AUDIENCE RESEARCH AS A STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT TOOL

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INTRODUCTION

Evaluation is a tool through which we can understand the worth or merit of our projects and products (Frechtling Westat, 2010). In cultural institutions such as museums, science centres, zoos and galleries, evaluation offers an opportunity to explore the value of what we do for many different stakeholders, with the key stakeholder being - we believe - our visitors. Museums and galleries would not exist without those who use them, and strategic planning therefore often includes the requirement to provide meaningful and engaging visitor experiences. In order to achieve this however, it is essential to define what 'engaging experiences' actually are and understand how they can be created. Audience research is a collective term to describe the practice and use of evaluation to support institutions to do this. As Kelly (2005) describes:

> Audience research is a discipline of museum practice that provides information about visitors and non-visitors to museums and other cultural institutions. It is a strategic management tool providing data to assist museums more effectively plan and develop exhibitions and programmes, meet their corporate goals, as well as to learn as organisations. (Kelly, 2005)

This is supported by (Barriault and Pearson, 2010) who reiterate that "Collecting visitor feedback is done in order to improve the visitor experience and increase the impact of their interaction." It is this emphasis on evaluation as a tool to understand visitors' experiences, learning and emotional responses to cultural exhibitions and programmes that this paper will focus on.

It is worth drawing some boundaries at this point, as there are many terms used interchangeably and which have different meanings in different cultural contexts. Audience Research is not the same as Market Research. While they complement each other, Market Research examines current and potential audiences in terms of their perceptions of the institution or brand, and practical factors such as journey time and price constraints[1]. Audience Research in contrast explores the effectiveness and impact of the cultural exhibitions and programmes offered by the institution.

As with Market Research, Audience Research is necessary as we cannot assume we know what visitors will enjoy, engage with or learn from. As museum professionals we know a great deal about producing experiences for visitors but we cannot be representative of them as our thinking becomes influenced by institutional objectives and we are familiar with our products in a way visitors will not be. We also cannot know what our visitors bring to the galleries. Visitors incorporate their experiences in-gallery into their existing knowledge, understanding and behaviour (Falk et al, 1998), so without finding out about our audiences' previous

[1] http://www.cim.co.uk/resources/glossary/home.aspx

knowledge or preconceptions we cannot make exhibitions that are truly emotionally and intellectually accessible for them.

Audience research generally falls into three broad categories that occur at distinct stages of a project: front-end, formative and summative evaluation. As will become clear, there is overlap in the timing and methods used for these types of evaluation, but they each have an independent value for their respective phase. It is useful to think of each of these evaluation stages as linked in a cycle.

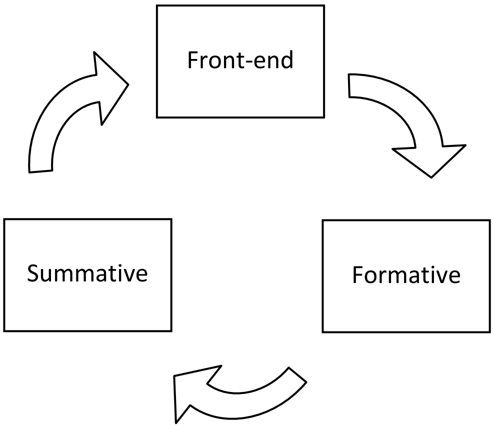

Figure 1 The Cycle of Evaluation

The purpose of this paper is not to describe *how to do evaluation* but rather to provide some arguments as to *why* it is important to commit precious time and resources to evaluation. Each of these stages is looked at in turn as this article describes their purpose and value.

FRONT-END EVALUATION

ITS PURPOSE

Front-end evaluation (sometimes referred to as Status Quo evaluation (Klein, 2011)) is used at the very beginning of a project to identify need. While visitor needs and expectations are ultimately being investigated, the needs of the institution and the sector more generally can be taken into account. For example, information about visitors needs can help an exhibition team to define target audiences, set objectives for an exhibition or highlight appealing ways to interpret content. But it can also allow an institution to review their current offer and identify any gaps, and to understand current practice across the sector or identify new trends.

Reviewing current offers and practice (at an institutional or sector level) allows the team to make use of, or build on, previous experience.

WHAT FORM DOES IT TAKE?

Like all evaluation, front-end research can be undertaken by the institution or by external consultants. It involves desk research, site visits and listening to the proposed target audience. The research is used to assess the proposed target audience's understanding of and reaction to key content themes. Desk research is used to review existing literature (both grey and academic) on previous exhibitions (in-house and external) that address similar content, have been developed for a similar target audience or have used a similar interpretative approach.

