

AAM / CARE Annual Meeting 2010

The American Association of Museums (AAM) is an organisation that consists of museum professionals from the States and 55 other countries. This year's annual meeting was held in Los Angeles from May 23rd to 26th with the theme *Museums Without Borders* with 5116 people attending. The conference explored a variety of topics each day through sessions, a marketplace of ideas, workshops, discussion forums and various informal evening arrangements at local museums.

A part of the 170+ sessions on offer were organised by the Committee on Audience Research & Evaluation (CARE) which is a Standing Professional Committee of AAM. Members come from a variety of backgrounds including visitor studies consultants, in-house evaluators, educators, exhibition developers and other professionals who believe that understanding your visitors is essential for museum planning and operation.

Whilst there was an abundance of great sessions throughout the conference, these were my most memorable two:

- Sylvia Matiko from A Different View talked about Millennials (those born between 1980 and 2000 – also known as Generation Y) and how evaluation allowed her to outline events that shaped their lives, their behavioural patterns and understanding them better. In the same session Ellen Rosenthal from Conner Prairie also talked about how knowing more about Millennials had allowed the organisation to change their offer and increase visitation as Millennials often have the veto vote in the family in deciding where to go. Ellen found that they want 'doing' rather than 'listening and watching'. From the evaluation, mainly video interviews which the youths loved, they found that Millennials don't want to visit something which will always be there. They want special events or exhibitions that only happen in a short time so that it feels like a unique opportunity.
- John Falk talked about using specific terms as markers for learning and the difficulties involved. He discussed a recent study where he had looked at using 'homeostasis' as a marker by testing whether participants thought they had learned the term at the Science Centre or in high school and how much of the learning could really be contributed to each factor.

These sessions have reinforced the great use of vox-pops with young people aged 14-18. With an increasing number of UK schools making use of virtual learning environments (VLEs) to support teaching and learning activities vox-pops would be a great way to capture feedback from secondary schools. Vox-pops (recorded by museum staff) could also be used to get feedback from young people visiting with their families or by themselves.

During the conference there was also general debate on whether it is worth trying to measure factual knowledge at all and if doing so, how to evaluate it and if this can really contribute the learning to the institution. Some attendees believed that measuring factual knowledge was a good way to show what visitors had learned. Others thought that learning could not be defined by visitors being able to do factual recall. Most of us agreed that it depended on the audience and the programme / exhibition. School groups were good examples of when it might be useful as most UK schools can't justify a museum visit if it doesn't link to the National Curriculum (which often focus on pupils' learning specific vocabulary).

Another hot topic was the continuous lack of funds and staff hours to conduct evaluation. This was particular the case at an Idea Lounge I facilitated which was about engaging volunteers in visitor studies (based on the NHM Evaluation Volunteer Programme I set up and run). The main issues were that many museums did not have staff entirely dedicated to evaluation and didn't have enough time to do so as a part of their role (but was still needed to

more than ever to provide evidence for funding bodies). Others had their full time evaluation staff/team completely cut away and were now seeking new solutions. A few participants unfortunately had no obvious solutions to their situation, however, most of us we were able to share ideas and learn from each other and generate new ideas to try out.

I would like to thank VSG for enabling me to take part in the meeting as it was very beneficial to be able to chair, present and share lessons learned with others but also learn from the many sessions and exchange ideas through informal discussions at such a prestigious international meeting. I have developed as an evaluator and as a presenter and it allowed me to expand my professional network as well as develop and consolidate relationships. Lastly, it has provided me with the opportunity to lead the new CARE webinar taskforce which will see evaluation resources from around the world shared live online.

Next year's AAM-CARE conference will be held in Houston in May 22-25, 2011.

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