

Methods of Audience Research For Museums With Living Collections

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Introduction

Professionals responsible for the operation of American museums are keenly aware that their institutions cannot remain traditional, elite, and inward-oriented, serving only those publics who share similar interests with the museum, and are frequent visitors.

Dramatic changes in the social and economic disposition of America over the past thirty years have adversely affected the socio-cultural status and financial health of museums across the country. These changes are forcing museum professionals to examine their operations and recognize the need for growth and expansion into new areas of services and programs. These museum professionals realize their institutions must develop programs and services to attract a variety of public visitors who will be depended upon to provide financial and political support.

Since the 1950s there has been a steady increase in the numbers and types of leisure activities in which Americans choose to participate. American consumers have so many entertainment options that most cultural institutions are now competing with various other attractions for their market share of visitors. At the same time, these institutions are competing with each other for grants and donations from ever-diminishing funding sources.

Most museums in this country are becoming more dependent upon the revenues generated from visitors. It is apparent that these institutions must design facilities and offer services and programs which are synchronized with the needs and desires of the consumer.

Museum professionals guiding their institutions through the final years of this century must prepare to meet the social, economic and political changes affecting their communities, and must understand how these changes affect the public's perceptions and expectations of their museums. As museums become more dependent upon outside support, they must appeal to and satisfy as many audiences as possible. Reaching their audiences has previously been a fiduciary responsibility of museums, but has now become necessary for many museums' survival.

Justification and Objectives Of The Research

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate, describe and discuss actual cases of audience research conducted by museums with living collections; that is, botanical gardens, arboreta, zoological parks, and aquaria.

Museums with living collections are unique in their exhibits and operations, and are significantly different from museums with inanimate objects. Botanical gardens, arboreta, zoological parks, and aquaria typically own all of their collections, and invest in the construction of permanent exhibits which last the lifetime of the living plants and/or animals, or longer. Museums with inanimate objects may maintain a permanent collection for exhibition, but often feature temporary exhibits of borrowed objects presented in the same, although modified, exhibition space. While museums with inanimate objects can readily change their temporary exhibits and modify their exhibit space to meet the interests of their audiences, museums with living collections in permanent facilities are not permitted the same flexibility.

Possibly because museums with inanimate objects and frequent exhibits have had more opportunities to evaluate the success of their exhibits, these types of museums have been the leaders in audience research. In fact, the majority of literature on museum audience research is limited to studies conducted by museums with inanimate objects.

Taking a cue from their counterparts operating museums with inanimate objects, the professionals responsible for the operations of zoological parks, aquaria, arboreta, and botanical gardens became aware of the value and importance of audience research in the early 1980s. Yet, many did not consider implementing audience research until as recently as 1988.

Within the past five years, audience research has become an urgent priority for museums with living collections. Unfortunately, audience research has also become the latest technical panacea. Those museum professionals who have invested the resources of their staff and supporters on audience studies without truly understanding the "how" and "why" of audience research typically finish such projects with disappointing results and damaged staff morale.

A serious gap exists between the quantity and quality of audience studies conducted and published by museums with living collections and studies by museums with inanimate objects. Although the readily available literature contains many specific cases by and for museums with inanimate collections, and several "how-to" guides for conducting audience research, there are very few examples of successful, and even unsuccessful, audience research conducted by museums with living collections.

Realizing that museums with living collections are just becoming acquainted with audience research and suffer exclusion from available literature, this research project focused on audience research for museums

with living collections. The research explores audience research conducted by botanical gardens, arboreta, zoological parks, and aquaria, and reveals their reasons for conducting the research, their chosen methods of implementation, the advantages and disadvantages of the chosen methods, and the consequences of the resulting data. More specifically, the research demonstrates successful and unsuccessful applications of audience research by botanical gardens, zoological parks, and aquaria, the various methodologies applied by them and the resulting benefits and consequences of the collected data.

The cumulative results of the research will serve as a guide for professionals responsible for the operation of museums with living collections. It will familiarize them with actual cases of audience research conducted by museums with similar collections, operations, and challenges, and will provide them with some of the practical knowledge and tools needed before launching into audience research projects at their own institutions.

Research Methodology

The omission of botanical gardens, arboreta, zoological parks, and aquaria from the available literature on audience research demanded an aggressive search for museums with living collections which have conducted visitor studies. The botanical gardens, arboreta, zoological parks, and aquaria used for this research were selected based on certain criteria. The garden, arboretum, zoo or aquarium must have conducted a study of visitors and/or nonvisitors within the past ten years, typically involving a survey or series of surveys. The study must have been inclusive of all visitors and the general public, and could not be exclusive to a specific sector of the population, such as the institution's members or a particular type of visitor. It was not necessary that the study was determined to be successful. Just as the old adage claims we learn by our mistakes, there were important and fundamental principles to be gleaned from failed methods and inadequate results.