Site visits may be made to other institutions to speak to parallel teams and review existing exhibitions, projects or practice.

It is important, even at this early stage, to listen to your visitors (or those you hope to attract). This can be done through focus groups or interviews, or by assessing existing feedback the institution collects e.g. comments cards.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Those conducting the research must be well briefed and have the support of the Senior Management Team (SMT). The SMT make decisions about the direction of the institution and they will integrate the findings from front-end research with the needs of the institution from a strategic perspective.

If the project is to be externally funded or there is competition for funds, the fundraising team also need to be aware of the findings from the front-end research. External funders can be persuaded by strong evidence, and appreciate an organisation gaining insight from previous experience.

The project development team are also key stakeholders in the outcomes of front-end research. As the creative process begins it can be easy to forget the evidence that was used to inform the overall shape and direction of the project. However, reflecting on these through development stages will support the development of content and interpretation.

THE VALUE IT BRINGS TO AN INSTITUTION

As has already been stated, front-end evaluation identifies a need which supports both the institution's mission and the needs of the visitor. It indicates what has been successful and what has not, thereby providing direction and knowledge about how to create improved experiences.

A further valuable outcome of front-end evaluation is that it encourages the institution and project team to make clear definitions from the start. In order to conduct research on audiences and content, it is necessary to first define a proposed target audience, the types of experience you want to create for them, and the key ideas and scope of the content. Defining these aspects in the earliest stages provides the team with a shared understanding of purpose, and a clearer indication of what constitutes success.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION

ITS PURPOSE

Formative evaluation takes place during the development phase of a project to test and improve specific exhibition components - such as interactive exhibits, labels or websites - *while they are still being developed*. We can't predict what visitors will do or take from an experience, especially when we are so familiar with the concepts they will be encountering for the first time. Trialling these components with real visitors can highlight whether it is successful, and most importantly, the reasons why or why not. Good formative testing will actively look for the barriers that prevent visitors having an engaging experience, such as not knowing how to use an interactive exhibit, not understanding the concept behind what you wanted to convey, or simply not enjoying or feeling motivated to engage. Once you understand what these barriers are, it is possible to work with designers to remove them while there are still resources available to make changes.

WHAT FORM DOES IT TAKE?

Formative evaluation can make use of a wide range of tools, but most often uses qualitative methods that highlight not only what the visitor is doing, but the reasons behind this and how they feel about it. Focus groups are ideal for identifying visitor reactions to concepts, such as the themes you may be dividing an exhibition into. Observation and in-depth interviews are used to test prototype exhibits or mock-ups of labels. Watching visitors will show you whether they can use an interactive or what their emotional response is, while asking them questions will highlight what they thought of it and what meaning they took from it.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

The whole exhibition team needs to be supportive of formative testing for it to be successful. Managers need to give the research appropriate time and funding, and help enforce any recommended changes the evaluation shows to be necessary. Designers also need to be aware of the process, and any expectations it places on them to produce prototypes or make changes as they develop their work.

Those producing content will benefit from understanding how visitors perceive their work, and effective testing will be reliant on the exhibition team defining the outcomes visitors should gain when engaging with different exhibition elements. Only through understanding what a project team want their exhibits to achieve is it possible to assess the extent to which this is happening.

Naturally visitors are key stakeholders as well, as they benefit from the research and are those being researched. Often this kind of testing will be quick, around 10 to 15 minutes with each visitor, and they can therefore be recruited to help during the day of their visit. It is amazing how supportive visitors are and even appreciative of being asked to see something new and give their opinion of it.

THE VALUE IT BRINGS TO AN INSTITUTION

Formative evaluation helps you avoid expensive mistakes. The cost of exhibitions runs into millions, with each exhibit often costing over £10,000. This investment would be pointless if you later discover that they do not work for the majority of visitors trying to use them.

Formative testing helps to develop museum products that are engaging and accessible for those they are designed for, and ensures that the final products are robust. It is evidence based, so you know that recommendations made to designers are representative of visitors' needs and not based on personal opinion.

In the past, formative evaluation has been accused of stifling creativity. However, testing is not about asking visitors to design exhibitions themselves, but about setting exhibition teams the creative challenge of conveying content through good, usable design (Rand, 1997).

It also shows sponsors, senior managers and visitors that you not only want to demonstrate best practice in curatorial knowledge, collection display and exhibition design, but you aim to provide access to these in ways that engage and excite your visitors.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

ITS PURPOSE

Summative evaluation takes place at the end of the project in order to measure its success. Ideally it will look back to the original aims, assessing the extent to which these have been achieved. It looks at how successfully the audience is engaging with the final product, what doesn't work so well and the reasons behind this. The best summative evaluations make clear the underlying reasons behind the successes and failures, which you can apply in the next project. Summative evaluation is also important in generating information to feed back to sponsors. Summative reports are often a requirement of funding as sponsors need to know the impact of their investment.

