

FROM RESEARCH QUALITY TO MANAGEMENT ISSUES: FACTORS FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MUSEUM AUDIENCE RESEARCH

*Eva M. Reussner
Freie Universität Berlin*

INTRODUCTION

As the field of museum audience research develops, the discussion if museums should undertake audience research or not has given way to new challenges, such as the question how institutions can make best use of the audience research they undertake and the information it provides. Many audience studies have been completed in museums but their potential is not always utilised. This leads to the question under which conditions audience research is effective, i. e., meets or exceeds the intended outcomes. As audience research usually requires a non-negligible investment, the effort should be worth the money spent and yield useful outcomes. The research project reported here seeks to identify factors for effective audience research, through a critical review of museum audience research activities of selected museums around the world. This paper concentrates on the following research questions: (1) When can audience research be considered effective? (2) What makes audience research effective?

In answering these questions with regard to the first subproject of the research focusing on Australian and New Zealand museums, the contribution of this paper is twofold: First, we extend the perspective on factors relevant for an effective utilisation of museum audience research to include management issues as well as the organisational context and culture in which audience research occurs. This is in contrast to publications that focus more narrowly on research methods or process models for the integration of audience research in exhibition development as means to ensure effective audience research. Second, in giving practical recommendations based on the results of this study, a contribution to improving the practice of museum audience research is anticipated.

This paper is organised as follows: After illustrating the motivation for this study, the term effectiveness is dealt with. Then, the research strategy is described. As a background, a short overview is given on the Australian and New Zealand museum sector and audience research in that context. Then, indicators and factors for effectiveness of museum audience research are illustrated. After these findings are discussed, recommendations for institutions wishing to improve their use of audience research are given and final conclusions drawn.

MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

Museum audience research is a particular form of applied research that uses established data collection and analysis methods from psychology and particularly the social sciences to gather information in relation to museum audiences. Audience research implies a double perspective: first, the museum perspective on its audience, through generating visitor profiles and the like, and second, the audience perspective on the museum: through evaluations, museums ask for the audiences' perceptions of exhibitions and services offered.

The motivation for this study is twofold. First, perpetual criticism in publications concerning audience research indicates the problem of a lack in effectiveness of audience research for museums. Second, there is a lack of studies investigating that problem. While earlier publications often were concerned with the question of whether or not museums should

undertake audience research (Friedman 1996), the discussion has now moved on. To date, many audience studies have been completed in museums but their potential is not always utilised. Several authors signal that there is reason for concern about an effective utilisation of audience research. The attention is called to barriers for an effective utilisation of audience research and lacking application of audience information in museum practice (Gammon & Graham 1997; Graf 1997; Fisher 2002; Klein & Bachmayer 1981; Loomis 1987, 1988, 1993; Rubenstein 1989). But while there is an awareness of the problem, it is analysed predominantly in the form of *anecdotal accounts* in contrast to systematic study.

The only *systematic study* of the problem was a research project commissioned by the American National Endowment for the Arts and conducted by Di Maggio, Useem & Brown, published in 1978 under the title "Audience Studies of the Performing Arts and Museums: A Critical Review". In this study, the authors investigated the quality and impact of arts audience studies as well as factors affecting research utility.

Although this study presents valuable insights, its findings cannot be assumed to have unquestionable relevance today because of the development both the museum sector and the field of audience research have undergone since the late seventies. In addition, the findings are limited to museums in the United States. With only one study undertaken decades ago, theory building in the area has been, to say the least, neglected. The time is ripe for a new study of factors for effectiveness of audience research that pays tribute to the current level of professionalisation and the widespread areas of application of museum audience research today. An important insight from both, anecdotal accounts and the above mentioned study, is nevertheless that not only research quality contributes to effective audience research, but organisational factors, communication and other management issues need to be taken into account as well as potential features affecting the effectiveness of audience research.

EFFECTIVENESS OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH

As a concept central to the study, the quite elusive term effectiveness needs clarification. To develop a more precise understanding of the term, literature on organisational effectiveness and effective museum management was consulted. In general, two kinds of criteria for effectiveness can be distinguished: (1) criteria focusing on *outcomes* as indicators for effectiveness, and (2) criteria focusing on *what makes* organisations effective.