Museums with living collections were sought from various regions of the country for a more representative sample and a greater potential for diverse information. Also, an equal number of museums with collections of animals (zoological parks and aquaria), and museums with collections of plants (botanical gardens and arboreta), were sought. After a preliminary interview with fifty institutions, twenty-one institutions which met the sample and selection criteria agreed to participate in the research project.

The method chosen to research these institutions was inspired by the subject itself, and included a telephone survey of surveys by those museums with living collections. A telephone survey permitted the use of open-ended questions and ensured a high, if not complete, response rate. The telephone interview encouraged the respondents to talk about themselves and their

institutions, as most professionals involved in the operations and special projects of their institutions enjoy discussing them with other professionals.

Results

Museums' Purposes for Conducting Audience Research

The twenty-one institutions which participated in the research project have conducted audience research for the purpose of learning about their current and potential audiences. All twenty-one participating institutions conducted surveys of visitors, but nine (forty-three percent) of the twenty-one institutions conducted a survey of both visitors and nonvisitors. Those institutions which surveyed only visitors are most concerned about identifying and understanding the audience they have at the present time. In fact, some institutions believe that their current visitors are the most important, and although they would like to see an increase in the numbers of visitors, they are more interested in meeting the needs of those audiences currently visiting their institutions.

Some institutions believe that their current visitors are a representative cross-section of their potential audience and any research they implement to better understand, reach, and serve their current visitors will enable them to understand, reach, and serve the public at large. It is possible that these institutions do not actually know the entire profile of their potential audience, and have presumed its identity. It is also possible that these and the other institutions which conducted only visitor surveys believe that additional visitors would not differ in demographic or psychographic character from those already attending their institutions.

Those institutions which surveyed nonvisitors maintain that they acquired valuable data from the nonvisitor survey which would not have been revealed by the visitor survey alone. While a psychographic survey of visitors may indicate why people choose to participate in the museum's offerings, a survey of nonvisitors' perceptions of their institutions empowers the museum professionals to select action to alter the nonvisitors' attitudes and opinions. Furthermore, a demographic survey of nonvisitors will confirm, or refute, any presumptions about the audience's demographic profile.

All of the institutions conducted audience research with the intention of collecting data on the demographics, psychographics, participation patterns and awareness levels of their visitors, and in some cases, the nonvisitors. The most obvious and inherently fundamental reason for conducting audience research, shared by every institution, was to identify the visitors and nonvisitors in demographic and psychographic terms. However, each institution chose to conduct the surveys for reasons specific to their present or future needs. These reasons were diverse, with some similarities across the institutions, yet each museum was seeking data which would facilitate well-informed decisions for their future operations. Indeed, there was a

common objective throughout all of the institutions' research—to increase visitation. For every survey conducted by these institutions, increasing visitation was the main objective, or a manifestation of other goals for the study.

Nearly all (ninety percent) of the institutions conducted audience research to collect data which would help them improve the visitors' experience when participating in the institutions' services, programs, and exhibits. To achieve this goal, the institutions were seeking psychographic information about the visitors and nonvisitors, particularly their attitudes, opinions, and perceptions about the institutions.

Visitors were asked to provide details of their visit and to rate the quality of their experience. The institutions were most interested in what the visitors liked and did not like about the programs, exhibits, services, and facilities. Some institutions also asked visitors to tell them what programs, exhibits, services, and facilities the visitor would like from the museum which are not currently offered by the museum. Institutions which surveyed visitors wanted to know what motivated the visitor to come to their institution. Institutions which surveyed nonvisitors wanted to know what factors and perceptions discouraged that portion of the audience from participating in the institution's offerings.

From this information, the institutions can determine if their offerings are synchronized to the needs and desires of their current and potential audiences. If so, the institution acquires confirmation that the exhibits, programs, services, and facilities are appropriate and the institution's operations parallel the visitors' expectations. If not, they may determine the type and extent of modifications which should be applied to their existing exhibits, programs, services, and facilities, within the bounds of the institution's mission. By adjusting their offerings to satisfy the expectations of their visitors, these museums are able to increase the frequency of participation by their current audience, and attract a more diverse audience.

For these institutions, their product is only as strong and popular as its ability to meet the needs of the public. The information gleaned from audience surveys facilitates an immediate response to the visitor's needs. For example, one institution learned that a majority of visitors perceived the front line staff to be discourteous and unhelpful. In response to this data, the institution promptly launched a personnel program to improve employee orientation, expand customer service training and increase disciplinary action for inappropriate treatment of visitors.

