

Front-end Evaluation - beyond the *Field of Dreams*
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If you build it they will come (adapted from the baseball movie *Field of Dreams*) - a phrase we would like to think applies to all our museum exhibitions, programs and events. Unfortunately, if we build it they, the public, won't necessarily come even though many planners, curators, directors, and so on still think that they will! One way of addressing this challenge is through a process called front-end evaluation.

This paper focuses on the front-end evaluation conducted for the Australian Museum's important new exhibition *Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples* which opened in March 1997.

Front-end evaluation is an essential part of program development. According to Shettel (1994) Front-end evaluation has shown itself to be capable of significantly improving the "goodness of fit" between what we present to the public and those who represent the public' (p.275).

Early evaluation studies (and to a large extent recent ones) focussed on evaluation of specific exhibits - particularly issues such as attraction and holding power ('attraction' being whether visitors are attracted to an exhibit and 'holding' how long they actually spend at an exhibit) and summative evaluation (did the exhibition achieve what it set out to). However in his extensive work on exhibition development, Screven (1990) emphasised that the planning phase in developing a program should be the longest phase. Therefore to take this further, it could be argued that the most time and resources of the evaluation budget should be devoted to this too - a focus on front-end evaluation.

Front-end evaluation should be more than just an analysis of the audience. It can serve a very valuable purpose in helping to clarify the actual project brief, as well as ensuring that quality issues are covered. It helps program developers to focus on what's important, sometimes even gets them to focus at all (!), and allows the evaluator to force developers to think about what they are actually doing and who

they are doing it for - which can often be lost in the complicated and stressful process of putting together exhibitions.

Evaluators can provide hard data, facts and opinions which allow developers to focus, to consider alternatives and make decisions from an informed point of view rather than gut feelings.

Front-end evaluation provided the Project Team responsible for developing the Australian Museum's *Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples* exhibition with the information it needed in:

- defining the project limits and tasks;
- formulating goals;
- overcoming fear and uncertainty;
- achieving quality (visitor focus) through measuring audience expectations and identifying knowledge gaps; and
- determining content and communication strategies.

The challenge the team faced was the same problem anyone planning to produce anything for an unknown someone else has: to find out who that someone is and their needs and wants. In this way, the project drew on principles which might be said to underlie approaches to continuous improvement or quality following a set of guidelines:

1. Understand the problem
2. Consult – internally and externally
3. Generate ideas and concepts for testing
4. Gather and analyse data on visitor perspectives
5. Develop solutions – design and communication strategies and content
6. Test with the visitor (customer)
7. Improve
8. Produce
9. And later...EVALUATE!

Points 5, 6 and 7 are in an iterative loop until a fit is found between visitor needs and the project requirements.

The front-end evaluations conducted in researching this project provided some outlines of content; a range of strategies to get the information needed to build up a picture of the audience, to find out what the customer, the visitor, wants to know about the topic; where the information gaps are and what communication strategies they prefer; and, importantly, information on underlying attitudes.

A final list of ten issues relevant to the Museum's collections and research bases was established and these ideas were tested with Museum audiences and Indigenous people through a Visitor Survey, an Indigenous Community Survey, an Indigenous Community Day Seminar and an Indigenous Studies Teacher Inservice.

As a result of these the themes of Spirituality, Cultural Heritage (combining Heritage and Culture), Family, Land, Health and Justice were chosen for development.

Although a great deal of quantitative data was obtained, the qualitative data collected at the same time is possibly even more important, and much of it was acquired by accident - peoples' feelings, fears, anxieties, hopes and so on. Some of the other important feedback from this process concerned attitudes of visitors towards an exhibition dealing with Indigenous cultures and history. These became the underlying goals the team worked towards in developing the content and interpretive or communication strategies to:

- begin with the contemporary;
- explore Indigenous peoples' experiences in getting there;
- leave a positive message for the future; and
- create a space where Indigenous people can express, explain and talk about their lives and experiences.

Two important needs of visitors were identified - they want to interact with people in the exhibition and have access to objects.

The audience research enabled the team to then develop appropriate content and methods of presenting - or interpreting - for the visitor. A matrix was developed to build the communication and design solutions, incorporating a mix of presentation and experiential strategies, learning strategies and activities, primarily derived from the program objectives and the goals developed out of the audience research, ensuring that the things the audience wants are kept in the forefront.

The front-end evaluation provided benchmarks to deal quickly and efficiently in developing good ideas and delivering them, and discarding those that did not fit audience needs.

During stage two of the development phase some formal prototype testing was conducted with the audience through three focus groups. The focus groups comprised the main audience groups - families, Indigenous people and schools (through teachers of Indigenous studies programs). The response of the three groups was dramatic and divergent. Indigenous people said the material was insufficiently hard hitting and had gone soft on some difficult issues, especially the 'stolen generations'. The family group said it was too hard hitting, too 'blaming', too confronting - especially the images of Indigenous people in chain gangs from the 1920s in the section dealing with dispossession of land, and even the presence of a stylised Aboriginal flag in the section on Spirituality. The teachers fell somewhere in the middle - they liked the concepts and content outlines and felt they could 'mediate' some of the more hard hitting elements in pre-visit preparation. They also said it was important to have more objects for visitors to handle, to touch and to use.

The question was what to do, then, faced with three such apparently divergent views on the same material? This was where returning to the front-end evaluation research served as a touchstone. When analysed in this cooler light, it was apparent that the

focus groups' reactions were generally consistent with the front-end evaluation - there was a convergence on views of content, messages, and communication styles, as well as things like visitor comfort. This reinforced that the team was on the right track but needed to adjust specific elements of the exhibition, particularly:

- the flow - to spread the more confronting material more evenly within the themes;
- the need for mediation strategies for visitors to deal with the more difficult content;
- reinforcing the need for the exhibition to address a view of the future; and
- to take up the ideas Indigenous people offered in how they felt some areas needed adjustment, such as ways of bringing a natural or bush feel to spirituality, and strengthening the section on the 'stolen generations'.

By anchoring the team's reactions to the focus group feedback to the original front-end evaluation, significant progress was made, and, rather than be discouraged by an apparent negative reaction, encouragement was gained from numerous reinforced positives.

The development of this exhibition showed the important role that front-end evaluation can play both at the initial stages and throughout the development of an exhibition. Further evaluation to be undertaken will test out whether the messages and interpretive strategies have achieved the original goals of the project.

Pressures that museums currently face mean that there is more need for timely, focussed and economical information that can be used by museums generally, and exhibition developers specifically. Front-end evaluation is one strategy to ensure that *if we build it they will come*.

References

- Shettel, H. (1994). Front-end evaluation: another useful tool. *ILVS Review* 2(2), 275 – 280.
- Screven, C. (1990). Uses of evaluation before, during and after exhibit design. *ILVS Review* 1(2), 36 – 66.

Note

This paper was published in 1997. Further work on this exhibition has been undertaken and results of these studies are reported in the following publications:

Kelly, L. and Gordon, P. (2002). Developing a Community of Practice: Museums and Reconciliation in Australia. in Sandell, R. (ed.) *Museums, Society, Inequality*. London: Routledge (pp.153-174).

Kelly, L., Cook, C. and Gordon, P. (2006). Building Relationships Through Communities of Practice: Museums and Indigenous People. *Curator*, 49(2), 217-234.