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Manual of Museum Exhibitions

SECOND EDITION

EDITED BY

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- ***Quality of the exhibition visit:*** the most significant indicator of performance and value within the museum, to be evaluated in relation to the exhibition objectives.

- ***Achieved objectives:*** to determine whether the core message and objectives for exhibition as defined by interpretive planners have been communicated to visitors. Did they get it?

In undertaking summative evaluation of the quality of an exhibition visit, museum professionals need to remember that the exhibition is primarily a venue for *affective* learning. A mounting level of research and opinion suggests that the museum exhibition is not particularly effective at communicating complex information or the transfer of knowledge. Rather like television programs (another example of mass media), exhibitions appear to be excellent at generating enthusiasm, challenging long-held opinions, affecting attitudes, arousing interest, raising awareness of specific issues, or generating deep—often long-held—emotional responses. Evaluators need to consider, therefore, on which criteria an exhibition should be evaluated in order for results to have the most meaning and relevance. A test for retention of data may be of little value, whereas a finding that interest in a previously neglected subject has been aroused may be of fundamental significance.

A variety of stakeholders including scholars, private and public funders, government, and sponsors are increasingly interested in more accurately demonstrating and recording the *true* value of museums, and the experiences that they offer. However, this requires the development of new and relevant measures of value not wholly reliant on statistics and other classic indicators of performance. As long as the exhibition remains the most visible means by which a museum makes the connection between audiences and objects, summative evaluation of finished exhibitions can make an important contribution to this wider debate.

Nor is summative evaluation of one show the end of exhibition evaluation. Like museum visitors, museum staff will continue to learn through applying the knowledge and experience generated through evaluation to the next exhibition. Exhibition evaluation can provide essential information for the management and direction of the whole museum, and as such needs to be considered a necessary part of any new exhibition development, particularly major long-term installations.

Exhibition evaluation does not promise or guarantee a perfect exhibition experience—whatever that may be. Exhibitions are unlikely ever to become a medium that can offer every single visitor what they are looking for, every time. But evaluation of exhibitions does offer the museum a far better chance of successfully delivering a meaningful and enjoyable experience to their audiences.

4.4 Qualitative and Quantitative Audience Research

Barbara Soren and Jackie Armstrong

How can exhibition planners find out about the visitors who attend an exhibition and the nature of their experiences? Some of the questions that exhibition planners need to ask are identified in figure 4.2.

Audience research related to exhibitions is an umbrella term for visitor studies, evaluation, assessment, and research. Qualitative measures answer some questions about visitor experiences in an exhibition; quantitative measures answer others. A combination of the two approaches, or a multiple-method or mixed-methods approach, answers most of the questions.