The data gathered from the surveys may also dictate the evolution of the museum's offerings. The institutions may develop new education programs, special events and exhibits based on the desires and expectations of the visitors. The visitor's expressed needs may also guide the expansion and renovation of facilities and services.

Little more than half (fifty-two percent) of the twenty-one institutions conducted audience research to acquire data about their visitors for long-range planning of the future development of their institutions. In fact, several institutions conducted visitor and nonvisitor surveys concurrently with the initiation of their five-year plan update so that the data gathered from the survey could be used to help develop the five-year plan, guide the long-range planning process, and chart a direction for the future of the institution. To these institutions, audience research is a planning tool which may provide them with answers to long-range questions, help them set effective long-range goals, and position the institution on a logical and appropriate course of action.

More specifically, these institutions sought information which would help each department improve its operations, programs, and services. When the institutions understand the demographic and psychographic nature of current and potential visitors, they may target their offerings to everyone by developing programs which fulfill the diverse needs and expectations of their various audiences.

In addition to program development, data gathered from audience research has been used by these institutions to guide the development, design, and expansion of exhibits and facilities. Several institutions actually built new buildings or exhibits because of interests expressed by the surveyed audience. Many of the institutions planned and designed building or exhibit renovations based on the survey's revelation of the needs and desires of their visitors. Other institutions used survey results to confirm their perception of the audience's needs and desires, which validated existing plans for renovations or expansion and justified the associated costs. One institution was able to include building renovations into the long-range capital campaign drive solely because of recommendations derived from their visitor survey results.

The institutions which conduct surveys to guide their long-range planning realize the value of implementing audience research before investing time and money into projects which may not satisfy the needs and expectations of their audience. At the same time, these institutions realize the limitations of their staff resources and mission. Although they are willing to consider all opinions and suggestions provided by the surveyed audience, they may not implement suggestions which compromise the institution's purpose and mission. However, some institutions have made audience research an integral part of their long-range plans and will conduct routine surveys to help direct future audience development, fundraising, programming, and exhibit and facilities expansion.

Over three-quarters (eighty-one percent) of the institutions conducted audience research to collect data which would help them improve their marketing, advertising and public relations strategies. Most of the institutions want to reach a broader audience so they may better serve the community and fulfill their fiduciary responsibilities. But more

importantly, these institutions want to increase visitation to gain the consequent revenues generated from an expanded audience.

Nearly all of the twenty-one institutions claim that all or a portion of their operating budget is dependent upon revenues generated from their audience. Several institutions state that although their operating budgets are partially supported by other funding sources, that support has declined by as much as sixty percent over the past ten years. As these museums are more reliant upon visitors as a source of income, attracting more visitors has become a greater priority. Indeed, the primary responsibilities of almost two-thirds (sixty-two percent) of the contact people for this research are marketing, public relations, communication, and development. Therefore, these institutions are using demographic and psychographic data from their visitor and nonvisitor surveys to develop more effective marketing and advertising strategies, and to determine where and how their marketing, advertising and public relations programs will be directed.

Demographic data are an extremely important part of marketing research, as they reveal the residency of visitors and nonvisitors and thus indicate what geographic areas the museum's marketing and advertising efforts are missing or simply are not effective. Some institutions found that they were not reaching certain portions of their audience either because they did not have any advertising in the area where those audiences lived, or their message was not appropriate to the demographic character of those audiences. For example, one institution conducted a survey ten years ago and learned that the majority of visitors, and nearly ninety percent of the state's entire population, came from three major population centers. However, the museum is located in a rural area of the state which is approximately one and one-half hours from each of the three major population centers. Therefore, the museum used major media to direct its advertising to those three population centers. But in a recent survey of its visitors and nonvisitors, the institution learned that the majority of their visitors did not come from those three population centers, and only fifty percent of the state's entire population now reside in those three cities. Because of the shift in population and visitor residency, the museum continues to advertise in the three population centers, but now places more emphasis on using local medias to reach audiences living in small cities, towns, and rural areas.

In addition to learning the demographic makeup of their potential audiences, the institutions discovered if the various forms of media they use are effective. One museum learned that a significant portion of their visitors are from out-of-state, but they were not marketing aggressively beyond their region. By increasing the quality, quantity and distribution of their advertising to out-of-state audiences, they were able to increase visitation by audiences from other states.

The psychographic nature of audiences is also very important in marketing, as individuals or groups of individuals are attracted to a leisure

activity which offers them the greatest satisfaction based on their criteria of a desirable leisure experience. Marketing and advertising efforts fail when an audience perceives that the museum will not meet its leisure criteria. In addition to utilizing the most effective forms of media to reach current and potential audiences, the institutions realize that the message must contain information which meets the psychographic expectations of their audiences. The audiences must feel comfortable and familiar with the images, verbiage and context of the message before they will be prompted to visit the museum.

