

## 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)

Perry, Ronning, Siska, and Weaver (1994) in a session at the Visitor Studies Conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, suggested that acceptance is a three-step process. The first step is "casual dating" in which evaluation is carried out in response to external forces such as a granting agency. The second step is "going steady" where evaluation is integrated into the institution usually as part of a single project. The final step is "getting married" characterized by a commitment to evaluation as shown by the hiring of an in-house evaluator and evaluation being included as part of all (or most) activities. A summary of this paper can be found on page 13 in this issue.

In 1995 at the American Association of Museums Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, Harris Shettel organized and chaired a session on the Politics of Evaluation. The speakers were: Michael Spock, formerly Assistant Director of the Field Museum in Chicago; Alan Friedman, current director of the New York Hall of Science; and Ridgely Williams, formerly the Assistant Director of the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa. Two of these papers (Friedman and Spock) are included in this issue (see pages 6-8 and 8-10).

At the 1996 meeting of the American Association of Museums in Minneapolis, I chaired a session that discussed the institutional acceptance of visitor evaluation. This session attempted to identify some of the relevant factors for an institution to accept visitor evaluation. The speakers were Kathleen Wagner from the Philadelphia Zoo, Kathleen Socolofsky from the Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, and John Schloder from the Birmingham Museum of Art. Two of these papers (Wagner, pp. 11-13 and Socolofsky, p. 14) are included in this special issue of *Visitor Behavior*.

The above review reveals several recurrent themes to the problem of institutional acceptance:

- Lack of understanding of evaluation
- Level of priority assigned to evaluation
- Possible negative consequences of evaluation
- The nature of the museum institution
- Lack of incentives to conduct evaluation

### 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

respect to the exercise analogy, this is equivalent to exercising every once in a while, but not enough to do long-term good.

3. *Understands the benefits.* Understanding the benefits would include the realization that information from evaluation can help in making more intelligent decisions. However, this does not imply action. While some staff may understand the benefits, they may be powerless to influence the decision-making process. But, no institution embraces visitor evaluation unless there is the nucleus of evaluation advocates on board.

4. *Uses evaluation for decision-making purposes.* When sound decisions are made based on evaluation results, then the institution has reached a new level of acceptance. The information may be used to identify gaps in audience understanding of an exhibition topic, or to select a marketing strategy, or to design a new wayfinding system, etc. While evaluation results do not dictate what decisions should be made, they can help reduce some of the guessing.

5. *Commits adequate resources to evaluation.* While evaluation is often included in project budgets, the resources are often inadequate to have the desired impact from evaluation results. While there is no specific percentage of the total budget that is accepted for evaluation, the range has been widespread. Alan Friedman (1993) has suggested that up to 30% of exhibit development finances in the New York Hall of Science has gone to evaluation.

6. *Sticks with it under pressure.* It is widely acknowledged that the first thing to go when the budget gets tight is evaluation. Unfortunately, the decision is often made that "more" is better rather than "effective" is better. It often takes real guts and resistance to a multitude of pressures to keep evaluation in the development process. Friedman (pp. 6-8) confesses that when he has succumbed to the pressures and reduced or eliminated evaluation, the result was predictably bad.

7. *Hires an in-house evaluator.* Employing an in-house evaluator shows a real commitment to visitor evaluation. Unfortunately, there are still only a few institutions that have arrived at this level of commitment. Notable among the institutions are: Adler Planetarium, Brookfield Zoo, J. Paul Getty Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Carnegie Institute, and American Museum of Natural History.

8. *Requires evaluation for all (or most) projects.* When evaluation becomes required for all or most projects, then the institutional process is almost complete. This does not imply that the findings will be applied in the most useful way.

9. *Implements evaluation projects with maximum impact.* Little has been said in the literature regarding the maximization of the impact from evaluation. One of the most important signs of this level is when evaluation findings result in substantial exhibit and/or program improvements.

### 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's 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.

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