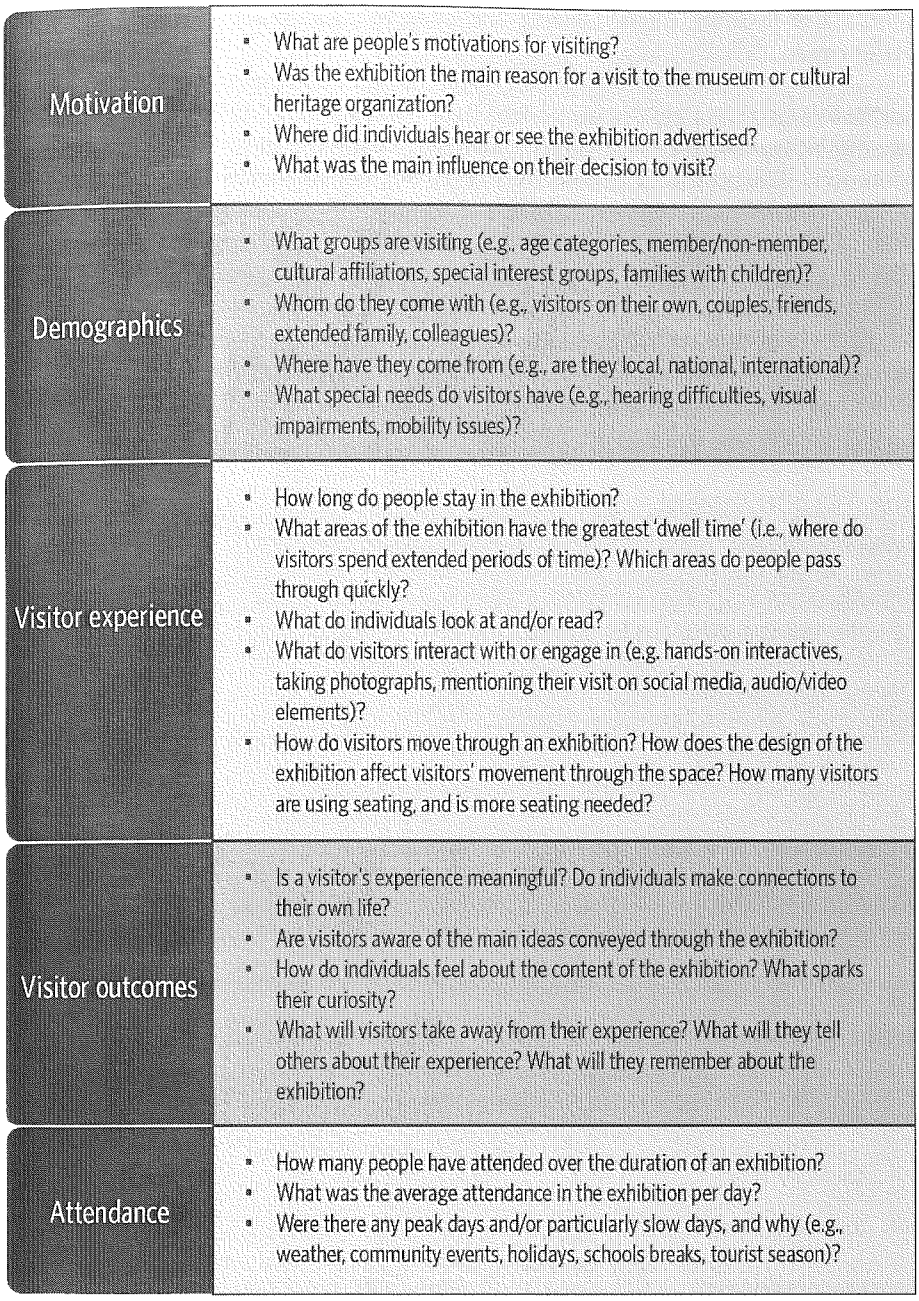

Figure 4.2 Asking the Right Questions (Evaluation Matrix)

- ***Qualitative*** methods are useful for collecting information about behaviors and feelings (observed in real time or through photographs or videos) and words (spoken or written). These methods provide depth in that it is possible to study selected issues in rich detail with a smaller number of people and situations. Qualitative methods also can be helpful for enriching statistical data. It is possible to code and quantify qualitative data, which deepens

the impact of findings, understanding and interpreting interactions, and looking at visitor experiences more holistically.

- ***Quantitative*** methods collect numerical data and highlight statistical patterns or trends. These methods provide breadth in that they require the use of a standardized approach and predetermined response categories, measuring the reactions of many individuals to a limited set of questions. Quantitative methods can test hypotheses, make predictions, and look at cause and effect through studying specific variables.

Numbers tend to be straightforward; words provide detail and nuance. Each way of collecting, interpreting, and reporting data has strengths and weaknesses. Together they can create a dynamic picture of the visitor experience.

4.4.1 Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches to Audience Research

Qualitative data offer detailed description, and often take the form of dialogue, conversation, or narratives. Reporting uses details that vividly describe the context of visitors' experiences with direct quotations from observations, interviews, activities, and written questionnaires.