Many institutions consider one or two particular psychographic characteristics of their various audiences to develop key advertising pieces. For instance, surveyed visitors were asked to identify their favorite exhibit at the museum. The exhibit most liked by the majority of visitors is then used to develop an image for advertising. In the case of zoos and aquaria, a favorite animal is the image used on mailers, brochures, billboards, and commercials. Botanical gardens and arboreta may use the image of a favorite garden or plant on their advertising pieces.

One institution learned from their visitor survey that the majority of visitors came to the museum with their families or friends. These visitors chose to participate in a leisure activity which would allow them to enjoy social interaction with other individuals in their reference group. Therefore, the museum changes its advertising and promotions to emphasize the social and family experience.

Some institutions learned from their surveys that their audiences were unaware of the museum's offerings because the message contained in the advertising did not clearly communicate or demonstrate what exhibits or programs the museum had to offer. Several institutions described an annual event at their museums, such as the birth of young animals or the blooming of a particular plant or garden, which was poorly attended until it was marketed as a special event.

The institutions which conduct audience research to develop marketing, advertising and public relations strategies agree that their institutions must know their audiences before they can market effectively to them, and any successful marketing campaign is based on research. These institutions implement surveys to keep in touch with the needs, opinions, and expectations of their audiences and use the data from the surveys to target their marketing accordingly.

There are further reasons why museums are conducting audience research. Of the twenty-one institutions participating in this research, four (nineteen percent) said their operating budgets require the support of funds from outside sources, particularly city, county or state funds. Despite the decrease in the amount of financial support from these sources, the museums will not be supported at all unless they can demonstrate to city, county or state officials that they are reaching out to all of the different communities whose taxes support them.

The contact people from four institutions (nineteen percent) reported granting agencies including government agencies, and private and corporate foundations, require justification for funding a program or exhibit. The museum's proposal to the granting agency must include a description of the audiences who will be served as a result of the program or exhibit implementation. The audience description typically must include a breakdown of the community by ethnicity, age, and gender so that the granting agency can determine if the program or exhibit will reach all, or a majority of the community.

The contact people from three institutions (fourteen percent) reported they must justify the receipt of annual government appropriations by demonstrating that their museums attract visitors from outside the city, county or state, and therefore increase revenues for other local, regional or state-wide industries through the audience it draws. The contact people claim that the economic impact of visitors from outside their institution's funding area is extremely important and determines the type and amount of financial support they receive from within their funding area.

All of these institutions use demographic data collected from visitor and nonvisitor surveys to justify support from funding sources. They employ survey results to demonstrate that they are serving all the diverse audiences within the domain of their public obligation, and they are reaching out to audiences beyond, who will generate additional revenues for the city, county or state.

Three institutions (fourteen percent) claimed that their government officials or governing boards require hard evidence to justify changes in the museum's mission, long-range plans, exhibits, programs, and departmental budgets. One institution used psychographic data from a visitor survey to demonstrate for county officials that plans for expansion of their facilities coincided with the needs and expectations of their visitors. The director of another institution uses demographic and psychographic data collected from routine visitor surveys to show the board the museum's position relative to the visitor's expectations, and justify changes in the museums direction to coincide with changes in the visitors' attitudes and opinions about the museum's offerings.

Data Collection Methods Used by Museums

The twenty-one institutions used various methods for collecting data from their audiences. The methods used include intercept surveys, telephone surveys, mail surveys, personal interviews, focus groups, and direct observation. Each institution selected the data collection method which would best achieve the purposes and goals of their audience research study within the limitations of the museum's financial and personnel resources.

The majority (sixty-two percent) of the twenty-one institutions used more than one data collections method to satisfy the research project with enough pertinent data to accomplish the museum's goals. These museums

did not use more than one method simply to gather superfluous information, but intentionally used those methods which were appropriate for obtaining the types of information they were seeking. Each data collection method will provide only a certain type or amount of information about a particular portion of the audience, so combining various methods allowed the museums to gather more complete information about their audiences.

All twenty-one museums used intercepts to survey their visitors. Two-thirds (sixty-six percent) of the institutions used the method of systematic random sampling (SRS) to draw their audience sample. The remaining one-third (thirty-three percent) of the institutions used the method of availability sampling to draw their audience sample. However, the museums who used availability sampling approached nearly *every visitor* for participation in the survey. Most of the institutions which used availability sampling believed that their sample was representative of their current audience because they had surveyed a very high percentage of their visitors. Some of the institutions would have preferred to use systematic random sampling, but the contact people claimed they could not afford to use that method due to limited budget, staff and knowledge of the sampling process.