Outcomes as effectiveness criteria are widely used. In these approaches, effectiveness is essentially related to goal attainment (Gilbert & Parhizgari 2000; Griffin et al. 1999; Griffin & Abraham 2000; Herman & Renz 1999; Phelps 1997; Redshaw 2001). The comparative model implies an assessment of outcomes and subsequent comparison with prespecified organisational objectives (Herman & Renz 1999), with norms and standard measures (Ames 1990; Gilbert & Parhizgari 2000) or with other organisations (Ames 1990; Herman & Renz 1999).

Other models of effectiveness assessment concentrate on dimensions that are understood to constitute organisational effectiveness. The multiple-constituency model (Herman & Renz 1999) implies a process in which various stakeholders of an organisation are consulted in order to define important criteria for assessment. Ames (1990) advocates a consensus in the museum community about important criteria. Other approaches such as the balanced scorecard concept (Kaplan & Norton 1992) prespecify generic criteria for assessment (see also Redshaw 2001, Rojas 2000). Among those criteria, stakeholder responsiveness is considered very important (Herman & Renz 1999, Kaplan & Norton 1992, Phelps 1997, Redshaw 2001).

For the purpose of this study, it was assumed that the generic models for effectiveness assessment on an organisational level can be transferred to a subfunction such as audience research. Accordingly, it was decided to distinguish between:

- (a) indicators for effectiveness of audience research: outcomes that audience research is expected to yield, and
- (b) factors for effectiveness of audience research: dimensions that are viewed to be important for audience research to yield the expected outcomes.

If outcomes are defined relative to the individual institution's audience research goals, comparability between institutions is limited. Therefore, outcomes needed to be empirically identified that apply across institutions. Correspondingly, factors for effectiveness were to be identified that have relevance across institutions.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

The overall research project on factors for the effectiveness of audience research is divided into three parts, according to the world region in focus: 1) Australia and New Zealand, 2) Europe and 3) USA and Canada. This paper reports on the first subproject, covering Australian and New Zealand museums.

Because of the theory building nature of the research, a case study research strategy was chosen. That approach is also appropriate as a professional integration of audience research is found only in a limited number of institutions. Further, it was clear that the organisational context in which audience research occurs may be significant for the problem in question, i.e., this context needed to be part of the study. In consequence, it was decided to use specific cases as "opportunities to study the phenomena" (Stake 1994) in depth. Case studies serve to investigate complex phenomena in a holistic view. They enable the researcher to "better understand the subtle institutional processes" (DiMaggio et al 1978) and to take account of the case's specific context (Yin 1994). A multiple-case study design was chosen, in order to test replication of results under different context conditions and to make the study more robust (cf Yin 1994).

Potential cases were determined through a review of publications and an exchange with experts in the field. From the identified institutions, cases were selected to provide variety and balance among the selected institutions according to a typology containing the following elements:

- world region (Australia & New Zealand; Europe; United States and Canada)
- museum types (History, Natural Science, Science, Art, Other, Mixed)
- degree of responsibility for audience research within institution (no responsibility; position with responsibility for audience research among other responsibilities; dedicated position(s) for audience research).

In the first subproject reported in this paper, case studies of eight institutions were undertaken. The data on these museums are mainly drawn from research the author conducted on behalf of the Museums Australia Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group (EVRSIG) in 2002. These data were complemented by a case study in New Zealand, in a research project in conjunction with the Arts and Entertainment Management Program at Deakin University, Melbourne.

A case study protocol was designed containing the dimensions for analysis. In order to allow cross validation of results, depth interviews, document analysis and questionnaire assessments were used as data sources. Within each of the selected institutions, 4 to 5 interviews were

conducted, using an interview guide containing the topics to be addressed. Staff from different areas of work were to be consulted, covering audience research, curators, exhibition development, public programs, visitor services, marketing and public relations as well as senior management. Independently from the institutions studied, insights were sought in interviews with six specialists either in audience research or the museum field. The interview data were complemented by organisational documents, such as annual reports, strategic plans, organisation charts as well as publications relating to the audience research activities of the respective institutions. Through qualitative content analysis of interview transcripts, documents and publications, an inventory of factors for the effectiveness of museum audience research was set up (cf Krippendorff 1980). These factors were then fed into a questionnaire for subsequent assessment of the situation within the selected institutions. A total of 53 assessments were received from the institutions investigated. These ratings helped to structure the inventory of factors for effectiveness of audience research (cf Bortz & Doering 2002).