The methods commonly used in qualitative approaches are:

- firsthand, intensive, long-term participant observation in a setting (i.e., as a participant and/or as an observer in the setting);
- semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions;
- focused observations in a specific location and for a set time;
- photographic, audio, or video materials that capture visitor experience; and
- participatory approaches (e.g., card sorts; comment or message boards; a photo booth; voting activities using stickers or dropping a color-coded slip of paper, button or object into a container; concept or personal meaning maps; reflective journal stems or questions that consist of more than one part, such as "Before this program, I . . ." or "Now that the program is over, I . . ." or "Looking ahead, I . . ."; crowdsourcing or soliciting contributions from a large group of people or an online community).

These methods are particularly useful for hearing people's stories about their experiences in an exhibition, including the following:

- What motivates individuals to come to a particular museum and exhibition?
- What interests them or sparks curiosity?
- Do people learn something new or unexpected?
- What types of connections do they make or associations do they have?
- How do visitors construct or make meaning?

- What do they find unclear or lacking?
- What will they find memorable?

During a study, ongoing analysis of visitor behaviors and comments on-site or online gradually paint a picture of the nature of visitors' experiences. One of the challenges in this type of audience research is finding topics, themes, and patterns in the rich amount of information gathered (e.g., behaviors, attitudes, opinions, values, beliefs, learning preferences), and deciding how much of individuals' responses to include in reporting to give a sense of visitors' experiences in an exhibition.

Quantitative data facilitate comparisons because all program participants respond to the same questions (or variables) within predetermined categories. Numbers and statistics report quantitative information, most often in tables and charts (e.g., scores, ratings, ranks, or frequencies).

Qualitative Approaches	Quantitative Approaches
• Qualitative data (conversation, narratives) • Naturalistic inquiry methods • Case studies of individuals	• Quantitative data (visitor numbers, statistics) • Experimental designs • Experimental treatment and control groups
• Inductive analysis of visitors	• Deductive hypothesis testing about visitors
• Subjective perspective • Close to the visitor experience or embedded as a participant-observer	• Objective perspective • Aloof from the visitor experience
• Purposeful or random sampling of relevant visitors	• Random sampling of visitors
• Understanding of the overall visitor experience, along with a focus on uniqueness and diversity of experiences	• Standardized, uniform procedures
• Emergent, flexible design of audience research that is responsive to a visitor's experience	• Fixed, controlled design of audience research
• Content analysis related to themes and patterns	• Statistical analysis
• Meaning about audiences extrapolated from evaluation or research	• Generalizations about audiences made from evaluation or research

Figure 4.3 Comparing Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches

Key factors in quantitative studies are

- behaviors that a design team can expect in an exhibition;
- control of variables; and
- analysis involving descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency and measures of central tendency, such as mean, mode, median, variability).

The next two sections highlight the uses of more qualitative and more quantitative methods for audience research. Included is the method used, a description of the method, and examples from audience research projects cited in print and online international publications, as well as from professional experiences as researchers and evaluators.

4.4.2 More Qualitative Methods

The following are examples of more qualitative approaches to researching or evaluating visitor experiences in exhibitions.

4.4.2.1 FRONT-END AND FORMATIVE STUDIES

METHOD: PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Description

- Invite individuals to project into ideas the exhibition design team is developing.
- May be participants in a focus group, questionnaire, interview, or survey.

Use for Audience Research

- Exploring people's awareness, knowledge of, and interest in a particular topic using an iterative evaluation process with periods of data collection and analysis, each followed by revisions to interpretation strategies (e.g., develop, test, and refine an innovative program that engages adult visitors in a deeper understanding of how children learn).
- Understanding barriers for diverse visitors and communities who may not typically visit exhibitions in the museum.
- Matching interpretive tools (e.g., didactic materials, text panels, labels, catalogs, tactile opportunities, audio/video/photographic elements, interactive media) to individual preferences for experiencing objects and learning styles.
- Testing of exhibition titles and marketing images to determine which are most appealing to audiences, and for a sense of messages conveyed.

METHOD: FOCUS GROUPS

Description

- A group representative of target markets and/or stakeholders, led by a facilitator or moderator, focusing on key issues or questions in a structured or open discussion.

