EXHIBIT EVALUATION TECHNIQUES FOR MUSEUMS WITH FEW STAFF AND NO MONEY

Here are a few exhibit evaluation techniques for smaller museums:

Getting to know you: basic audience research

1. Count how many people are visiting

Most museums keep a daily head count of visitors. This is exhibit evaluation at its most basic: are people coming to see the museum's exhibits? Are more people coming this month than at the same time last year?

2. Find out who makes up the current audience

By having the front desk person ask a few basic questions, like "where are you from" and "what made you decide to visit the museum today?", and note age and gender of visitors, you can get a much clearer profile of who is visiting. If you can enter the information on a database program, great. If not, in a smaller museum a little time with the visitor records and a pencil and paper can produce a lot of information about the demographics of the audience and how it changes during the year. This will help you plan your exhibit schedule and marketing better. You can also get some insight into why people are visiting, including whether specific new or temporary exhibits bringing in more visitors.

3. Find out what visitors liked [and didn't like]

If you have a staffed front desk, you have a valuable full-time evaluator on duty. Arrange for the front desk person to ask visitors who are leaving a couple of questions on the way out and note their answers beside their demographic information. You can - and should - keep these questions very short and casual, and change them from time to time. Some useful questions might be:

- what exhibit did you enjoy the most? why?
- if you could improve one thing in the museum, what would it be?
- was there anything you were expecting or hoping to see here that was missing?

If this information is linked to your demographic information, you can then find out things like whether tourists and locals respond differently to different exhibits, or whether different age groups prefer different parts of the museum.

Don't rely on a voluntarily filled in visitor book to provide valid information about what people think - other than identifying a few specific problems, it will mostly be filled with vague positive comments such as "awesome!" that don't give much useful information.

4. Find out what they do while visiting

Some large museums have done tracking studies, where visitors are surreptitiously followed for their whole visit. This is very labour-intensive, and beyond the reach of most smaller museums. Depending on the layout of your site, however, it may be possible to do some surreptitious observation. The front desk person may be able to tell how long people spend in certain galleries. Or, if you have someone already in a gallery, for security or doing some maintenance, for example, that person can also gather information about how visitors are using the space.

Bear in mind that tracking only tells you where people are going and which exhibits they are stopping in front of, but doesn't necessarily tell you what they think of the exhibits or if they are learning anything!

Front-end evaluation: using your audience to help you plan
Logically enough, front-end evaluation is audience research done before you actually begin to develop an exhibit.

5. <u>Find out what visitors prefer</u>
One great use of front-end evaluation is to find out what your target audience would prefer to see. You can ask visitors to choose the most interesting of several possible exhibit topics, for example, when planning your temporary exhibit schedule. You can also ask visitors to choose the most interesting from a number of possible approaches to a subject. A very easy way to do this is to put a number of alternatives on index cards or on pieces of paper and just ask visitors to arrange them in order from the one they find most interesting to least, and then hand them back to you. This is quick, easy, cheap, requires no equipment, and, again, can be done at the front desk. [You, of course, have to note down the order in which they were handed back before you hand the set to the next visitor.]

6. <u>Get guidance from community representatives</u>
Another technique that is not too time-consuming for small museums is to gather a small "focus group" or an advisory group that can help you shape an exhibit. These are quite often used when doing an exhibit on a particular ethnic or occupational group, or on a highly technical subject.

These groups can help identify important topics to cover, give you guidance on how your proposed exhibit strikes an "insider", and generally keep you from putting your foot in it. As a bonus, if members of the group like the project and buy into it, their connections can also help you with research, gathering images and artifacts, and marketing.

Potential risks with this technique include picking the wrong people, looking like you are only seeking token advice, or having the group take so much ownership of the project that they want to dictate all the exhibit details!

7. <u>Find out what visitors already know – or think they know, but don't</u>
Front-end evaluation can also be used to find out what visitors already know about a topic, or how they "read" an uninterpreted artifact. This kind of information can help you decide what you need to focus on communicating in an exhibit, and what most people already know. It can also help you spot misconceptions. For example, in one evaluation I did, many visitors assumed that the artifacts in poorest shape had to be the oldest – which was not the case.

Formative evaluation: using your audience to help you design

If you only have time to do one kind of evaluation, formative is probably the one that will give you the greatest rewards. It occurs while you are designing the exhibit and writing text.

8. Find out if your writing makes sense

One of the easiest kinds of formative evaluation is to test whether your writing for labels and panels is going to make sense to your visitors – before you produce it. It can be as simple as giving a case worth of text to a few people to read, then taking it away and asking them to tell you what it was about. If the message you hear back is not the one you thought you were sending, it's "back to the computer" time. Although you should bear in mind that, sometimes, good exhibit text *doesn't* make sense unless the objects or images are there too. In that situation, try…

9. Find out if a case layout makes sense

You can mock up a case design using the real artifacts or pictures of them, along with rough versions of the text and other elements. Show it to some sample visitors, and then either ask them to tell you about it or give them a written questionnaire, to see if what you are trying to convey comes across clearly. Bear in mind that visitors who are asked to look at a mock up will probably examine it more closely than most casual visitors who see the finished product, so if they don't "get it", you are probably in trouble.

Summative evaluation: finding out how it all turned out in the end

Summative evaluation is done [surprise, surprise] after the exhibit is complete. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of summative evaluation. The first is a major research study that looks at big issues related to how people are using or learning from an exhibit; this kind of study is usually beyond the reach of a smaller museum [unless it is lucky enough to become a laboratory for research by a nearby university]. The second, which is much more likely to be done in smaller museums is:

10. Figure out what to change first

If you are trying to figure out your exhibit schedule, and wondering which existing exhibits should be replaced or improved first, you may want to conduct a little summative evaluation. You can use some of the techniques described in "audience research" to determine if visitors consistently ignore certain exhibits, or to find out which ones are firm favorites. If you suspect that some exhibits are used, but not getting the intended message across, try technique #9, above, but using the finished exhibit instead of a mock-up.