TRACKING & OBSERVATION STUDIES

Why do we undertake these studies?
To obtain data about visitor behaviour in order to:
• report on program outcomes
• make changes and improvements
• compare to other exhibitions/programs
• trend analysis: over time & across programs

What do we really need to know when conducting these studies?
Broad aims:
• total time spent
• pathways/visitor flow
• demographic data - gender, age (kind of), social grouping
• key messages - are these getting across?
Specific aims:
• coverage - how thoroughly is the exhibition used?
• stops - attracting and holding power
• are exhibits used as designed/intended?
• design feedback

What will the information be used for?
• better understanding of visitor behaviour, experiences & learning (meta-evaluation)
• supplementing other research (surveys, interviews, focus groups)
• making changes to floor exhibits
• exhibition refurbishment
• signage
• fixing interactives
• pointer to further research needs

ISSUES TO CONSIDER
Preparation:
• good, clear, accurate floor plan showing key aspects of exhibit
• good quality stopwatch or watch
• photographs for visual support to findings
• Excel/other database to manage data
Process:
• ethics - privacy, notices
• getting caught - explaining
• need to be quick, accurate and concentrate
**Consistency:**
- what counts as a stop?
- how do you define ‘reading behaviour’?
- quality control
- sampling over range of times/days

**Staff involvement:**
- how will they support the findings?
- how to get designers on-side?
- using staff to gather data can help in this

**Budget, time & human resources**
- what’s available?
- how to make best use of resources?
- using staff and volunteers to gather data

**WHAT IS TRACKING?**
- unobtrusive recording of visitor behaviour in a museum/specific exhibition, noting:
  - exhibits attended to
  - behaviour: reading, browsing, studying
  - time spent
  - pathways and flow
  - starts/stops when visitors cross an ‘invisible’ entry and exit line

**Development of tracking at Australian Museum: Two case studies**

**SEX exhibition (1997):**
- use of interpretive strategies and time spent
- conventional format - tick box and analysed via Excel

**Thylacine** exhibition (2001):
- visitor pathways included
- analysed using both Excel and Adobe PhotoShop via layering technique

**How did we do it?**

**Form:**
- draw visitor path
- note stops, time and behaviour

*Figure 1: Sample Tracking Form SEX Exhibition*
Analysis:
- data in Excel - time, stops
- pathways layered on Abode PhotoShop:
  - grouped as heavy, moderate, light

Figure 2: Sample Charts SEX Exhibition

WHAT ARE OBSERVATIONS?
- systematic collection of data through watching visitors at specific parts/sections of an exhibition
- specific audiences can be researched (eg families, schools)
- generally small-scale and targeted

Observation is good ...
- when specific sections of an exhibition need to be reviewed
- when time and budget is limited
- for training purposes (staff, volunteers, students)
- for less experienced researchers

- Easy to collect, collate, analyse and report data:
  - Excel is the only tool needed!
  - Also need to consider same issues as for tracking:
    - preparation, ethics, speed, consistency
  - But limited as doesn't give an overall picture of visitor use

Bats exhibition case study (2000):
- forms used in four sections of the exhibition
- sections chosen by AMARC and Project Team
- observed 20 visitors in each section
- tick boxes where visitors stopped
- time spent in each section noted
data analysed in Excel
able to show which exhibits were attractive, how the written material was used, lighting and flow issues

Figure 3: Sample Observation Form Bats Exhibition

Figure 4: Sample Charts Bats Exhibition

USEFUL READINGS


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(NOTES FROM PRESENTATION GIVEN AT MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA CONFERENCE, ADELAIDE)