- May use prototypes of exhibits and/or objects.
- May be recorded with participant consent.
- May be a catalyst for communication among the observers of the focus group.

Use for Audience Research

- Helping an exhibition design team consider elements they should develop (e.g., for a science fiction (SF) exhibition asking target markets about their SF awareness and preferences, or ideas for the exhibition and complementary programs).
- Exploring perceptions of existing displays and changes for a new exhibition (e.g., orientation, welcoming environment, clear language, layered information, displays relevant to visitors' lives).
- Determining adolescents' self-identified needs and expectations for a visit to an exhibition.
- Using behavioral indicators for family learning to develop exhibit enhancements aimed at achieving family learning goals.
- Receiving feedback from specific audiences such as caregivers, partners or individuals with Alzheimer's and/or other forms of dementia after participating in an art-making program (e.g., conduct one focus group with caregivers and one with individuals with Alzheimer's to find out what attracted people to the art-making program, previous experiences, what they enjoyed about the program, how the program affected them, thoughts on improving the program).

4.4.2.2 SUMMATIVE VISITOR STUDIES

METHOD: CONTENT ANALYSIS

Description

Analysis of . . .

- exhibition planning documents and records of planning meetings to determine goals and objectives.
- visitor comments and requests for information to examine outcomes for visitors.
- visitor behavior in an exhibition using technologies for data visualization (e.g., Tagxedo, Wordle, Stamp It, Padlet, or Pixton).
- visitor drawings, photographs, or messages that individuals share with open-ended prompts.
- staff and exhibition developers' reflective responses before and after a particular exhibition.
- online surveys using SurveyMonkey, Qualtrics, FluidSurveys, iFormBuilder, or TrackNTime™.
- social media sites related to an exhibition using metrics (e.g., Google Analytics).

Use for Audience Research

- *At a living history site:* observing staff meetings, volunteer training sessions, Christmas decoration of the heritage house and several special weekend and evening programs to find out about the history behind objects, ideas selected, and decisions made about how to present objects, intentions for visitor experiencing and learning, and interpretive strategies developed.

- *At a science center:* analyzing visitor comment cards to look at visitors' new insights into the nature of science and sociocultural influences on visitor understanding.

- *At an art museum:* tracking visitors through an exhibition, and seeing which images, phrases, and types of messages appear most frequently in responses to follow-up open-ended interview questions.

- *In an online members' survey:* finding out ways in which visitors might "take action" in their community after seeing an exhibition about the power of children.

- *On an exhibition's Facebook site:* looking at how many "likes" and "shares" there are; on the exhibition's Twitter site: determining the number of new followers, re-tweets, and replies; on the exhibition's Tumblr site: assessing new followers, likes, and re-blogs; on the exhibition's Pinterest site: counting new followers, re-pins, and "likes."

METHOD: WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRES, STRUCTURED AND SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS, FOCUS GROUPS

Description

- Open-ended questions asked in a systematic way so it is possible to report on visitors' responses directly.

- May be recorded with participant consent.

- Use objects from the exhibition and/or photographs taken by visitors to discuss responses to an exhibition.

- Conduct exit interviews as visitors leave an exhibition, at a particular location within an exhibition, or after some time has passed since a visit.

Use for Audience Research:

- Finding out how, when, and why people visit an exhibition, and the effectiveness of information and interpretive materials provided for visitors.

- Exploring how visitors respond to the use of humor in an exhibition (e.g., whether visitors find the use of humor to be appropriate in the context of the exhibit, whether the humor was understandable to individuals, whether the humor had a perceived positive effect on their visit, and whether the humor changed visitor attitudes about the topic).

METHOD: IN-GALLERY OBSERVATIONS

Description

- Impressions of visitors' experiences in exhibitions, with descriptions recorded by the observer(s).
- Use of a behavioral tracking form or checklist to record movement around an exhibition, reading of interpretive materials, interactions, length of time at objects and at specific elements in the exhibition.

