



StEPs-UT AUDIENCE MODULE

Introduction to Audience

HANDOUT | Visitor Studies Case Study

From: Klingler, Stacy and Conny Graft. "In Lieu of Mind Reading: Visitor Studies and Evaluation." In *The Small Museum Toolkit: Book 4, Reaching and Responding to the Audience*, edited by Cinnamon Catlin-Legutko and Stacy Klingler, 37-74. Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2012.

STARTING SMALL

When you start small and ask questions whose answers you know you can use right away, you can demonstrate the value of visitor studies to your board, staff, and volunteers without much cost to the organization.

When Stacy Klingler started as the director of the Putnam County Museum in Greencastle, Indiana, the museum was just one year old. From the standard guest book visitor register (which asks for date, name, and address), she knew that 203 people visited in the first year during the opening hours of 1 p.m. to 6 p.m. on Thursdays.

To provide information the board wanted for making decisions (such as when to be open and how people were learning about the museum), she replaced the standard guest book. She created a very short form printed on loose-leaf paper and set out in a three-ring binder. Visitors could still page back to see who had visited (as they frequently did with the guest book), but she was able to ask a few additional questions and to modify those questions easily over time.

In the first iteration, the visitor register asked:

- name city/state (listed before address to separate it from the possibility of getting an unwanted mailing)
- address (noting that this was optional)
- date and time of visit (with a small calendar and clock on display next to the binder)
- how visitor heard about the museum (with the options of friend, newspaper, poster, and other)

The answers were summarized monthly using an Excel spreadsheet and reported to the board. After a year, they had some great information. With the city/state data, they were able to tell the county visitors' bureau that 14 percent of visitors came from out of the county. With the date and time information, they were able to show how much of their increased visitation was during new hours—10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays—and how many visitors came on days they were not officially open, thus demonstrating the need for expanded hours and additional staff. They were also able to determine that the late hours on Thursday were ineffective: In one year, just one person had visited between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. Later iterations added questions about the number of people in a visiting group, whether the visitor had visited before, and whether the visitor was a member.

You can be even more informal and flexible with your initial research efforts. Consider asking just a single question, as the Scottsburg Heritage Center in Scottsburg, Indiana, did. When visitors entered, the docent asked, "How did you find out about the museum?" and tallied the answer on a piece of paper. This question

revealed that the radio public service announcements were a very effective means of reaching people. A few months later, the docent asked, “Did you come to see something in particular today?” The answers to this question revealed which of their marketing efforts were more successful in bringing people in. (Special temporary exhibits were a driver of attendance.)

You can choose to ask a question at any point in a visit, as long as you ask the same question of every visitor and have a simple way of recording answers. If your question is very open-ended, you might simply record the answers in a notebook and then tally the answers into meaningful categories on a regular basis. For example, if you ask at the end of the visit, “What was the most interesting thing you learned today?” you might find a pattern about which exhibits are attracting visitors’ attention. This might lead you to do more in-depth research to determine if the topic or story is the compelling force or the manner of display or storytelling makes the difference.

As you grow more comfortable with asking questions, you may decide to ask a few questions of each visitor. Remember, visitor studies do not have to be complicated. It only needs to focus on information you can and will use and to be systematic—ask each and every visitor and ask the same question of everyone.