

**Visitor Studies 201: Observing, Talking to and Learning from Your Visitors**  
American Association of Museums (AAM) Annual Meeting  
Tuesday, May 15, 2007

Sponsored by CARE (Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation), a Standing Professional Committee of AAM: <http://www.care-aam.org/>

**Chair:**

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**Panelists:**

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Kirsten Ellenbogen, Director of Evaluation & Research in Learning, Science Museum of Minnesota, 120 W. Kellogg Blvd., St. Paul, MN 55102, [kellenbogen@smm.org](mailto:kellenbogen@smm.org)

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**Session Description:** There are various ways museums can gather information about the visitor experience. To help you determine the best approach to gathering information, this session covers three main visitor studies approaches: 1) observing visitors, 2) interviewing/surveying visitors and 3) conducting focus groups. In addition to addressing the strengths and limitations of each approach, panelists will present case studies of how they have used the results to inform decisions in their own work.

**Overview:** This session is a follow up to the popular Visitor Studies 101 session from previous Annual Meetings. For the presentations and handouts for Visitor Studies 101 and Visitor Studies 201 please visit the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation's (CARE) web site at <http://www.care-aam.org/>.

**I. Observing Visitors - Linda Wilson**

Opportunities:

1. Data points are taken in context. You see what visitors do rather than what they say they have done or remember doing
2. These are generally quantitative data, which are relatively easy to summarize and can be analyzed statistically if you are testing ideas.
3. Observing can also be done in a more open-ended, qualitative manner to provide rich, context-specific insights
4. Observing can let you know how often, for how long and in what manner visitors use an exhibit, a program or the entire museum
5. This method adapts quite well to digital environments as well
6. The process of deciding what behaviors indicate successful outcomes helps developers better understand their exhibits, programs or services.
7. Method can be used in formative, remedial and summative evaluations

Challenges:

1. Too many visitors can make it difficult to observe or keep up with subjects; too few visitors can make it difficult to be unobtrusive
2. Larger timing and tracking studies can require considerable time to get a good sample and generates a big, possibly cumbersome database
3. Observers need to be trained carefully to obtain consistent observations
4. The method requires informing visitors they might be observed
5. Using technology to increase amount or depth of data is countered by more difficult transcription and higher costs

References:

Diamond, J. (1999) Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings. Walnut Creek, CA. Altamira Press

Serrell, B. (1998). Paying Attention: Visitors and museum exhibitions. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

Vom Lehm, D, Heath, C. and Hindemarch, J. Video based field studies in museums and galleries, Visitor Studies Today, Fall/Winter 2002. pp. 15-23.

## **II. Interviewing/Surveying Visitors – Kirsten Ellenbogen**

Opportunities:

1. A very direct way to reach your audience.
2. An ideal method for getting a large sample size.
3. A good technique for getting a reliable sample.
4. With the right sample size, the results can be generalized.
5. Can combine quantitative and qualitative.
6. Adapts to most contexts and stages of evaluation and research.

Challenges:

1. Writing questions is not as easy as it seems
2. Questions are not always understood as intended.
3. Should be tested in advance.
4. May not work well in all situations. For example, some questions are difficult to ask over the phone.
5. If the target population is diverse (adults and children, for example) you may need multiple versions.
6. Interviewing should be done by trained data collectors.

References:

Borun, M. & Korn, R. (Eds.). (1999). Introduction to museum evaluation. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.

Diamond, J. (1999). Practical evaluation guide. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Korn, R & L. Sowd, (1999). Visitor Surveys: A User's Manual, Professional Practice Series. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 164 pp.

### **III. Conducting Focus Groups – Chris Parsons**

Opportunities:

1. get in-depth qualitative data (beliefs, opinions, etc.)
2. hear respondents talk about the topic in their own words
3. can get synergy among participants leading to new discoveries, topics, thoughts
4. can test new concepts, ideas, products and services
5. facilitator can clarify responses, probe for more details
6. can capture and analyze body language, as well as verbal responses
7. appropriate for a variety of audiences from children to multi-lingual communities
8. results tend to be easy to understand

Challenges:

1. data are difficult to quantify, are not statistically valid
2. results are not generalizable to the larger population
3. small sample of people can skew the discussion and hence the results
4. can get conflicts among participants or dominance by one or more participant, leading to unreliable data
5. difficult to get personal information in a group situation
6. requires a well-trained facilitator
7. analysis can be challenging due to the open-ended responses

References:

#### **Books**

Krueger, R. A. (1988). *Focus Groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Stewart, D. W., & Shamdasani, P. N. (1990). *Focus Groups: Theory and practice*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

#### **Websites**

A Manual on How to Conduct Focus Groups of Low-income Parents, Muskie School of Public Service, University of Maine,  
<http://muskie.usm.maine.edu/focusgroupmanual/manual.htm>

Basics of Conducting Focus Groups, Free Management Library:  
<http://www.managementhelp.org/evaluatn/focusgrp.htm>

Focus Group Basics, Student Life Assessment:

<http://www.unlv.edu/studentlife/assessment/pages/focusbsc.html>

Focus Group Principles, American Marketing Association:

<http://www.marketingpower.com/content1293.php>

Focus Group Tips for Beginners, Texas Center for the Advancement of Literacy  
and Learning: <http://www-tcall.tamu.edu/orp/orp1.htm>