

EVALUATION VOCABULARY

EVALUATION: “Any effort to...enhance human effectiveness through systematic, data-based inquiry.” *Michael Quinn Patton*

FRONT-END EVALUATION: Evaluation activities that begin in the planning stages of an exhibition, project or program. Front-end evaluation tests concept ideas with visitors to assure visitor interest and comprehension of key ideas.

FORMATIVE EVALUATION: Formative evaluation takes place during the design stages of an exhibit or program, often using prototypes of exhibit components to test their usability or effectiveness. Formative evaluation make take place at several points in time.

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION: Summative evaluation takes place at the completion of the exhibit or project to assess whether the project achieved its goals and objectives.

QUESTIONNAIRES or SURVEYS: One of the most commonly used evaluation methods is the survey or set of questions that are often self-completed by the respondent. They are especially suitable when the museum desires responses from a large number of people in a relatively short time. Questions may be closed or open or a mix of the two,

INTERVIEWS: One on one conversations between a staff member and an audience member may be “structured,” using only a pre-defined questions, or “semi-structured,” using a set of pre-defined topics that allow the interviewer to ask questions in his/her own way. Interviews generally produce richer narratives than questionnaires, but will have fewer subjects.

FOCUS GROUPS: Focus groups involve discussion among a group of people on a designated topic. Usually facilitated and organized around a set of pre-planned questions, focus groups are good at providing qualitative information, often revealing more of people’s attitudes, beliefs, and experiences.

OBSERVATION: Observing how visitors interact with exhibit components can reveal a great deal about the impact and popularity of an exhibit component and patterns of use. Observation should be conducted with a pre-planned record sheet to be systematic in viewing visitor patterns.

VISITOR TALK-BACK METHODS: Comment cards and books, graffiti walls, post-it notes and other creative methods can be used to encourage visitors to leave comments and responses in their own words.

36 Evaluation Tips (In no particular order)

1. Always ask for a visitor's permission to be part of an evaluation and explain the purpose of the evaluation activity – whether it's an interview, questionnaire, observation, or any other format.
2. Reserve adequate time for evaluation when planning the timeline for a project.
3. Be sure you have the "buy in" of your boss.
4. Be sure you have the "buy in" of all who will be affected by the outcomes of your evaluation.
5. Always begin with setting goals for each project to be evaluated; do this as a team.
6. First define what you need to know; then determine the best method to use to get your answers.
7. Every evaluation begins with the question "What do we want to find out?"
8. Before you begin an evaluation, identify the assumptions you are making about your visitors.
9. Consider a mix of evaluation approaches, such as, questionnaires to get a lot of data and interviews to get in depth responses.
10. When possible, undertake a simple literature search to determine if other studies have been done that answer questions similar to yours.
11. When interviewing, avoid questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no."
12. Before beginning a structured "observation," spend time on the floor and watch visitor behavior to help you determine what you want to know.
13. When observing visitors, carry a notebook and record all that seems pertinent. (This is especially useful when observations are carried out at different times and by different staff.)
14. Make a map of exhibit components and use a stop watch to learn how long visitors interact with each.
15. Make use of props or photos to learn how much visitors know about a subject and what they would like to know.
16. Invite children to draw pictures to record their experiences with objects in a museum and then encourage them to talk about what they drew.
17. Make the visitors the experts – ask what they think could be changed or added to an exhibit.
18. Avoid using the words "test" or "testing" when asking visitors for their help. Some may feel that they are being tested rather than the exhibit.

19. When evaluating label copy, use questions like “What do you think is the main idea – or most important message – in this label? “What if I say _____ instead?”
20. Write down your observations immediately.
21. When you have completed your evaluation, look again at the assumptions you began with. Have they been challenged?
22. Talk with different kinds of visitors: experts, novices, children, adults, members, non-members, etc.
23. Staff conducting evaluations should carefully examine their own biases and avoid leading questions.
24. Select visitors in a random order (every third visitor, etc.) to avoid bias.
25. Questionnaires should be limited to one page --- or, at most, two sides of one page.
26. A Likert scale can be a useful tool on a questionnaire to produce a lot of data.
27. Focus groups should be kept small – six to eight people.
28. Focus groups should run no more than one to one-and-a-half hours.
29. Share your findings frequently with other staff in the museum, through conversation and reports.
30. In addition to sharing data, share stories and direct quotations.
31. Follow summative evaluation with discussions of “lessons learned.”
32. Experiment with visitor “talk backs” – using post it notes, comment cards and books and other formats to elicit their thoughts.
33. Use your website as a tool for displaying visitors’ photos and comments.
34. Consider a “gift” for visitors who participate in evaluation – a small token for your gift shop, a free pass to an exhibit, etc.
35. Do not use a focus group for discussion of a “highly-charged, controversial issue.”

A comprehensive evaluation plan should include studies conducted throughout the exhibit or program development.

This document was prepared and presented by Beverly Sheppard of BKS Consulting at a series of workshops offered by the New Jersey Historical Commission and entitled *Understanding Audience Needs Through Evaluation*. These workshops were presented in 2016 and 2017.