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American Association of Museums · 2006 Annual Meeting  
PRAM Breakfast Roundtable

## Thinking about Audience Research

### Ten Dos and Don'ts

April 29, 2006

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Audience research and planning for the mission-driven world.

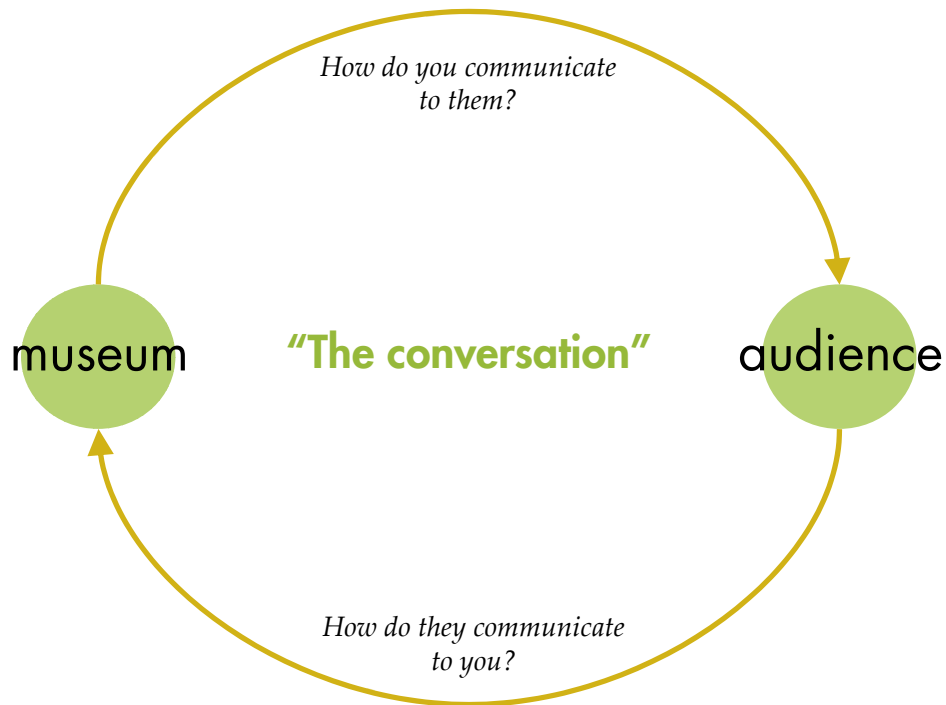
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*Do* think of research as the other half of marketing communication.

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- Successful organizations use research to create and maintain a dialogue with their audiences.
- Of course, “marketing communication” isn’t the only way your museum conveys messages. Likewise, your research shouldn’t be just about “marketing.” (See page 3.)

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*Don't* start with "what do I need to ask?" Start with "what do I want to be able to do?"

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- Successful organizations use research not just to "find out who our audience is," but to inform specific actions and decisions.
- Research implies you want to do that "something" better or differently. It's about change. (Change can be scary. So can research.)

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*Do* bring your colleagues together around the research. *Do* take a holistic approach.

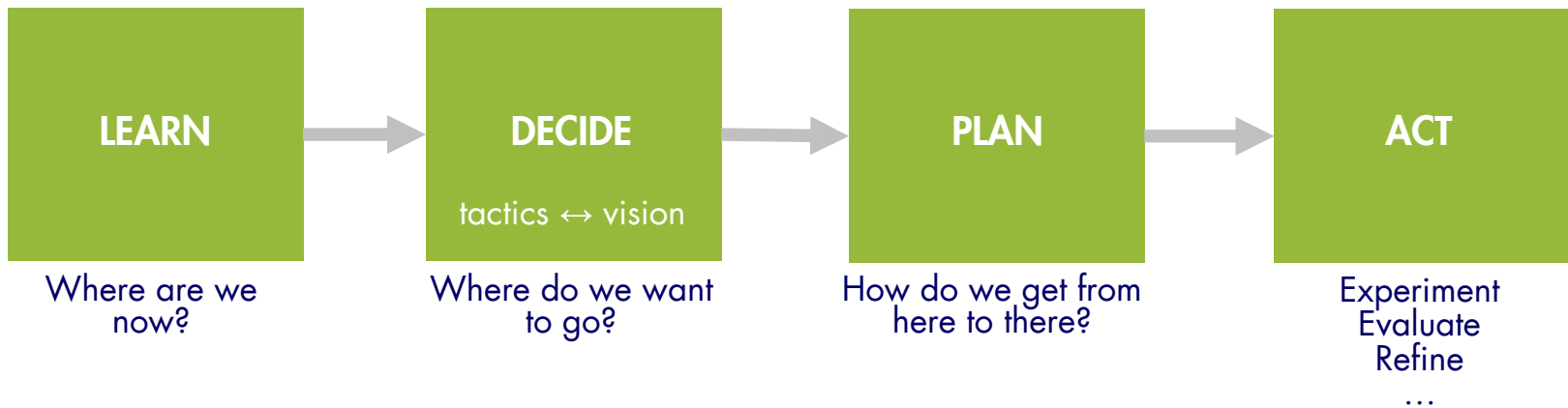
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- Form an interdepartmental research team, including curators, education, exhibits, etc. (Everybody's responsible for the museum's relationship with its audiences.)
- Involve your director...because the issues that come up will cross everyone else's territorial boundaries.
- Put the visit experience on the table. It's the decisive influence on word-of-mouth...and word-of-mouth is the decisive influence on visitation for some audience segments.
- Don't think about audience categories in static terms (non-visitors, visitors, members, donors). Think about how people move through those categories. (Becoming, not being.)

