

Presidential Address

Missions: Current and Future

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What I want to talk about today has to do with the Visitor Studies Association (VSA), its new Mission Statement, and some of the issues I see VSA facing as it begins its second full year of existence. I feel reasonably qualified to discuss these things not so much because of my role as President, but more importantly because I am the chair of one of the 14 committees of VSA which, in fact, drafted the Mission Statement.

Mission statements, of course, have a long and illustrious history of being something that you feel compelled to prepare when you start a new organization, but which you often feel equally compelled to ignore from that moment on. It's always instructive when you ask the director of a museum to show you a copy of the institution's mission statement, and then note the time it takes to find it! One could argue that "time to find" is negatively correlated with perceived value. But as VSA is still young, I sincerely believe that we do need to give careful thought to what we say in our Mission Statement, which is why our committee solicited comments not only from the Officers and Board Members of VSA (which resulted in a number of important changes), but also from the entire VSA membership (see Shettel [1992] for the complete Mission Statement).

I see this current Mission Statement document not as the final, ultimate statement of who and what we are and want to be, but as a first draft of a document that should continue to be reviewed and reworked so that it reflects new ideas, new directions, and new concerns of the organization. The Mission Statement itself says that it should be reviewed annually "to ensure that it continues to reflect the aspirations of the VSA, its members, and the field of visitor studies."

I'm going to discuss only two of the several issues that came up in putting the Mission Statement together, but I think they are core issues that will require continuous review and discussion if we are going to enjoy a long and successful future. One issue is *membership* and the other is *professionalism*. They are, as we shall see, not unrelated to one another.

One reasonable way to define an organization is, in fact, to look at its membership. Our current VSA members define in a very real sense who we are *now*, and the members we don't have, but wish we had, define who we

would like to *become*. In an early comment about VSA I wrote that “I see it as a core organization that will embrace all those who are interested in visitor studies regardless of their professional or occupational affiliations.” (Shettel, 1990a, p. 15) That suggests a big, wide open door that all who wish may enter. No litmus tests for us.

However, our Mission Statement needs to be, and is, a bit more specific and says that we are committed to providing a forum for all those who agree that there is a need for expanded research studies of visitor behavior, as well as a need for greater dissemination and utilization of what we have already learned about visitors. So—more research, get the word out, and get more people to apply what is known. The Statement then goes on to list what are considered to be the three core (but overlapping) constituencies that comprise our major target audiences for membership:

1. Those in the research and academic community who carry out applied visitor research studies;
2. Practitioners who regularly conduct systematic visitor evaluations and surveys;
3. Those in administrative, management, and other positions who are able to support the conduct of visitor studies and/or use the results of such studies.

The notion is, and the Statement goes on to reflect this, that what may be considered the historic core of the visitor studies field consists of those who actually carry out and document evaluations and surveys with real and/or potential visitors. But that practitioner core needs to be enriched and supported on the one side by an active and viable research community that has the luxury of doing controlled, generalizable studies that expand our knowledge base (usually, but not necessarily, university-affiliated), and on the other side by those who are in a position to promote and support visitor studies in their own organizations, and who thus create a demand for the services provided by the practitioners. This three-tiered membership model reflects what is often true of other, more firmly established, so-called “mature” service-oriented professional areas such as medicine, psychology, and education, where in each case, there is an active academic/research axis, a viable practitioner/entrepreneurial axis, and “users” or “customers” who give the other two areas their reasons for existence. No patients—no doctors. No doctors—no, or certainly less—need for medical-oriented research. No students—no teachers and no educational research.

It should also be noted that it is often the case in these service-oriented disciplines that those who do the basic and applied research do not have the same agendas, needs, and interests as their cousins the practitioners, and therefore often do not share the same goals, or even the same organizations, publications, lobbyists in congress, etc. The American Psychological Association came very close to self-destructing over the split between those

from the academic/research world and those from the practitioner's world. The latter was seen as pretty much taking over the organization with their practical concerns relating to fees, licensing, certification, ethics, malpractice insurance and what have you, and neglecting, if not ignoring, the needs of the scientific base of psychology. A large group of academic/research-oriented psychologists, in fact, formed their own organization with, I'm sure, their own very different mission statement.

The field of visitor studies may be too young and too small to see this distinction between research and practitioner roles as being a problem or a source of tension. In fact, many of us interchangeably perform in both arenas, changing our professional hats with apparent ease. But I feel certain that as we mature as a field of study and as an organization, this tension will increasingly manifest itself in interesting, surprising, and not always pleasant ways. (In fact, the series of exchanges that took place recently in several issues of *Visitor Behavior* between Mark St. John [1990], Harris Shettel [1990b & 1990c], D. D. Hilke [1990] and Lisa Roberts [1990], could be seen as involving at heart certain practitioner/research/professional kinds of issues.)

Let us return to our three membership categories. The third group, made up of those who create the demand for and support evaluation services in their own institutions, is the least represented in VSA membership. And yet, without their support we are, over the long haul, drilling in a dry hole. (Remember, no patient—no doctor.)