In spite of the sampling methods used, these institutions felt that they had compensated for sampling error by selectively choosing when the intercept survey was taken. All twenty-one institutions were very deliberate in timing the intercepts to acquire a representative sample of visitors. The schedule for intercepts varied with every museum, and was determined by the purpose of their research study, budgetary constraints, and limited personnel. In general, intercepts were scheduled during periods of peak visitation to the museum. For some museums, this meant doing a survey during two, three or four seasons out of the year to get a representative sample of the differing seasonal visitors. A few museums conduct brief intercepts for one or two weeks every month, and one museum conducts intercepts with specialized questionnaires during special events. Most of the museums scheduled intercepts for a period of one week, and a few museums extended the intercepts for two weeks. All the museums were careful to conduct a certain number of intercepts every day of the week and at different hourly intervals of the day so that mornings, afternoons, and evenings of weekdays and weekends were covered.

Less than one-third (twenty-nine percent) of the twenty-one museums conducted a telephone survey, and they used the telephone survey as a method to reach nonvisitors and get the nonvisitor's perceptions and opinions of their museums. Most of these museums used a telephone survey in combination with an intercept survey to collect demographic and psychographic data on both visitors and nonvisitors. It is nearly impossible for museums to conduct telephone surveys as an in-house project because telephone surveys require specialized procedures, training and equipment. Museums which conducted telephone surveys relied on the expertise of a research consultant who has experience in implementing them.

Because of the problems associated with mail surveys (laborious process, lengthy amount of time required to complete the process, and typically low rate of returns), none of the institutions in this research conducted a mail survey of visitors or nonvisitors. However, one institution combined the concept of intercepts with the concept of mail surveys to conduct a visitor survey. The museum designed a questionnaire which was distributed by interceptors to every person leaving the museum. Instead of asking the visitors to stop and answer the questionnaire while at the museum, the interceptors asked the visitors to take the questionnaire home and answer the questions at their leisure. If the visitors mailed the questionnaire back to the museum, they received free admission tickets. This museum actually had a very high rate of return and only paid postage to mail incentives on returned questionnaires. Although they used the method of availability sampling, the museums staff believed they had acquired a representative sample because of the high return rate. The staff also obtained the types of information they were seeking.

Less than one-quarter (nineteen percent) of the twenty-one institutions conducted focus groups at research facilities. The institutions did not use focus groups as their sole data collection method, but used focus groups in conjunction with an intercept survey, and in some cases with an intercept survey and a telephone survey. All of the museums which conducted focus groups used at least two groups. Typically, one group included visitors and the other included nonvisitors.

Most of the museums conducted the focus groups before conducting the intercept and telephone surveys, and used the qualitative data to help define the type of quantitative data they would be seeking through the intercepts and telephone surveys. In addition, focus group discussions can provide clues to special problems that could develop in the quantitative research, such as inappropriate wording or illogical ordering of survey questions. Results of the focus group discussion allows the museum to develop more effective procedures for the intercept and telephone surveys.

One museum conducted the intercept and telephone surveys before the focus groups, so the quantitative data would help them concentrate on specific issues or priorities during the focus group discussion. Focus groups can provide insights about the meaning and interpretation of intercept and telephone survey results, and can suggest action strategies for problems perceived by the respondents to the surveys.

One institution conducted personal interviews with various leaders of the city whom they called opinion leaders. The opinion leaders represented the diverse social and cultural communities within the city. The researcher for the museum used a standardized questionnaire to conduct each personal interview. While the interviews were conducted at the museum rather than at a research facility, the institution felt the responses of the opinion leaders were not biased by this fact.

Most of the contact people did not report direct observation as a data collections method they had used, but all of the contact people said they had "a feel for" participation patterns and visitor perceptions based upon informal observation. One museum uses the method of direct observation to gather demographic data about its visitors. One member of the museum staff routinely checks the vehicle registration of cars in the parking lot to learn from what states their visitors are coming.

Audience Research Implementation by Museums

The twenty-one institutions which conducted audience research relied on assistance from various sources to implement their audience research studies. Three-quarters (seventy-six percent) of the museums employed resources from outside of their institutions, particularly audience research consultants, marketing research firms and university students majoring in market research or leisure studies. Some of these museums also used staff and volunteers to assist in the study implementation. The remaining museums used only those resources available from within their institutions, including staff and volunteers.

