

Audience Research: Strategies & sources for understanding audiences

**Chaired by Cathy Blackbourn, Professional Development Program Manager
for the Ontario Museum Association,;**

Reporter, Jenna Rose

See Handout for introduction to this session.

Questions and answers are drawn from two sessions with 10 participants each.

Question: Are museum peers the only ones we should ask for feedback?

Cathy – No, we need audience feedback. As Nina Simon pointed out this morning, people like to be asked their opinion.

Question: How should I approach planning an exhibit that I think might be provoke controversy?

Cathy – Work with the community in designing it. Talk to people before and during the installation, as well as after it's completed. Hold a roundtable/focus group to discuss and get feedback. Encourage your community(ies) to participate in exhibition development.

Question: How do I go about getting feedback?

Cathy – You could start by using Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/> to engage people. There is a new “Questions” feature. Survey Monkey <http://www.surveymonkey.com/> allows you to ask a limited number of questions about exhibits for free. The negative side about surveying like this is that you may get more non-constructive criticism. A more traditional approach is to provide comment cards for visitors to complete on site.

Question: What are some of the advantages of the information revolution?

Cathy – Web-based learning is rich and readily available. We have greater access to our colleagues' research and resources. Audience research like focus groups can be conducted online.

Question: Where can I go to see samples of audience surveys?

Cathy – Check out <http://informalscience.org/>

Question: How do I begin to build a relationship with my audiences?

Cathy – Nina Simon’s work <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/> is very helpful here. You may also find useful material on the Association of Science-Technology Centers website <http://www.astc.org/>.

Question: How do I engage kids in history?

Cathy – See *Connecting Kids to History with Museum Exhibition*, edited by D. Lynn McRaney and John Russick <http://www.lcoastpress.com/book.php?id=222>. Be cautious when using American resources about audience relationships/participation. There tends to be more of a focus on Hispanic communities. We need to keep in mind that Canada is multicultural.

Question: How do we get large institutions to respond to visitor feedback?

Cathy – Get the decision-makers out on the floor talking with visitors, so that they hear what people are saying first-hand.

Questions: How do we test our assumptions?

Cathy – Put your questions out on the professional listservs first. Verify your assumptions before plunging into a project. Sit down with focus groups and ask them directly. Don’t ask about things you are not prepared to change. Generic demographic surveys that many museums undertake do not help develop exhibits based on community. We need to find out what they want! John Falk’s methods are fantastic.

Cathy Blackburn, B.A, B.Ed, MMSt, is Professional Development Program Manager for the Ontario Museum Association. She was Education Coordinator at the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum for 10 years. Cathy has also worked for the Royal Ontario Museum, London Regional Children’s Museum, Toronto Historical Board and Oakville Museums. As a member of The Learning Coalition, Cathy co-authored *Building Responsive Museums: A Discussion Framework*, *Human Resource Planning Tool for Successful Museums*, two online learning modules (for CHIN) on Project Management and Storyline Development, *Improving Performance Through Evaluation A Resource Guide for Museum Training Providers and Managers* and, *Guidelines for Developing Entry-Level Museum Practice Programs*.