A good example of this kind of support was provided by what I thought was an excellent panel presented at the 1992 meeting of the American Association of Museums in Baltimore, chaired by Minda Borun, on "Evaluation and Fiscal Responsibility." Three well-known managers from three well-known institutions (Chicago Botanic Garden, New York Hall of Science, and the Adler Planetarium) made a "no if's, no and's, and no but's" call for the support of front-end and formative evaluations on the grounds that it is fiscally *ir*responsible NOT to conduct such studies whenever one is preparing new exhibits and programs! The panelists had well-documented case studies to back up their argument.

Managers, administrators, curators, exhibition designers, interpreters, and education specialists are the kinds of people (represented in membership category number three) who need to see the value in supporting VSA, hopefully through their membership but also through presentations, writings and, of course, actions such as hiring evaluators. Getting these busy people to actually join VSA and attend our annual meeting is not going to be easy. I don't know if we can reach the point where we can successfully compete with the other organizations that represent more closely their primary occupational interests. But regardless of the difficulty, we must continue to actively solicit this potentially large "user" support group.

Looking at numbers for a moment, we would quickly fade away as a viable organization if we depended solely upon the pure academic/research group for membership support simply because there are relatively few of them around who fit exclusively in this category. I am sure they will grow in number, but they will probably always be a proportionately small part of VSA. And as just noted, the third group, the managers, directors, curators, etc., are going to be a hard sell. That leaves those who routinely and regularly *do* evaluations and surveys—the practitioners, as the major source of membership and the all-important revenue that derives from that membership. While I would have to believe that many of these people already know about VSA and that a sizable portion are members, I also believe that they represent a growing constituency that will require our active and continuous solicitation.

An interesting development in this regard is the growing number of persons who participate in the design, development, and production of visitor-related environments of various kinds—people like exhibit planners and designers, educators, architects, interpreters, label writers and others who more and more frequently need to work with, understand, and implement visitor study findings into their work. They need to have a basic understanding of the role of such studies and how they inform the development process.

What is an even more important and interesting development is that these team members are more frequently being assigned to *do* visitor studies, often in addition to their regular responsibilities. In fact, we often see these people in our VSA preconference workshops. In several cases I happen to know about, these initial part-time assignments have become full-time responsibilities, even with a new title—“Evaluator.” They become, in effect, evaluation practitioners. I think we need to be keenly aware of this development and make sure that these converts find a meaningful home in VSA in recognition of their increasingly prominent role in the field of visitor studies. It certainly broadens our base and gives us a much larger potential pool of VSA members. These developments have important implications in the area of professional standards, a subject I will get to shortly.

Our membership also needs to be looked at along two other important dimensions—organizational affiliation and geographic representation. An analysis of our membership by type of organization last year revealed that we had the heaviest membership from science centers and zoos, and moderate membership from consultants, art museums, history museums, university faculties, students, natural history museums and botanical gardens. We were very weak then in aquariums, parks/recreational facilities, children’s museums, architectural/exhibit design firms, nature centers, and state and Federal governmental agencies.

While this breakdown might look somewhat different this year, I doubt that the difference would be dramatic. What is beyond question is the fact

that there are still many categories of institutions that are organizationally underrepresented in VSA and yet would clearly benefit from their affiliation with us. Do they know we exist? If they do know, do they perceive us as not having something of sufficient value to them? Could it be our image (too specialized?), our benefit package (too limited?), our membership fee structure (too expensive?), or what? We don't have the answers to these questions yet, but we need to find out ASAP. (The Membership, Development, and PR Committee, chaired by Ellen Stokes, has made a start on this important work.)

Looking at our geographical representation, we do not yet adequately reflect the international scope of VSA (which is, by the way, one of our distinguishing characteristics as compared to the AAM Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation [CARE] whose voting members must be individual AAM members). In 1991 we had the privilege of having our annual conference on Canadian soil (Ottawa). We had a very healthy representation of Canadians, as one might expect (64%), and a somewhat weaker showing of those from the US (32%), and a relatively small number (4%) from other countries—UK, France, Germany, and Australia. (The Canadians, by the way, have been consistently supportive, not only of VSA, but of the visitor studies field in general right from the earliest days.) I have not had a chance to look at our present roster of VSA members or at those who registered for this conference. But it is clear that we are not attracting anywhere near the number of people and institutions worldwide who have an interest in, and a need to know about, visitor studies.

(Since this presentation was made, we have looked at the St. Louis registrations by country. Sixteen percent of the 185 attendees were from outside the US, 62% of them being from Canada.)

We do have an International Committee, chaired by Ridgeley Williams, that is actively exploring ways to get our message out to those throughout the world who share in our goals. I hope to see the time when we have active VSA-sponsored-and-supported organizations with their own meetings and workshops in places like England, Germany, France, Australia, to name only a few, where there are those not only doing visitor studies but actively promoting them.