The general limitation of a case study methodology is that it does not allow statistical generalisation. Also, questionnaire assessments within institutions cannot be treated like survey data because of the small number of respondents per institution. But as the intention was to build a systematically structured set of case study data which is analytically generalisable to theoretical propositions (Yin 1994), and not statistically generalisable to a broader population, a case study methodology was considered appropriate. Through cross validation, confidence in the results is enhanced.

AUDIENCE RESEARCH IN THE AUSTRALIAN AND NEW ZEALAND MUSEUM SECTOR

The history of the the Australian museum sector begins with the Australian Museum in Sydney, established in 1827. To date, the sector comprises over 2,000 museums. New Zealand, a country of 3.5 million people, has over 460 museums. Museums range from large National and State museums in the bigger cities to small regional museums and Keeping Places, run by few staff or solely by volunteers, especially in remote areas. In recent years, the museum sector has experienced a rejuvenation process. New museum concepts – and buildings – have been set up, e.g., for the National Museums of both countries. Other museums have undergone restructuring efforts and institutional redefinitions together with new directors coming on board, e.g., the Australian Museum and Museum Victoria. A distinctive aspect of the Australian and New Zealand museum sector is the recognition and respect of Indigenous rights to their cultural heritage, apparent in the establishment of Keeping Places, repatriation of artefacts and human remains, and particular museum policies (CAMA 1993).

The field of audience research in the Australian and New Zealand museum sector is comparably young, with audience research activities in museums coming up towards the end of the 1970's. Nonetheless, today, audience research can be considered a relatively established museum activity. A recent Australia-wide survey showed that about a third of the Australian museums undertake some form of audience research (Reussner 2003). It seems not exaggerated to speak of a field of advanced practice, with the first of now 14 dedicated positions for audience research in museums established in 1991 and many university-based researchers, consultants as well as specialised marketing research agencies working in the area. The year 1995 saw the creation of professional forums in the form of a Special Interest Group, founded at the Museums Australia Conference in Brisbane, and a full conference on audience research on issues for museum audience research towards the end of the century.

INDICATORS AND FACTORS FOR THE EFFECTIVENESS OF AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Institutions Studied

The following table (Table 1) gives an overview of the distribution of the seven Australian institutions and one New Zealand museum that participated in this study, by type and level of responsibility for audience research within the institution.

responsibility \ museum type	History	Natural Science	Science	Art	Other	Mixed
no responsibility			1			
among other resp.	1					
dedicated position(s)		1			2	3

Table 1: Distribution of museums by type and level of responsibility for audience research within the institution

To obtain a balanced view, a broad spectrum of museum types was to be studied. In this investigation, a history museum, a natural science museum as well as a science centre are covered. The category 'other' comprises a military and a maritime museum. Three participants are multidisciplinary institutions. Unfortunately, no pure art museum could be identified that was active in audience research on a level comparable to the other institutions selected. In terms of the level of responsibility for audience research present in the institutions studied, six institutions are provided with at least one dedicated position, one of them appointed only recently. One institution has a person responsible for audience research among other responsibilities, and one institution currently has no formal responsibility for audience research within the institution.

Indicators for the Effectiveness of Audience Research

As explained earlier, the effectiveness of audience research is measured through assessing the achievement of outcomes. Outcomes were identified through qualitative content analysis. They are mostly formulated as positive statements (impacts audience research has on the operation and success of museums), some state the absence of deficiencies. In the following, outcomes are described that were found to be applicable to all institutions studied. Certainly the spectrum of potential outcomes of audience research is not limited to the items mentioned below. The items are ranked according to the degree audience research contributes to them. Data were normalised for each institution to ensure inter-organisational comparability. Through addition an index was calculated for each item across institutions. Table 2 shows the ranking of indicators for effectiveness. From the scale applied for the rating of items (1: high impact of audience research to 4: no impact of audience research at all) follows that, the lower the index, the more audience research contributes to the item across institutions.

Indicator: Audience research has contributed to...	Index
Bids for financial support / sponsorship etc.	5,83

Used in exhibition and program development	5,88
Willingness of staff to include the visitor point of view in their work	6,10
Improved organisational performance	6,34
Organisational development	6,38
No misuse of findings for political purposes	6,60
Informed decision making	6,82
Improved exhibitions and programs	6,82
Commitment to learn more about audiences	7,09
Improved experiences for the visitor	7,48
Used in planning	8,04
Audience development	8,43
Reporting organisational performance	9,18

Table 2: Ranking of indicators for effectiveness (lower number means higher impact)

Bids for financial support / sponsorship etc. It might be surprising for some to find that funding negotiations is the area where audience research has the highest impact across the institutions studied. Through audience research, institutions have information at hand that supports their argumentation in bids for financial support before funding bodies or sponsors.