Two-thirds (sixty-six percent) of the museums used consultants from marketing or audience research firms to assist in the implementation of their audience research studies. For many museum professionals who are confused and overwhelmed by the methods and procedures of audience research, the knowledge, expertise and services provided by consultants saves them an immense amount of time, money, and frustration. Many of the contact people conceded that they and their survey committees were unfamiliar with audience research methods and procedures and relied on marketing research consultants to plan, administer, and implement their audience research studies. Research consultants provided the skills and expertise which the survey committee lacked to guide the museums through a successful project.

The decision to hire a research consultant was made by the museums after they had conceptualized the research project and determined what they wanted to accomplish. When selecting a research consultant to guide the research implementation, the museums considered the consultant's previous experience working with museums with similar collections. The museums also sought references from museums with similar collections who had worked with the consultants. Some museums made a decision to hire a consultant based solely on the consultant's experience and reputation. For some of these museums, the consultant provided excellent service and produced quality data. However, some of museums experienced difficulties in communication with and cooperation from their consultants, and did not get the final product they had expected.

Other museums requested bids from several marketing and audience research firms and asked the firms to base their proposals on the museums' needs. These museums based their final selection of a consultant on the

comprehensiveness of the bid, how well the consultant works with other people, and, to a lesser degree, the total cost of the bid. All of these museums were pleased with the services and final product provided by the consultant and believed the consultant produced quality data and useful results.

However, some of the contact people claimed they experienced problems with their consultants, and the process for completing the study was difficult and confusing. They acknowledged that some of these problems could have been averted during the planning phases of the project when they selected a consultant to assist them with the research. Those museums which solicited bids from several marketing or museum research firms, and negotiated the terms of the final contract, were able to select the consultant with the most appropriate plan for conducting the research, meeting the needs of the museums, and serving the goals and objectives of the study. Museums which did not conduct a bidding and negotiating process, but selected a sole consultant to perform the work, had more problems during the study and were not as successful at obtaining the information they were seeking.

All of the contact people maintained that close communication with the research consultant is essential, and starts with the bidding and negotiation processes. The consultants must clearly understand the service and information needs of the museum. The survey committee must clearly understand the extent of the services and final product to be provided by the consultant, and any requirements of the consultant to provide those services and a final product. Proposals to conduct the research should be presented by the consultants to the survey committee, and should include a specific plan for conducting the study. The plan should contain a detailed description of the proposed data collection methods and survey sample, with an explanation of why they are appropriate to the purposes of the research study and how they will be executed. The plan should also contain an explanation of how the data collection methods will be administered and how the results will be analyzed. In addition, the proposal should include a description of the content of the final report to be prepared by the consultant. It is essential that the final report be prepared in such a way that it is easy to use and the survey results can be easily interpreted and understood by the museum's staff.

Museums should request a copy of the computer disks which hold the raw data of the research study during the negotiation process. Owning the raw data of completed research studies will allow museums to conduct further analysis at a future date, if necessary. For example, a museum may wish to run crosstabs and other types of analysis which may not have been run during the initial study, to gain additional information or clarification. It is also important that the museum negotiate to receive the raw data in such a form that it can be used on one of the many sociology statistics software packages available for personal computers.

It is essential for survey committees to be familiar with all of the services provided by consultants so they may choose the services which best suit the needs of the institution, the goals and objectives of the research project and the limitations of financial and personnel resources. The survey committees should ask each firm submitting a proposal to provide a comprehensive schedule of their services and operations. Consultants should make it clear that they cannot be expected to provide a service in the middle of a study which was not discussed and negotiated during the planning phase of the project, although they may provide subsequent services for an additional fee. The consultant must select the data collection methods, design the survey sample, design the questionnaire, and conduct the analysis based on the needs of their clients. The contact people stated that, after all, the research is being conducted to get information which is meaningful and useful to the museum.

Nearly one-quarter (twenty-four percent) of the museums collaborated with local universities to implement their research studies. Three of the museums initiated the collaborative effort by contacting professors in the Department of Marketing Research at local universities. The two remaining audience research studies were initiated by university professors in the Departments of Marketing Research and Leisure Studies, who wanted their students to gain practical experience in designing and implementing visitor surveys.

Most of the museums which collaborated with universities had a satisfying experience and acquired pertinent data and useful results from the research study. The contact people from these institutions insisted that the success of the research study was due to the professors' commitment to the project, tight supervision of the students, and close communication with the museum staff. The most successful research studies were those in which the professor remained in constant contact with the museum staff and rigorously supervised the execution of the study. However, one institution had a frustrating experience because neither the students nor the professor were committed to the project, the students were not closely supervised, and there was very little communication between the museum staff, the professor, and students.

To conduct the research studies, the students applied various data collection methods, including intercepts, telephone surveys and focus groups. The students also helped to define the goals and objectives of the research study, designed the survey sample, designed the questionnaire, prepared the questions, and analyzed the data. Although the students provided the full range of audience research services typically offered by marketing and audience research consultants, the students obviously lacked the knowledge, training, experience, and expertise of professional research consultants.

