

## ANNUAL MEETING HANDOUT

# Unintentional Lessons from Visitor Surveys

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The process of implementing a survey can provide insight into who visitors are and how they want to communicate with the institution. This session provided group discussion and problem-solving of scenarios.

### Moderator

- » **Conny Graft**, Principal, Conny Graft Research and Evaluation

### Presenters

- » **Marianna Adams**, President, Audience Focus, Inc.
- » **Sara Devine**, Manager, Interpretive Materials, Brooklyn Museum
- » **Kristie Smeltzer**, Manager of Visitor Evaluation & Correspondence, Monticello, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation

### Annual Meeting & MuseumExpo

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This session handout is from the 2013 Annual Meeting in Baltimore.

## AAM Annual Meeting 2013

### Creative Collaboration Session: *Unintentional Lessons from Visitor Surveys*

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Moderator: Conny Graft [cgraft6@gmail.com](mailto:cgraft6@gmail.com)  
President, Conny C. Graft Research and Evaluation

Marianna Adams  
[marianna@audiencefocus.com](mailto:marianna@audiencefocus.com)  
President  
Audience Focus Inc.

Sara Devine  
[sara.devine@brooklynmuseum.org](mailto:sara.devine@brooklynmuseum.org)  
Manager of Interpretive Materials  
Brooklyn Museum

Kristie Smeltzer  
[ksmeltzer@monticello.org](mailto:ksmeltzer@monticello.org)  
Manager of Visitor Evaluation &  
Correspondence at Monticello

#### Scenario 1: Format

A museum launched a visitor survey to be completed on site using laptops. Staff or volunteers were present to recruit visitors to take the survey. However, this proved to be a difficult task as many visitors declined to take the laptop survey, yet, many of those declining spend time talking to the staff/volunteers telling them what they thought of their visit.

What advice can we give this museum?

- Go with the flow. If visitors are willing to talk, then engage them in conversation and train staff/volunteers on how to take down what visitors say. This does make the analysis more challenging, but the data is so much richer. It's important for staff to have conversations with visitors; it helps break down the walls.
- From these conversations you can make up a survey that addresses what visitors want to tell you, not so much about what you want to know about them.
- Consider making the surveys more interesting to look at—they don't have to look like a school exam.
- Keep the survey very brief.

What are the unintentional lessons?

- These visitors preferred a face-to-face conversation as opposed to using a computer. Why? Is technology a barrier? Or just impersonal? The laptop stations were staffed, but this museum ran an interview in conjunction with the laptop survey and interview participation was extremely high. Perhaps conversation is a preferred method of sharing.

#### Scenario 2: Intercept

A Science Center conducted a visitor exit survey during the summer and the center attracted a large family audience. Volunteers were trained to implement the survey (paper & pencil) and they stood in the lobby near the doors to recruit visitors. The decline rate was huge. Very few visitors, with or without children, would stop.

What advice can we give this museum?

- Standing too close to the exit doors often results in low participation. It is better to find the place where visitors are starting to make the decision to leave, but before they are in full view of the doors. It also helps to have a table with attractive signage and some seats.
- Since there will be a lot of children, have some activities or toys from the gift shop for children to play with while their parents fill out the survey.
- It's summer, offer visitors bottles of ice water if they take the survey. You will have no problem

getting respondents.

What are the unintentional lessons?

- Creature comforts can not be overlooked. By making sure visitors are comfortable, i.e. have a place to sit and can include their entire party (children are occupied while parents participate for example) can encourage engagement across the board; it will also increase stay-rate.
- Once visitors have decided to leave and are on their way out, it is difficult to shift their attention from that goal. So be careful in where, how, and what you are asking visitor to do in the building.

### **Scenario 3: Skewed Sample**

A museum set up an un-staffed visitor survey on a computer kiosk in the lobby area of a natural history museum. Over a fairly short period of time there were a lot of responses to the survey, so museum decided to review the results. A large majority of the sample was made up of teenaged boys, which was not representative of the larger population of visitors.

What advice can we give this museum?

- It's good to check progress, particularly if there are red flags such as higher- or lower-than anticipated participation, and address any concerns in order to get a more accurate dataset.
- Station a staff/volunteer for certain periods of time to recruit visitors on a random basis. The computer survey software should have a date/time stamp on each survey; filter for just the facilitated times where the sample should be more representative. Then compare the facilitated/random sample results to the self-selected (teenaged boy heavy) sample during other times to see where responses varied.

What are the unintentional lessons?

- Teenaged boys at this institution, for whatever reason, seem to be drawn to a computer kiosk. Might this observation be useful in the future for possible interpretative methods or to solicit input from that portion of the audience?

### **Scenario 4: Implementation Error**

A historic site wants to get some quick information about visitor perceptions of their experiences. A small note card survey is created to ask visitors to rank 5 items that might influence their feelings about their visit on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being most influential and 5 being least. An intern is sent out to intercept visitors and ask them to complete the note card surveys. She returns to her supervisor because instead of ranking things between 1 and 5, visitors are giving more than one item a 5, multiplying by 5 to weight items, etc. Based on initial responses, the institution isn't getting the information it needs.

What advice can we give this museum?

- It is always advisable, prior to beginning to use a survey in earnest, to test it out with people from the real sample to discover points of confusion that can result from institutional blindness because of our familiarity with the location and information.
- If you're encountering repeated unsuccessful survey responses, it's time to reevaluate what you're asking and/or how you're asking it.
- As long as you are not concerned about biasing respondents, provide an example of the survey that shows how the ranking system (or other aspect that's causing confusion) should look when done as intended.

What are the unintentional lessons?

- No matter how hard we try to clearly communicate with visitors, nothing can replace input from them as to whether or not our message is getting across. This is true of everything from signs to interactives.

### **Scenario 5: Recruiting Your Sample**

The director of an outdoor historic site wants feedback from African Americans on the African American programs and the overall historic site experience. The evaluator and interviewers (who are African American and are trained to do interviews and surveys) go out to the streets to select African Americans who are visiting the historic site. They immediately realize how hard it is to determine who is African American. The African American staff also agrees that it is very difficult to determine who is and who is not African American.

What advice can we give this museum?

- Selecting respondents by ethnicity is not possible. Additionally, it does not make a difference if the person recruiting respondents has the same ethnic background as the people you are trying to recruit.
- If demographic information is important, open the survey up to any visitor that wants to participate and include a brief questionnaire at the end to get at demographic information.

What are the unintentional lessons?

- This experience provides insight into the challenges and limitations of trying to “categorize” visitors.
- By opening the survey up to all visitors and adding a brief demographic questionnaire at the end, the museum could compare across visitor groups.