Used in exhibition and program development. Audience research has a major impact as its findings come to fruition in exhibition or program development. Qualitative content analysis showed that lacking effectiveness is essentially being related to findings from audience research not acted upon and recommendations not being implemented at all or in full. In line with these perceptions, the criterion of findings being used is emphasised as an important indicator for effectiveness.

Willingness of staff to include the visitor point of view in their work. This item is intended to express what is usually called visitor orientation. This is an aspect related to organisational culture that then filters down into day-to-day operations. The results suggest that audience research makes staff more prepared to recognise the audiences' perspectives.

Improved organisational performance. Audience research is not only understood to contribute to a subset of organisational functions such as exhibition development, but it is acknowledged as enhancing overall organisational performance. Audience research plays a role in accomplishing the overall purpose of the institution.

Organisational development. In line with the latter item, but in a long-term perspective, audience research is perceived to contribute to the constant development and change of organisation and staff in the context of continuous improvement efforts and organisational learning.

No misuse of findings for political purposes. Findings from qualitative content analysis show that there is also a misuse of findings being criticised, i. e., findings being deliberately misinterpreted or being used to confirm or deny a particular point of view. The degree to which that occurs or does not occur in an institution is used to indicate, among other criteria, the effectiveness of audience research.

Informed decision making. One of the central contributions of audience research is the provision of solid information that assists in decision making in different areas of museum work, from general planning to exhibition development.

Improved exhibitions and programs. This item goes beyond the question whether results are fed into exhibitions or programs or not. It brings in a quality aspect that takes into account if audience research findings are made best use of: that the implementation of results finally brings about better exhibitions and programs.

Commitment to learn more about audiences. This again is an item dealing with visitor orientation. Here, an ongoing interest in audience issues and a learning orientation are emphasised as indicators for effectiveness.

Improved experiences for the visitor. Not only thinking about the audience perspective makes audience research effective, but lastly that results are actually integrated in museum work in a way that a better visitor experience is offered that meets the needs and expectations of visitors so that visitor satisfaction is increased.

Used in planning. This item covers the use of audience research findings in a long-term perspective for corporate planning purposes. Qualitative content analysis showed some dissatisfaction with findings from audience research not being taken into account for planning purposes. While this item can be taken as an indicator for effectiveness, its low rank calls for caution: it should not be given too much weight.

Audience development. Audience research is perceived as having comparably low effect on audience development. The term audience development summarises efforts to ensure access and participation, to increase visitation and encourage repeat visitation, to engage new diverse audiences, to effectively connect with target groups.

Reporting organisational performance. Audience research is used for the development of performance indicators and subsequent measuring and reporting of performance. The last rank in the list of indicators for effectiveness shows that the contribution of audience research to that function is considered to be rather secondary.

What was *not* measured is the extent to which audience research was *intended* to contribute to the above outcomes. That was difficult to measure in the framework of the current research approach because it depends on the individual audience study conducted within an institution. A comparison of intended and actual effect would have given more precise indications of goal attainment.

Factors for the Effectiveness of Audience Research

In this section, the factors for effectiveness are introduced that were identified through qualitative content analysis. The items are arranged in descending order according to their frequency of occurrence in the source documents.

1. Quality of Research

Research quality is the issue of highest concern, as content analysis shows.

Scientific Quality relates to the application of rigorous social research principles in conducting studies, i.e., the selection of appropriate methodologies, accurate sampling and data collection procedures as well as instruments that provide valid and reliable data etc.

Expertise and Experience of Researchers. Research quality is closely related to the expertise and experience of those conducting the research, from the researcher in charge to interviewers and other people involved. Apart from expertise and experience in the area of applied social research in general there is also the demand that researchers, especially contractors external to

the institutions, know the museum field in general and the individual museum they are undertaking the research for. In addition to research skills, there are a range of competences considered important or desirable, from communication to project management and leadership skills.

