. A few examples will illustrate this concern. In 1988 at the first Visitor Studies Conference, two papers dealt with institutional acceptance. The first, by Harris Shettel (1988), described six factors that impede evaluation (i.e., are responsible for “our [evaluators] low level of impact”): (1) the current method of developing exhibits “works”; (2) the natural conservatism of institutions; (3) evaluation is seen as a threat to the existing power structure of an institution; (4) evaluation costs money and takes time; (5) the lack of trained people to do evaluation; and (6) weaknesses in the current approaches to evaluation.

The second article from the 1988 Visitor Studies Conference (Reich, 1988) described three major obstacles to visitor evaluation: (1) the funding factor; (2) the time factor; and (3) the threat factor.

At the 1989 Visitor Studies Conference, Knott and Noble (1989) described three major impediments to visitor evaluation - lack of understanding of the role of evaluation, tight budgets, and staff concerns. In addition to identifying impediments, the authors describe how each problem was handled in a project at the Memphis Museum System.

At the 1993 Visitor Studies Conference, Alan Friedman (1993) made a powerful argument for evaluation from the director’s viewpoint. He showed examples of exhibit projects whose success could not be predicted without evaluation. He concludes that:

“Formative evaluation is not the cheapest way to build exhibits. But I have become convinced that formative evaluation is the cheapest way to build effective exhibits. My conviction stems from 20 years of experiences in developing exhibits, both with and without formative evaluation.” (p. 256)

Evidence of Institutional Acceptance

I believe there are a number of levels of institutional acceptance. Of course, it is obvious that some of these signs show a deeper level of acceptance than others. The first sign discussed below would represent the lowest level of acceptance, while the last represents the highest.

1. Believes evaluation is worthwhile. The first step in institutional acceptance is an awareness that the activity is worthwhile. This is like saying “Exercise is good for you” but not doing any. But, it is clearly a first step. Without the awareness of its benefits to an institution, one cannot expect acceptance.

2. Conducts evaluation occasionally. This seems to be equivalent to Perry et al. (1994) “casual dating” stage. With
Suggestions for Improving Institutional Acceptance

1. **Educate the staff.** This may include providing articles on evaluation, discussing evaluation results during staff meetings, encouraging participation in workshops, etc.

2. **Involve stakeholders in evaluation.** All stakeholders should contribute to and approve of the projects’ goals.

3. **Demonstrate the benefits and communicate the findings of evaluation.** Acceptance can take time and repetition of the benefits.

4. **Minimize the threats of evaluation.** Note that front-end and formative evaluation are less threatening than summative evaluation. Make evaluation part of the entire process.

5. **Understand what motivates the staff.** What is the payoff for staff to cooperate with evaluation? If the evaluation process takes into account the motives of all stakeholders, it is more likely to be accepted.

6. **Know the problems that undermine evaluation.** Many of these problems are identified in this special issue by Friedman, Knott and Noble, Reich, Shettel, Spock, and Wagner.

References