Use for Audience Research

- Better understanding of the context for an individual's comments during interviews, and giving a sense of decisions a range of visitors are making about where to go and what they are interested in seeing in the exhibition.
- Using an observation protocol that includes:
    - visitor behavior (e.g., initial route decisions, hesitancy; use of a museum map, plan or guidebook; who is accompanying the visitor if with a group; conversational patterns)
    - label/captions/wall texts behavior (e.g., reading of wall text and length of time spent reading; number of objects in a gallery compared with number of objects stopped at; length of time reading traditional or tombstone labels, extended labels, and viewing objects; photographing of text with cell phones)

METHOD: IN-GALLERY INTERVIEWS

Description

- Conversational interviews in which an interviewer encourages a visitor to talk freely about key issues or questions.
- May involve an individual or group.
- May be specific to interpretive strategies, art works or objects, and/or programming.

Use for Audience Research

- Finding out about a visitor's conceptions of specific issues.
- Testing the effects of different visitor agendas on visitor learning.

METHOD: SELF-REPORTS, AUDIO/VIDEOTAPES, PARTICIPATORY

Description

- Make recordings of experiences and responses to objects or displays (e.g., in writing, on audiotape or videotape, or on a mobile device).

- Use of reflective journals, personal writing and/or drawing on topics of interest, concept mapping about a given topic or theme, self-tracking or documenting a visit, photographing areas of interest or confusion.

- Integration of more activity-based forms of data collection into an exhibition.

Use for Audience Research

- Studying the letters and pictures returned after children visited with school groups to compare how children experience an exhibition compared to adults.

- Inviting visitors to use an instant camera to take a photo of what most captures their interest in a particular exhibition and using that image as a point of discussion.

- Using "play-testing," in which a selected group of users (random or invited) play unfinished versions or variations of a game to test its "playability," clarity of instructions, design, fulfillment of goals such as looking more closely at works of art, and the fun factor. Usually, those involved in the creation of a game are the first to play-test, and later on in the process outside participants (e.g., museum visitors) might receive invitations to play-test (facilitated or not). "Play-testing" is possible with both analogue and digital games (e.g., a Museum of Modern Art and Institute of Play collaboration on a game called "Everyone's a Critic").

4.4.2.3 LONGER-TERM IMPACT STUDIES

METHOD: CASE STUDIES

Description

- Focused, intensive inquiry about one or more individuals related to an exhibition, activity, or program experience.

- May be across groups (cross-sectional) or related to one individual over time (longitudinal).

- May be immediately following an experience or after some time has elapsed to determine the longer-term impact of an exhibition experience.

Use for Audience Research

- Probing visitors' memories of their experiences at time intervals after their experience in an exhibition, through telephone interviews.

- Asking about recollections of exhibition experiences (e.g., a field trip from school; visits to a region's outdoor cultural attractions; an online experience browsing an exhibition website or responding to the exhibition's blog, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or Pinterest site).

4.4.3 More Quantitative Methods

The following are examples of more quantitative approaches to researching or evaluating visitor experiences in exhibitions.

4.4.3.1 FRONT-END VISITOR STUDIES

METHOD: PROJECTIVE TECHNIQUES

Description

- Invite visitors to project into ideas the exhibition design team is developing.
- There are no "correct" answers; frequency of responses is important in analysis.
- May be part of a focus group, questionnaire, interview, or survey.

Use for Audience Research

- Having focus group(s) with target market individuals or groups react to elements an exhibition design team is considering or elements the team should develop.
- Conducting structured interviews that invite participants to describe an object or exhibit component and predict what would happen as they manipulate objects.

4.4.3.2 FORMATIVE VISITOR STUDIES

METHOD: PERFORMANCE TESTS

Description

- Creation or simulation of a realistic situation that elicits specific behavior, abilities, and/or interests.

Use for Audience Research

- Testing of specific skills, strategies, and application of prior knowledge or understanding of exhibition components.