Research Utility. For short term utility, the research needs to be targeted, i.e., the purpose and research questions of the study must be clear to all involved and the product evaluated must be understood, so that the results can be relevant and applicable. Another aspect is the provision of research findings in time so that decisions can be made based on those findings and sufficient time is available to implement them. For long term utility, it is considered important to produce generalisable results and to ensure continuous collection of consistent, standardised data.

Other quality aspects comprise the demands that the research complies (1) with ethical guidelines, i.e., confidentiality, and (2) with the overall aims and direction of the organisation.

2. Acceptance and Support of Audience Research Within the Institution

Acceptance and support of audience research are considered an important condition for audience research being undertaken effectively. Advocates and champions for audience research play an important role in getting audience research accepted. Project staff need to develop a sense of ownership of the research. In the long term, audience research should remain unquestioned and be regarded as a matter of course throughout the organisation.

Acceptance of Audience Research as a Legitimate Form of Research. Some museum staff find it difficult to accept audience research as a legitimate form of research. Scientists working in museums may have limited confidence in qualitative research strategies that are often used in audience research. They often come from a background where quantitative methodologies are dominant. As soon as audience research is perceived as not complying with scientific principles and standards, its credibility is at stake.

Audience Research is Challenging. Audience research findings sometimes challenge cherished beliefs and assumptions. It requires a lot of tact and respect for each other's territory that audience research is not misunderstood as personal judgement in contrast to constructive criticism. Staff involved can see their authorship of exhibition concepts threatened. Audience research may be perceived as interference with someone else's business and responsibilities.

3. Availability and Management of Resources for Audience Research

Other Matters Having Higher Priority. Resources is a major catch cry in all organisations. That is also true for audience research that is competing with other priorities within the institution.

Resource Scarcity is seen as an important barrier for (1) undertaking audience research effectively and (2) implementing the findings. Resourcing not only relates to financial equipment, but also to the availability of sufficient and qualified staff to undertake the work.

4. Communication

Communication concerning specific research projects and their findings. Wide access to information on audience research projects undertaken is considered important. The studies need to be clearly explained in terms of purpose, methods, limitations and findings. Content and format of reports need to be targeted to the information needs of the end-users of the research. Communication of results should go beyond presentation, towards discussing the research and its implications together with those that are to implement the recommendations.

Communication on audience research in general. An ongoing dialogue on audience research in general is urged to raise awareness and understanding of audience research, two items that are explained later in the course of this chapter.

5. Integration

Audience Research should be:

An Integral Part of Exhibition resp. Project/Program Development, i.e., audience research critically accompanies development of exhibitions or other projects. Interviewees emphasize the importance of thinking early enough about audience research to be able to plan for it, as it requires some lead time. In addition, audience research is understood to make its best contribution in the early stages of project development as concepts still can be adapted and changes to elements of exhibitions can be made much more easily than in later stages when major decisions are already made. Study participants suggest making evaluation a compulsory mile stone during project development. This brings up questions about the general nature of the exhibition development process: is it a rather linear process where the concept developers hand over the relay to the designers who, when the design concept is completed, call in the museum educators and audience researchers? Or is it, what is recommended, a highly consultative process that involves all concerned from the outset, including the audience researchers?

Integrated in Planning. To avoid *ad hoc* approaches, it is advised to set up a longer term program of audience studies to be undertaken throughout the institution. That enables management to consider it in planning budgets and setting organisational priorities. Integration in planning also concerns the incorporation of audience research findings in corporate and strategic planning.

6. Involvement of Stakeholders and Staff

Cooperation and Teamwork With Stakeholders. Audience research is expected to become more effective if those concerned are closely involved. The research can more easily be targeted to the needs of the end-users of the findings. Project staff feel they have a say in areas that they are concerned with and are more likely to develop a sense of ownership of the study.

Involvement of All Staff and Levels. To foster overall awareness and understanding of audience research, the involvement of staff at all levels of the institution is recommended, e.g., through staff observing focus groups.

Involvement of Audience Researchers in Visitor Related Matters. In the opposite direction goes the argument that institutions should make best use of their audience researchers through consulting them in all visitor related matters. Not every project needs specific research done, but many can benefit from insights and accumulated knowledge of audience researchers.

7. Responsibility for Audience Research Within the Institution

It is considered a substantial advantage having someone in-house who is responsible for audience research.

