

VISITOR STUDIES *Today*

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Making the Most of Front-end Evaluation

Randi Korn

INTRODUCTION

Asking visitors questions during the initial planning stages of an exhibition can provide exhibition teams with concrete information about their potential visitors vis-à-vis the subject of the exhibition. There are, however, two important caveats: front-end evaluation must be done at the right time, and you must ask the right questions, otherwise the value of front-end evaluation plummets. This article explains how to know when the time is right for front-end evaluation and whether your questions are the ones you should be asking.

TIMING IS ALMOST EVERYTHING

Traditionally, front-end evaluation is part of exhibition concept development. As the exhibition team is constructing its big idea (Serrell, 1994), it seems fitting to ask, "Well, what about visitors—what do they think?" Bringing visitors into the equation is considered good practice; however, the process can be steered down the wrong path if they are brought in too early. If an exhibition team has not yet identified the exhibition's big idea with clarity, conviction and passion, it is too early to begin a conversation with the public. Conversing with the public

before the team has a focused exhibition idea suggests that the team is going fishing.

Consulting the public as part of exhibition development is often misconstrued to mean that teams should develop exhibitions according to what visitors say they want. Thus, front-end evaluation is often conducted too early and for the wrong reason. In fact, some museum professionals may not see the value in front-end evaluation if they think it is done to give visitors what they say they want.

For example, when the education department in a large art museum came to us to conduct a front-end evaluation for their exhibition on 15th- and 16th-century hand-colored prints, the curator, who had never worked with an evaluator, was dubious. She suspected (correctly) that the public would know nothing about this topic and thus have no insights. Fortunately, this curator was open-minded, and we explained how a front-end evaluation could be effective. By respecting the exhibition's big idea and talking with visitors about how they perceived the big idea, we uncovered their attitudes and conceptions. We were able to provide data that helped the curator clarify the exhibition's communication

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objectives in the context of the audience and devise strategies for helping the public experience, look at, and understand 15th- and 16th-century painted prints (RK&A, 2003).

FIRST YOU NEED A BIG IDEA

Front-end evaluation should be conducted *after* the team has declared its big idea (e.g., the team knows exactly what it wants the exhibition to be about, what the exhibition's primary "take-home" messages are, and whom the exhibition is for). Once we, as evaluators, know where the museum wants to go with its ideas and what it wants the public to experience, we can help the team find conceptual and emotional links between its ideas and the public.

Identifying a big idea is not just a good idea for conducting an evaluation; it is an essential part of the exhibition development process. A team has to reach consensus on what the exhibition is about. Front-end evaluation is most valuable to exhibition developers when it is conducted to help exhibition teams understand *how* their visitors think about the ideas they want to address and present in the exhibition.

For example, the exhibition team for the Maryland Historical Society decided that it would tell the history

of Maryland through the conceptual lens of liberty. After constructing a solid conceptual framework by which to tell Maryland's history, team members wanted a front-end evaluation to focus on how visitors understand liberty in Maryland and to help them determine how to best tell Maryland's liberty stories (RK&A, 2002a).

Data generated from in-depth conversations with visitors helped the team understand how the public thinks about liberty in the context of the exhibition. The team will use the information to design specific interpretive strategies to help visitors think about the relationship between liberty and Maryland history.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Conducting front-end evaluations after establishing a big idea is important, and so is asking the right questions. This issue leads to another common misunderstanding about front-end evaluation: front-end evaluation is about asking visitors what they want to know—what interests them—about a topic. Such a question often does not produce useful information, because it is not possible for novices to articulate what they want to know. They can tell you only what they already know or are familiar with. Data from front-end evaluations have shown that what visitors say they are interested in reflects their current knowledge or familiarity with a topic—not an interest, per se.

If the exhibition team at the Maryland Historical Society had wanted to know what visitors were interested in regarding Maryland history, then liberty—as a conceptual framework—would not have emerged at all. As such, the idea of telling Maryland's history through the lens of liberty—a story the exhibition team was passionate

about—would have been dropped in favor of ideas with which visitors were already familiar. If exhibition developers had developed an exhibition around an idea that did not excite them, their product would likely reflect their lack of enthusiasm. Practitioners often want evaluators to ask visitors what interests them, and that desire is well meaning because interest in a subject is a precursor to a learning experience. However, asking visitors what interests them, and then making such content available to visitors, does not guarantee that they will be interested in the topic when exposed to it.

In a study conducted by Randi Korn & Associates for the Chicago Historical Society, two exhibition ideas were tested: one (referred to as Chicago History) presented Chicago history based on what visitors said they were interested in during a front-end evaluation (Garibay & Perry, 1999); the other (referred to as Chicago as an American Story) presented Chicago history in the context of the United States, illustrating how Chicago's history affected developments in other parts of the country (RK&A, 2001).

Focus groups were conducted with adults and teens. Adult participants found the Chicago History exhibition fairly predictable, saying that they expect the Chicago Historical Society to present Chicago history as outlined in the plan. Teenage participants, as well, did not find anything new or compelling and said that they already knew everything that was in the plan—yet during a front-end evaluation (Garibay & Perry, 1999) visitors were asked what they wanted to know about Chicago's history and their declarations were included in the Chicago History plan.