Summative evaluations provide data on who is using an exhibition, how many have visited and how satisfied they are with it. They should also show whether exhibitions successfully deliver their messages, what visitors have gained from the experience, and any impact it has had on visitors' attitudes towards a subject or the museum itself. This is done through looking at a wide range of aspects from the physical (such as lighting and text layout), to the psychological (such as response to thematic layout, enjoyment of the experience, or opportunities for social interaction).

WHAT FORM DOES IT TAKE?

Summative evaluation can make use of an extremely wide range of tools and methodologies, and those a researcher selects will depend on the aims they have drawn up for the research. A combination of both qualitative and quantitative research is most effective, from electronic counters, large sample exit surveys and tracking of randomly selected visitors, to targeted accompanied visits through the experience, in-depth interviews and focus groups.

There should also be an element of internal review, such as looking at the relationship between project costs and outcomes, and talking with staff.

STAKEHOLDERS INVOLVED

Summative evaluations have a wide influence, with a potential impact on senior staff, sponsors (both past, present and future), designers, content developers, gallery staff, visitors and the wider museum community.

They are used to report back to sponsors, whether an internal board that approved the spend or an external trust who donated funding. Importantly, summative findings can also be used as evidence to support applications for future funding bids.

This form of evaluation supports institutional learning. Findings can be used to provide internal training on best practice, to understand what creating a successful exhibition involves, and the documented report can be referred back to for future comparison and planning.

When shared externally, summative evaluations also support the wider museum community to understand and adopt best practice.

THE VALUE IT BRINGS TO AN INSTITUTION

There is often some opportunity to introduce remedial changes following recommendations from a summative evaluation, thereby making direct improvements for visitors. However, the key value of summatives is not in changing what can be difficult and expensive to undo, but in learning lessons for the future. This is why audience research is a cycle, with each project feeding into our understanding of the next. While this may happen to a certain extent by default with staff moving between projects, audience research is a way to formalise this process and ensure it is evidence based and focused on the visitor experience.

Audience research allows you to recognise the visitor as a key stakeholder in exhibition development, and if the results of evaluation are acted on, it will ultimately improve the experience for your audience – with the institutional impact of improved reputation, increased visits and repeat visits, improved engagement with local communities and better visitor engagement with your content.

The way in which summative research is conducted and disseminated could bring further benefits. For example through building relationships with university programmes, involving interns with projects, or improving reputation within the sector through disseminating findings in papers and conferences. This dissemination could even lead to consultancy income.

CONCLUSION

While we hope that we have provided a convincing case for undertaking audience research at all stages of project development, we are aware that this value is not recognised by all members of our community. Anecdotally, this could be because of embedded institutional traditions which place the communicator, designer or curator as the “expert”. We don’t deny this expertise, but want to highlight that combining curatorial expertise with visitor needs will produce a better experience for all. Audience research is not about expecting visitors to be experts on the subjects we communicate, it is about understanding how to best engage them through representing content that reflects their interests and needs.

We are very aware that audience research takes resource, as Barriault and Pearson (2010) recently wrote:

> "It can be argued, however, that most methodologies used by researchers and external evaluators require substantial financial and human resources as well as expertise in investigation methods. Despite having the best intentions… the resource demands of research remain a difficult hurdle in conducting research on the visitors' learning experience and exhibit evaluation." P92 (Barriault and Pearson, 2010)

However, as we have already highlighted, not all aspects of evaluation and audience research need be conducted in-house. A mix of internal staff evaluators, external consultants and university researchers provides opportunities for museums to undertake innovative research and evaluation which may, in turn, open up access to funding not previously available. Audience research will also ultimately help you avoid making expensive mistakes.

The ambition of most cultural institutions today is to provide meaningful and engaging visitor experiences. Audience research supports this by helping to define what 'engaging experiences' are and highlighting how these are best achieved. Often this is about recognising and removing barriers to visitor comprehension and motivation, but also understanding how visitors learn and what they gain from a visit. Audience research is therefore key in supporting all the benefits institutions receive through engaging and exciting their visitors: increased visitor numbers and the correlating visitor spend, recognition by peers within the community, recognition as providing value by sponsors and, of course, effective interpretation of the concepts and collections we are passionate about.

We will finish by posing a hypothetical question. It is not so much a question of whether you can afford to dedicate resources to understanding your visitors, but rather can you afford not to?

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