Dedicated Position for Audience Research. Creating a dedicated position for audience research means there is someone who can coordinate research efforts and build up competences and expertise within the organisation. For staff with internal knowledge it is easier to focus research efforts on the conditions and needs of the organisation. They keep up the awareness of audience research in contrast to external consultants whose presence is limited to short episodes. External consultants have limited possibilities of following up if and how recommendations were implemented.

Location in Organisational Structure. The case studies show that the location of the audience research position within the organisational structure influences how it is used throughout the institution. Its main activity tends to evolve around the department it is embedded in. To make audience research a resource for the whole institution, it needs to be associated with a neutral department with organisation-wide functions, such as the executive area. At the same time, an association with the executive area stresses the institution-wide importance of the function.

8. Understanding of Audience Research

Understanding of the Role of Audience Research. Staff throughout the institution should be clear what audience research is about, that it is a systematic, constructive way of bringing in the audience perspective.

Understanding of the Benefits of Audience Research. For acceptance and support of audience research, one needs to see the value of audience research and what benefits it can provide.

Understanding of the Principles and Methods of Audience Research. A basic understanding of the scientific principles and methods applied in audience research assists the establishment of a common language to avoid misunderstandings. A part of that is understanding the limitations of audience research.

Understanding of the Findings of Audience Research. To ensure an appropriate interpretation and application of findings, it needs to be clear what the findings actually say and what practical implications can and cannot be derived from them. Careful explanation and discussion of the findings is recommended.

9. Readiness to Learn

This item stresses attitudinal aspects. Designated end-users of the research need to be prepared to accept the findings, if positive or negative, and actually move on towards implementing the recommendations. That is easier said than done, because of different reasons:

Accept Findings. It is understandable that it is difficult to accept findings from research that imply a negative assessment of exhibition concepts and the like. Recipients of research results find it often difficult to deal with findings that contradict expectations and prefigured assumptions. Predetermined agendas may override any implications from audience research.

Act Upon Findings. Designated end-users of the research need to be prepared to actually revise concepts and implement changes based on audience research results. There must be a commitment, a will to use the findings. Here, other agendas can get in the way as well. Very seldom there is an accountability for the use of results, a control of if and how findings are responded to.

10. Leadership of Senior Management

Senior management plays an important role in widening support for audience research throughout the institution. Senior managers often are the ones who drive audience research activities. If senior managers are won as champions that call attention to the importance of audience research, their commitment has a chance to filter down through all levels of the institution.

11. Visitor Orientation

Visitor orientation is a precondition for the acceptance of audience research. It requires being prepared to recognise the audiences' perspectives. Museum staff need to think beyond their territory and turn their attention to and take seriously the audiences' needs and the prerequisites they bring with them.

Professional Gap. The requirement of taking the audiences into account is at times experienced as a conflict with professional standards and professional integrity, especially with staff not directly involved in the public side of museum work. Audience research can be understood as popularism, treason of scientific accuracy and inappropriate interference of 'Joe Public' with things that are not his business.

12. Awareness of Audience Research

For audience research to become an effective part of museum operations, there needs to be an awareness throughout the organisation that there is a function called audience research and what it can offer.

In Mindset. Everyone in the institution should be conscious about audience research and how it could benefit them. That is a precondition for people seeing the need for audience research in specific projects. Audience research should be among the 'top of mind' priorities of senior managers.

Awareness Of Current Research Activities. To ensure an ongoing dialogue and high-level awareness of audience research throughout the institution, everyone should be made aware of current research activities and learn how the results were fed into museum work.

Awareness of Audience Research In Project Planning. Project teams need to be aware of audience research in order to plan for it early enough if they want to use it for their project.

In the following, items are discussed that distinguish best practice institutions from the other institutions. Best practice institutions were defined as those institutions on whose operations audience research had the highest impact. Outcomes were weighted according to their relative importance across institutions (see Table 2) and scores for the individual items were added per institution. The resulting values were taken as a guide for identifying the institutions in which audience research is most effective.