METHOD: Q-SORTS (I.E., SORTING ITEMS RELATIVE TO ONE ANOTHER ALONG A DIMENSION SUCH AS "AGREE"/"DISAGREE")

Description

- Typically include observations in the form of a checklist or rating scale.
- Create ranked categories of values, needs, and preferences.

Use for Audience Research

- Exploring preferences, priorities, attitudes about prototypes or exhibition elements.

METHOD: USER TESTING

Description

- Work one on one with users as they browse an exhibition's website or an online exhibition.

Use for Audience Research

- Having users think aloud as they make decisions about navigating the exhibition's website or online exhibition and interact with sections of the site, with one researcher guiding the user through the interview questions and another recording (often in writing and on audiotape with consent from the user).

4.4.3.3 SUMMATIVE VISITOR STUDIES

METHOD: BEHAVIORAL ANALYSIS AND INVENTORY RELATED TO IN-GALLERY OBSERVATIONS

Description

- Define, observe, and code specific behaviors in the exhibition's entrance or exit, galleries or halls, and hands-on areas, during tours or programs.

- Examine specific skills or strategies, application of prior knowledge, personality traits, social interactions, kinds and frequencies of behaviors.

Use for Audience Research

- Tracking studies of visitors' decisions about paths and stops through an exhibition and number of objects stopped at compared to number of objects in the space.

- Recording time in exhibition, and time reading text panels, labels, or captions.

- Noting use of brochures, leaflets, guides, plans, or activity cards.

- Observing use of audio guides and apps.

- Documenting interactions with docents, gallery guides, educators, hosts, or facilitators.

METHOD: WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRES, STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS, SURVEYS

Description

- A series of close-ended questions or fixed-response items with predetermined categories (e.g., questions with rating scales, yes/no/not-sure options, multiple choice), or open-ended questions that will result in one or more "scores" related to visitors' responses.

Use for Audience Research

- Gathering quantifiable information about motivation for a visit, wayfinding throughout the exhibition, use of interpretive materials, and interest levels.

- Testing knowledge gain and curiosity arousal; recording general visitor behaviors and demographics; comparing responses by age, gender, and language groups; and assessing visitor satisfaction.

METHOD: CONTENT ANALYSIS

Description

- Examine visitor statistics or records. Classify and statistically analyze content of visitor responses.
- Use Google Analytics to gather metrics for an exhibition's website or social media site (e.g., a Tumblr blog or Wordpress) or an app.

Use for Audience Research

- Comparing visitor market segments and assessing whether the exhibition is reaching its audience targets.
- Collecting admission counts and visitor demographics.
- Analyzing visitor comment cards or books, looking for patterns in responses.
- Finding out about devices used to access content related to the exhibition, general geographic locations of users, new vs. returning users, content that is getting the most "hits," and how long people are spending on specific content.

METHOD: EXPERIMENTAL OR QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN STUDIES WITH RANDOM SAMPLES AND CONTROL GROUPS

Description

- Performance of visitors analyzed in relation to topics, ideas, or content exhibited, controlling for variables and using statistical analysis.

Use for Audience Research

- Studying a random sample of visitors to an exhibition by examining responses in exit interviews, pre- and post-visit questionnaires, and written comment cards. Variables could be leisure habits, frequency of visits to the museum and other museums locally and internationally, why individuals visited, how long the visit lasted, what visitors think about components, and knowledge expressed about topics.
- Investigating the effectiveness of project components in a focused school field trip designed to enhance the use of an exhibition as an educational resource for students of the district public schools (e.g., pre- and post-test of basic knowledge of target concepts, and rates of target behaviors for students and teachers).

4.4.4 *Multiple Perspectives on the Visitor Experience*

Most often a combination of qualitative and quantitative strategies provides multiple perspectives and the most in-depth understanding of the visitor experience in an exhibition. Together, qualitative and quantitative data can help make visitor voices heard and can help inform decision

making about exhibitions within the museum. Quantifiable information (e.g., about motivation for a visit, wayfinding, preferences for interpretive materials and satisfaction levels) can serve as a context for more in-depth descriptive data. Evaluators working with more ethnographic or naturalistic approaches have considered triangulation techniques as an important way to control investigator bias and establish validity for findings. Types of triangulation strategies include data, investigator, and methodological strategies.