The greatest advantage to collaboration with universities is the significant cost savings for the museum. The out-of-pocket expenses for

research projects conducted by university students included only photocopying or printing fees to reproduce the questionnaires. Other minor costs included incentives and the time of the museum staff who were involved with the research study.

One of the greatest disadvantages of collaboration with universities is that the research must be done during the school year. Institutions with peak visitation in the spring or fall would be likely to conduct their research projects during the spring or fall semester. However, those institutions with peak visitation in the summer, or those institutions who want to do a series of surveys during each season, may not be able to use college students to conduct the research. One institution conducted a research study using students in a summer course. The project was a frustrating and fruitless experience for the museum, as the students were unorganized, uncommitted, and unsupervised, and never completed the project.

Five museums (twenty-four percent) conducted their audience research studies in-house. Three museums had staff members with experience in audience research and the staff members were able to conduct a scientific research project which resulted in reliable and valid data and produced pertinent and useful information. Two museums had staff who were familiar with audience research, but were unsure of the appropriate research methodologies and the subtleties of each. For them, the research study was a difficult process, but eventually they gained the knowledge and experience to acquire useful data.

Staff participation is essential in all research projects, whether the museums is relying on a consultant, university students, or museum staff. Every institution agreed that the process for conducting the research study was relatively smooth and uneventful when the project received the support and commitment of the museum director and staff. Museums which included the staff at the beginning of the study found that the staff felt a sense of ownership and responsibility for the outcome of the study. In some cases, the research consultant for the project conducted a staff orientation session at the beginning of the project to elicit this kind of buy-in response. Most of the museums took advantage of the staff's knowledge of their departments' needs and functions by soliciting them for suggestions for the goals of the research. Input from the staff in every department resulted in a more thorough research study which produced data that was comprehensive to the entire institution.

In addition to soliciting comments and suggestions for the goals of the research, some museums used staff to help prepare questions for the questionnaire and serve as survey interceptors. Using staff to assist in the research reduced the consultant's costs, but the staff had to sacrifice time from other museum operations. The museums which used staff as interceptors either held training sessions in-house, or had their research consultant conduct the training sessions. Staff who were oriented on the value and importance of audience research during the initial phases of the

study, and later trained to perform intercepts properly, assisted in the provision of complete, accurate, and reliable data.

Nearly half (forty-eight percent) of the museums employed the services of their volunteers to assist with the administration and implementation of the audience research project. Volunteers were typically used as interceptors for exit surveys. Some museums considered their volunteers to be an integral part of museum operations, and asked the volunteers to provide objective suggestions for the goals and objectives of the research. One institution conducted its research in-house and benefited from the guidance and services of a volunteer who had been a market researcher before retiring.

However, all the institutions which used volunteers to help conduct the research project agreed that the volunteers must be included at the beginning of the research project, and just as with the museum staff, must be oriented to the research. Volunteers were committed to the research project when the museums explained the value and importance of the research, and included the volunteers in a team effort to make it happen. Volunteers who were not informed about the research study process did not understand its worth, and did not give their support to the project.

Museums which did not have a commitment from the volunteers had problems using them to administer the survey. In some cases, volunteers who were scheduled to do intercepts simply did not come or waited until the last minute to notify the museums that they would not be available. In other cases, the volunteers wanted to have fun, and would not stop the required sample of visitors to distribute the questionnaire because it was too much work. Some volunteers complained about the weather or other working conditions, and were rude to the visitors. Two museums had to stop volunteers from filling out the questionnaires themselves rather than intercepting visitors.

Volunteers who will serve as interceptors must be trained thoroughly, and given an opportunity to practice performing the intercept. This is critical, as museums who did not train their volunteers or had only modest training sessions had many problems. Intercepts which were not done properly led to insufficient, incomplete or inaccurate responses, which adversely affected the quality of the results.

Some volunteers were uncomfortable talking with people and did not intercept the required sample of visitors. Some volunteers did not want to stop certain visitors because they were afraid of them, such as the case in which a senior, white female volunteer would not stop young black males. Some volunteers would not stop certain visitors because they felt guilty about bothering them, such as the case in which the volunteers would not stop mothers with children.

In those research studies where the volunteers asked the questions to the visitor, there were problems with the volunteer not asking all of the questions, especially if they already had a strong opinion about the answers.

In addition, some volunteers would lead or persuade the visitor to give a certain response the visitor may not otherwise have given.

The museums which used volunteers to assist in the implementation of the research saved a tremendous amount on the total cost of the research study. For the museums who trained their volunteers, treated them as team players and rewarded them for their efforts, the research project provided quality data desired by the museum.