The item that most clearly distinguishes best practice institutions from the others is *involvement*. In these institutions, project staff provide input in the issues and questions to be researched and assist to develop the research instruments to be used. The biggest difference is the high degree to which project staff discuss audience research findings with the researcher. With best practice institutions, the *quality of research* is less perceived to be a problem than with the other institutions. Better institutions claim a sufficient use of external expertise and findings produced are considered useful. Findings are more likely to be provided in a format tailored to the needs of the end-users of the research results. Best practice institutions all have a *dedicated role* for audience research within the institution in the form of at least one full-time position. In the better institutions, more staff *understand* the principles and methods of audience research, and staff have higher *confidence* in findings. Best practice institutions use a larger variety of information sources about visitors than other institutions, while all institutions consider themselves to be high-level *visitor-oriented* organisations.

In this paragraph, factors for effectiveness are discussed that show correlations with individual outcomes. *Other matters higher priority* appears to affect the contribution of audience research to improving and reporting organisational performance as well as the willingness of staff to include the visitor point of view in their work. *Poor communication of findings* reduces the impact of audience research on informed decision making. In the case of *lacking resources* audience research findings are more likely not to be used in planning and being misused for political purposes. Misuse of findings is also more likely if *external expertise is not used sufficiently*. *Poor quality research* affects the improvement of overall organisational performance, bids for financial support as well as an ongoing commitment to learn more about audiences. If *findings are not available when needed* the willingness to include the visitor point of view is lower and improved experiences for the visitor are less to

be found. *Involvement of stakeholders and staff* relates positively to the provision of improved experiences for the visitor and improved exhibitions and programs. These outcomes are also more likely if staff involved *understand the principles and methods of audience research*. Understanding of the methods also appears to support audience development. Basic *understanding of the role of audience research* is related to the utilisation of research results in exhibition or program development and decreases the danger of findings being misused. Designated end-users of the research *not being prepared to adopt findings* correlates positively with findings being misused and impacts negatively on organisational development.

Recommendations

Insights gained from the research reported above can be summarised in the following recommendations. The suggestions focus on organisational and management issues. It is important to recognise that one of these strategies alone will not be as effective as a combination of several approaches. Institutions should assess their situation and subsequently choose the strategies that focus on their weakest points. Institutions wishing to make better use of audience research should:

- Raise the awareness of visitors among staff by bringing staff in contact with visitors, e.g., through sitting in on focus groups or helping with interviews or observations.
- Nurture advocates for audience research throughout the organisation.
- Communicate widely about why audience research is important to the institution.
- Familiarise staff at all levels with the basic principles and methods applied in audience research.
- Let everybody know what is going on in terms of audience research through forums such as email lists, staff newsletters, staff meetings, discussion groups etc.
- Allocate sufficient resources to audience research. Collaborate with universities and other institutions to the benefit of both sides.
- Ensure someone is responsible for audience research. Locate him or her within a neutral section of the organisation such as the executive area. If necessary, give him or her sufficient time to qualify and get some experience.
- Give researchers and interested staff opportunities for professional development. Train students and volunteers that are to be used as interviewers.
- Ensure the research is rigorous and credible. If there is no in-house expertise available, bring in external expertise through contracting in consultants or partnering with universities and the like.
- Make evaluation a compulsory mile stone in project development.
- Bring in evaluation at an early stage in project development.
- Allow sufficient time for audience research to be undertaken and the findings to be implemented.
- Set up a program for audience research in organisational planning.
- Ensure the research and subsequent reporting are targeted to the organisation's needs. Colleagues are customers too: be responsive to the needs of internal clients. Allow sufficient time to clarify objectives.
- Ensure those concerned are involved in audience research projects from the outset.
- Ensure transparency in reporting of audience research projects and make limitations clear.

- Ensure that findings and their implications are not only presented, but discussed.

CONCLUSIONS

In paying tribute to the organisational culture and management issues in the context of museum audience research, this research provides a new perspective on factors relevant for an effective utilisation of museum audience research that have not traditionally been viewed from a management perspective. While research quality has been confirmed as an important factor for effectiveness, the results suggest a departure from a narrow focus on optimising research methods to the organisational conditions that impact on the effectiveness of audience research. The findings from this study hold promise for museums who seek to improve their practice of audience research. In view of that, suggestions for improvements are made. This study is expected to raise the understanding and awareness of the range of factors important for an effective utilisation of audience research, identify further training and strategic initiatives to improve this kind of work and support advocacy for audience research within the museums sector. Future work seeks to put the findings on Australian and New Zealand museums in an international context as further case studies will be undertaken in institutions world-wide. At the same time, the relation between factors for effectiveness identified empirically and insights from theory in organisational learning, organisational effectiveness and museum management will be examined.

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