I might mention here that there is an organization called *Heritage Interpretation International* that has interesting parallels to VSA. They hold what they call a "World Congress" every three years. In November, 1991, it was held in Hawaii and attracted over 500 delegates from 40 countries around the world. As can be seen from a statement of purpose taken from one of their publications ("The conservation, presentation, and interpretation of our natural and man-made heritage to the public"), they share many of the same concerns as does VSA. When Steve Bitgood, Ridge Williams and I gave a workshop at that conference we had numerous expressions of interest in VSA and its mission. Those to whom we talked were, for the most part, completely unaware of the work that has been done in the field of visitor

studies or of VSA, a situation that we need to take steps to correct. But this is just one example of the conceptual linkages we have with a variety of organizations and disciplines that need to know about the motivation and behavior of that ubiquitous abstraction we lump under the word *visitors*.

We could summarize our membership discussion by saying that we definitely need to clarify and sharpen up our membership target audience descriptions, and at the same time we need to reach a broader base of institutions at both the national and international level. I did not address related issues like profit and non-profit organizations, vendors and suppliers, and non-educationally-oriented visitor environments like theme parks, and whether or not there should be special membership classification schemes, fees, and benefits for such groups. But all of these membership issues do relate to my second topic, which is *professionalism*.

You will be delighted to know that I am not going to go into this complex subject in detail. I really only want to open up the dialogue a bit and relate the subject back to the membership issue.

The term *professional* is noted a number of times in the Mission Statement. Most particularly, the Statement says that the VSA has “an important role to play in the development and support of professional standards and ethics for those working in the field of visitor studies, and in providing educational and training opportunities through publications and the sponsorship of workshops and seminars.”

Frankly, we have not yet done very much in this area. We do have two committees that are charged with making recommendations—one on *Professional Standards*, chaired by Ross Loomis, and another on *Professional Development*, chaired by Steve Bitgood. It is easy to frame some of the critical questions that need to be addressed, but it will take time to arrive at the answers. What, if any, is our “gatekeeper” role vis-a-vis professional standards? Should we promulgate a set of standards for the conduct of evaluations and surveys like the AAM CARE did? Should we consider adopting those or do we need our own? Should we play any kind of “enforcement” or “quality control” role through some kind of certification process? Can VSA maintain a professional stance if we accept as members those who have no particular evaluation or research credentials? Does that suggest categories of membership, an idea most of us say we want to avoid?

And, an equally important question: Can VSA promote high professional standards and, at the same time, sponsor evaluation workshops that may last only half a day, encouraging participants to do what are sometimes called “quick and dirty” evaluations? Even if the workshop presenters mention all the caveats, and advise participants to get help when they need it (do they know when they need it?), are we not really supplying the field with what might be called “amateur” evaluators, who can sometimes do more harm than good (and have)? Is *any* evaluation better than *no* evaluation? (“Mature” professional organizations often go to great lengths to protect the perceived rights and privileges of their members.

Allowing mental health practitioners to prescribe drugs, for example, has been a long and bitter legal battle between the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Medical Association.)

And perhaps the most fundamental question of all: Could those of us working in the field of visitor studies arrive at a consensus as to what "professional quality research and evaluation" is and the "correct way" to carry out such work? I can personally attest to the fact that there are divergent views on such matters. It may in fact be too early to try to arrive at such a consensus.

My last, and related, point has to do with the more formal training of qualified evaluators and research people. Where are these people going to come from? Are current university graduate programs in evaluation methodology adequate? Only a few offer courses directly related to our interests. Is there such a thing as a "universal evaluator" who can work in any area? Personally, I don't think so—not without considerable cross-training. For one thing, without knowing the visitor studies literature (of which there is a sizable and rapidly growing body), one would be poorly equipped to do research and evaluation work in our field.

I know that the various museum studies programs around the country do not even begin to fill this need. The best that the best of them do (and this represents only a small handful) is to provide limited exposure to the literature and methodology of evaluation, perhaps providing a practicum that may involve some actual visitor interviews and/or observations. This is good in the sense that such programs can create over the years a cadre of museum workers coming up through the ranks who should at least recognize the value of doing visitor studies. They may well be the "users" of the future. But they are not likely to be the "doers" of the future without a lot more training. VSA should, I think, play an active role in the professional training area *if* (big IF) we aspire to exercise any kind of influence in establishing and maintaining standards in the work that is done under the name of "visitor studies." But that role, as noted, is yet to be defined.

It is clear to me that VSA as an organization is moving ahead in its efforts to become a significant player in the field of visitor studies. But even more importantly, we must recognize and deal with some of the more critical challenges we face. I have addressed only two of them today. Our membership has not yet reached the critical mass that insures our ability to do what our Mission Statement says we want to do, and I think should do. It is not just a question of numbers, but also of organizational and geographical representation. In addition, our status as a professional organization is ambiguous and needs to be clarified.

As I said when I agreed to accept the presidency, the infant VSA will survive only if it has an extended family of supporters who will take an *active role* in its growth and development. I happen to know for a fact that

VSA has a good set of genes because I know its parents very well—Steve Bitgood and Arlene Benefield. But nature alone is not enough—nurture plays a critical role as well. And as I hope my remarks today have demonstrated, VSA will continue to need nurturing for some time to come.

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