For the museums which did not train their volunteers or include them in the beginning of the project, the survey administration was plagued with scheduling problems, disgruntled visitors, and questionnaires which had to be thrown out due to bias and error. The contact people from these museums reported that the cost savings were not worth the problems associated with using volunteers, and would not use volunteers in future research studies.

Although the sources of assistance for implementation of the audience research studies, and the impending results varied among the participating museums, the contact people reported that their institutions used the best assistance possible within the limitations of their budgets and staff support, time, and expertise. After completing one audience research study using a certain type of assistance, many of the contact people believed that their museum staff would have a better understanding of that type of assistance and could manage it more effectively in future audience research, or they would use a different type of assistance.

Conclusion

The staffs of the museums with living collections which participated in this research have realized that their institutions are in danger of stagnation if they do not include the perspective of their current and potential audiences when planning the future operations, goals, and development of their museums. They acknowledge that their museums must grow into the new century, and recognize that they will increasingly rely upon the support of their audiences to do so. Through audience research, these museum professionals have gone beyond the boundaries of their museums to identify and understand the needs and expectations of their audiences and anticipate how they can impact the future direction of their institutions.

The contact person from every museum reported that they experienced some difficulties with the administration and/or implementation of the research study. Some institutions encountered minor problems which were easily resolved, while others were plagued with complications. Yet nearly all of the contact people (ninety percent) asserted that the project was successful and they were able to get the information they were seeking.

Most of the contact people insisted that many of the problems they encountered could have been avoided by better communication with the research consultants, staff, and volunteers. They agreed that all individuals

participating in the planning, administration, and implementation of the study must understand the needs of the institution, the goals and objectives of the study, and the importance of the research. Those survey committees which were able to foster this understanding had fewer problems than those which did not. To encourage understanding and elicit support, the survey committees held orientation sessions with their consultants, staff and volunteers to explain the value of the project to them and the institution.

Two contact people (ten percent) professed that their museums' audience research projects were unsuccessful, as they did not acquire the information they sought. The audience research projects by these two museums were not supported financially or morally by the director and staff of the institutions, and were administered by students and volunteers who were not committed to the project. Despite the failed experience, the contact people from these museums continue to believe in the relevance and worth of audience research, and expressed a desire to solicit support for another research study in the near future.

The contact people from those museums which used staff and/or volunteers to plan, administer, and implement the audience research project also affirmed that close communication is an essential element for maintaining a relatively smooth process and obtaining successful results. Staff and volunteers must be oriented to the value, importance, and procedures of audience research. Staff, and possible volunteers, should be included in the planning process and invited to submit ideas which will help articulate the goals and objectives of the research project, and questions which will help shape the survey instrument. Museums which oriented their staff and volunteers and solicited their input provided their full support to the research study. Staff and volunteers must also be well-trained if they are to perform the administration of the questionnaire. Staff and volunteers were used successfully as interceptors by museums which held training and practice sessions before the survey, and closely supervised them during the survey.

The use of staff and volunteers in conjunction with, or as opposed to, the services of a research consultant helped to minimize the total cost of the research project. However, the contact people from the museums which used staff and volunteers warned that institutions should consider potential negative consequences which can accompany the cost savings. Museums which did not invest time in the orientation and training of their staff and volunteers experienced frustration throughout the course of the project. In addition, their survey results were plagued with bias and error which affected the accuracy and reliability of the results.

All of the contact people stated that their museums have used, or will use, the results from their successful audience research studies to modify their existing exhibits, programs, services, or facilities, or to initiate the development and implementation of new ones. None of the museums planned to eliminate exhibits, programs, services or facilities, but rather

planned to alter their existing offerings to suit the desires and demands of their customers. Those museums which made alterations in their offerings, based on the results of and subsequent recommendations from their audience research, had significant increases in visitor attendance. Museums which regularly conducted audience research, particularly on an annual or semi-annual basis, are able to make subtle modifications, or drastic changes if mandated, to maintain a high approval rating from their visitors. These museums have made the understanding and service of visitors a part of their mission, and are using audience research methods on a routine basis to fulfill that purpose, as well as to increase their visitation.

Indeed, audience research should not be used to make quick patches and repairs in exhibits, facilities, services, and programs of a museum, but should be integrated into the standard operations of the institution to help guide it through the twenty-first century. Audience research should be a step in the overall planning process of museums, including specification of the institutional mission, goals for exhibits, programs, and facilities, and design and use of budgets and resources. As museums move from donor-driven organizations indulging elite constituencies, to client-centered institutions serving a broad and diverse public, they must understand how to attract, welcome, gratify, and sustain those multiple audiences.