4.4.4.1 DATA TRIANGULATION

Data triangulation techniques include collection of data over a prolonged period of time and under different circumstances. In an exhibition, this may include collecting data at different times of the day/evening, week, month, or year. Analysis of the same situation may be from the point of view of the casual visitor, a tour, or a school program. The experiences of different casual visitors can be the focus of audience research, such as specific age groups, visitor groups, genders, cultural affiliations, and access needs.

For example, for an audience research component of an art exhibition visitor audit, data collected could include:

- observing visitors during approximately fifty hours, over ten days, in meeting areas and rooms throughout the exhibition;
- observing and interviewing visitors in as many different areas of the exhibition as possible (e.g., in front of works of art, in interactive areas, in AV rooms, or in seating areas);
- collecting visitor comments in writing, on e-mail, posted on social media, or told to staff at the Information Desk; or
- profiling specific visitors representative of the different identified market segments to show the range of experiences for individuals and groups who visited the exhibition during the week of observation and interviews, including:
    - first-time visitors, infrequent visitors (one or two times a year);
    - frequent and repeat visitors (three or more visits a year);
    - all age groups including families with young children, visitors 18–29 years and over 55 years; or
    - residents and tourists.

Any available historical documents related to exhibition development, design, and programs, and information about mandates and philosophy for collecting and public education are useful to collect (e.g., original proposals, background information or design copy on file for objects in the exhibition). Past audience or marketing studies, related studies in the community with similar local and regional demographics, website and social media metrics, and attendance records for similar exhibitions in the museum and related exhibitions in local communities provide information about trends in visitation. Visitor comments written in books, collected in suggestion boxes, or communicated via e-mail and at current programs or special events help to give a sense of visitor experiences.

4.4.4.2 INVESTIGATOR TRIANGULATION

Investigator triangulation provides multiple perspectives by using several investigators to collect data. The triangulation process can include either a group of outside evaluators/researchers—a combination of "outsiders" and "insiders"—or an in-house team alone. Working groups, stakeholder groups, students, and interns can collaborate in thinking about visitor evaluation and/or collecting data. The variety of individuals involved in the process helps illuminate specific data, creates a better understanding of the visitor experience in a particular exhibition, and empowers individuals to make changes that positively impact the visitor experience. An audience research or evaluation team is useful because a group of observers can share insights, continually discuss observations, and together reflect on the data gathered.

4.4.4.3 METHODOLOGICAL TRIANGULATION

In methodological triangulation the audience researcher uses multiple methods to collect information. Ethnographic methods such as in-gallery observations and interviews give in-depth information about the experience of a small group of visitors. Other methods add breadth and provide statistics about, for instance, pathways a large number of visitors take through exhibitions and parts of the collections they choose to see, demographics, reasons for coming and number of visitors who go to the retail store after time spent in an exhibition.

The following provides a list of multiple methods that have been useful for studying visitor experience in one exhibition:

- Interviewed 90 visitors.
- Observed 450 individuals and groups.
- Administered a mini-survey to 275 visitors during the same period to provide quantitative information about motivation for a visit, use of interpretive materials, and satisfaction levels, as a context for more in-depth, descriptive data.
- Consulted Security and Information Office staff about their observations of visitor experiences.
- Invited each visitor to participate in an audit and fill out a background information sheet for basic demographic information.
- Conducted three focus groups with 30 regular visitors in different age groups (18–30 years, 35–55 years, 55 years and over) to find out more about how, when and why people visited the exhibition.
- Used SurveyMonkey® to survey 250 members online following their visit to the exhibition.

Generally, multiple methods that integrate qualitative and quantitative strategies provide a rich palette of the nature of the experience for a sample of individuals and contribute to a more holistic and reliable understanding of the meaning visitors make related to the time they spend visiting an exhibition.