Giving visitors what they say they want may meet their expectations, but

exhibitions that meet expectations may end up being predictable exhibitions and ones that do not bring visitors to a new way of thinking. Broadly speaking, the goal of a new exhibition should be to create compelling and thought-provoking museum experiences that exceed visitors' expectations. In their critique of the two exhibition ideas, both adults and teens talked about wanting different information about Chicago history. The teens, in particular, noted that the Chicago History exhibition is exactly the history they learn in school, whereas Chicago as an American Story included a new way to think about their city's history (RK&A, 2001).

These kinds of comments suggest that to engage and satisfy visitors, exhibitions must present new ways of thinking about familiar ideas and events, and that the experiences that museums offer should be unique and not available elsewhere.

INTERESTING OR JUST FAMILIAR?

In a recent study about presenting breakthrough science to visitors, conducted for the Liberty Science Center, the exhibition team wanted to identify science topics that visitors would select as most interesting from a predetermined list (RK&A, 2002b). Twelve topics were listed on a questionnaire, and 411 visitors responded to the question. An additional 30 visitors participated in open-ended interviews where they were shown five of the twelve topics, as follows:

- ANIMAL CLONING:
Science Fiction Comes to Life
- DARK ENERGY:
Cosmic Forces Found by the Hubble Space Telescope

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- GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE:
Our Life in a Hot House
- ROBOTS:
Design Inspired by Nature
- BOTOX:
Can Poison Make Your Pretty?

During the interviews, visitors were asked to identify the topic of most interest, after which they were asked to look at five interpretive panels, one for each topic above, then select the one panel they were most interested in. (Note: The five interpretive panels were not part of the questionnaire.)

After reading the list of topics, the Robots title ranked fourth (twelfth on the questionnaire), but after reading the five interpretive panels, the Robots panel ranked first. The Dark Energy title ranked second during the interview, and after reading the interpretive panel, it ranked fourth.

Interviewees explained their reversals by saying that when they read the list of topics, they did not know anything about "Robots: Design Inspired by Nature," and so said they were not interested in it. But when they learned a little about the robots from the panel,

their interest was piqued. When interviewees said they were uninterested in the topic initially, they were actually unfamiliar with it. They became interested after reading the story and learning a little about the subject.

To accentuate this point about "interest," the title, "Dark Energy: Cosmic Forces Found by the Hubble Space Telescope," was frequently selected as interesting to interviewees, but few selected the panel presentation as compelling. Interviewees may have selected the topic as interesting because they were familiar with the Hubble Space Telescope, which was in the title, but after reading the panel, they realized they were not as interested as they once thought. (Of course, whether a text panel is appealing to visitors is a complicated issue that entails whether the text is well written and accessible and if the graphics are visually appealing.)

It is not uncommon for visitors to confuse their "interest" in a topic with their being familiar with a topic. Psychologists note that the basis for interest in a topic is prior knowledge (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1996)—not familiarity, even though people likely confuse their alleged interest with being familiar with a topic. And being familiar with a topic is not a point worth exploring, rather, as Dierking notes in *Questioning Assumptions*, "what you need to be asking is, 'What are your pre-conceptions, attitudes, and beliefs and how strongly do you hold them?'" (Dierking & Pollock, 1998).

MAKE IT CONCRETE

Front-end evaluation can be enormously helpful to exhibition teams, but the exhibition being explored must be about something

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specific before including the audience in the conversation. Sometimes, front-end evaluations are most fruitful when visitors have something concrete to either read or listen to, and something visual.

For the front-end evaluation about painted prints (RK&A, 2003), it was crucial to provide visitors with some examples of painted prints and some examples of the black-and-white prints they were accustomed to seeing. Without something concrete and specific to look at and think about, visitors could not have contributed very much to the conversation.

The front-end evaluation that generated the Chicago History exhibition plan used open-ended questions and asked visitors to identify their interests regarding Chicago history without offering any concrete ideas to consider, making it difficult for visitors to think critically or specifically. They had to rely on their own knowledge, no matter how expansive or limited (Garibay & Perry, 1999). In contrast, during a

subsequent evaluation where focus group participants were provided two concrete scenarios of how Chicago history could be presented, they had the opportunity to compare one exhibition plan with another and determine the pros and cons of each (RK&A, 2001).

Sometimes because “props” are needed to encourage meaningful conversations, this can cause confusion among exhibition developers about which phase of evaluation they need—front-end or formative evaluation. But props are not meant to exemplify specific exhibit elements, as one might use in formative evaluation. They are meant to be points of departure for significant conversations that will ultimately help developers understand what is inside visitors’ minds.

SUMMARY

Getting inside visitors’ minds and understanding how they think about specific ideas is vital if an exhibition hopes to affect visitors and introduce them to alternative ways of knowing and experiencing an idea. Front-end evaluation—timed well with the right questions—will help you gain insights into your visitors’ minds so that you can develop more engaging exhibitions.

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