Why we do audience research (and will continue to do so)

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In these straightened times we are all fighting our corner, justifying expenditure on our work. Those who work with and listen to visitors, to inform the practice of their institutions, are no different. There are many arguments for undertaking audience research from the financial to the ethical. Audience research significantly affects the bottom line by increasing visitor numbers, repeat visits and visitor satisfaction by ensuring relevancy of experience. Whether publicly or privately funded, charitable or commercial organisation, our visitors pay our wages through taxation, charitable donation or ticket sales: they’ve paid for an experience so we have to deliver. Similarly, we have promised our funders that we’ll deliver certain experiences, emotions and responses in our visitors – we use audience research to provide evidence of our achievements. We are part of our communities and by talking with all our visitors and potential visitors we engage with our communities and create experiences that are valued by all.

During the lifetime of the Visitor Studies Group we have seen a dramatic change in attitude to visitors. Once upon a time visitors were problematic; curators were all powerful, and there was little sense that visitors could contribute meaningfully to the development of sites of informal learning. Yet we find ourselves in the current position where engagement is an everyday phrase. We take part in discussions around engaged museums, engaged universities, engaged libraries, engaged everything; but how this looks in practice is diverse. However it is interpreted, audience research contributes to engagement. Asking visitors about their experiences to report to funders or boards of trustees can be a form of engagement. Working closely with members of a community to inform the development of a gallery about their lives, culture and history is certainly engagement. The benefits engagement brings are numerous. Staff and organisation learn from their publics, are challenged and develop deeper insight into what makes their visitors value the institution. The communities involved develop ownership of their museum or gallery and become advocates for it, ensuring security into the uncertain future. The skills needed for engagement, for any end, involve asking the right questions, listening carefully and acting sensitively.

As we look to the future, audience research can only become more important. The need to truly engage is not going to diminish. With that comes a need for those skills to become embedded across institutions, and for insight to be valued at all levels and stages in project delivery. Being an engaged institution is currently promoted as the way for organisations to survive (and thrive) for the reasons touched on above. However, there is a big unknown: how do visitors value, interpret and take meaning from exhibitions, galleries and experiences that have been developed with significant input from other visitors? As a community, the Visitor Studies Group looks forward to contributing to this discussion and others that are emerging.

The Visitor Studies Group has long been the only skill sharing network for audience research professionals. Our members come from a wide range of institutions: museums, science centres, zoos, libraries, parks, to name a few. But we all have the same thing in common: a desire to engage with our visitors to improve the experiences we create with and for them. We believe passionately in excellent visitor experiences, we celebrate our collective insight as we work with influencers outside of the VSG, and we are committed to working in partnership with others.