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*Don't* try to use research as a substitute for internal decisions or vision.

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- Research findings are an input into your decision process. You still have to make the decisions. Including decisions about vision, brand, soul. (Your audience can't tell you who to be.)
- And research findings are feedback to your decisions, plans, actions.

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*Don't* confuse qualitative and quantitative research.

*Do* worry more about representativity than sample size.

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- Qualitative research:
  - focus groups, in-depth interviews, some kinds of observation
  - good for identifying issues, understanding processes, revealing emotional factors, etc.
  - allows audience to influence the research questions (they can answer questions you didn't think to ask)
  - isn't just "anecdotal": if done rigorously, will be generally valid for the studied segment(s)
  - but doesn't allow you to make statistical inferences or comparisons of any kind
- Quantitative research:
  - surveys (online, phone, web, mail, or intercept), some kinds of observation, analysis of secondary data
  - good for measuring strength and prevalence of issues, identifying relationships among issues, identifying and comparing segments, developing profiles, etc.
  - doesn't allow (much) audience influence on the research questions (they can answer only what you ask)
  - doesn't give you much texture or ability to understand the "why"
- Do work hard to randomize your sample within the population you're studying.
- This is just as important for qualitative recruitment as for quantitative surveying.
- Most "opt in" methods give you a convenience sample, which will skew toward the outer extremes of opinion.
- In survey data analysis, the right sample size depends on what kind of slicing and comparing you want to be able to do within the data. (Your smallest analytic group should be at least 60 cases.)

*Don't* beg the question. Make your research a white canvas for them to paint on.

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*“Are you (a) contented, (b) happy, (c) very happy,  
(d) wildly happy, (e) deliriously happy?”*

- Make sure your question doesn't impose your frame of reference onto theirs. (Otherwise you won't be measuring what you think you're measuring.)
- Having hypotheses is fine — you can test them in the research...but only if you're aware of them and you design the research to be neutral about the outcome.
- In surveys, a good question is usually one that...
  - measures only one thing
  - is unambiguous and easy to understand
  - is neutral or allows for a wide range of possible responses
  - doesn't offer new information or show much "personality"
  - isn't likely to be influenced by the preceding questions (if so, place it earlier in the questionnaire)

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*Do* make audience research an everyday part of your museum's culture.

- Successful organizations make research an ongoing, rather than a special, process. (Keep the conversation going...in both directions.)
- Ongoing or "tracking" studies let the staff see changes over time, celebrate successes, and spot problems and opportunities early.
- Ongoing research builds the staff's empathy with and understanding of the audience. Regular research presentations and discussions let staff internalize an accurate picture of the audience, which loosens and strengthens decision-making.

*Do* build an audience research database for the whole staff to use.

- Make sure you (collectively) know what you know.
- Build an easy-to-use database or well-labeled shelf of your latest reports, and keep them current. (Then make sure everyone knows that it's there and how to use it.)
- Gather a reference library of books on research. Some recommendations:
  - *Who's My Market? A Guide to Researching Audiences and Visitors in the Arts*, by Helen Close and Robert Donovan (Sydney: The Australia Council, 1998). Available as a download at: [www.ozco.gov.au/arts\\_resources/publications/whos\\_my\\_market/](http://www.ozco.gov.au/arts_resources/publications/whos_my_market/).
  - *Asking Questions: The definitive guide to questionnaire design – for market research, political polls, and social and health questionnaires*, by Bradburn, N., Sudman, S., Wansink, B. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).
  - *The Focus Group Research Handbook*, Edmunds, H. (Lincolnwood, IL: NTC Business Books, 1999).
  - *Moderating to the Max: A Full-Tilt Guide to Creative, Insightful Focus Groups and Depth Interviews*, by Jean Bystedt, Siri Lynn, and Deborah Potts (Ithaca: PMP, 2003).
  - *Know Your Visitors Survey Guide*, edited by Gérald Baril; translated by Knowles & Mascherin (Quebec: Société des musées québécois/Musée de la civilisation, 2001).

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# Do get outside research help when you need it...for example, to inform a major change.

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- Much research can be done fully or partially in-house (especially if you have a research person on staff.)
- Free or inexpensive help is sometimes available from grad students and faculty at nearby universities (try sociology, psychology, business, and public policy programs).
- When selecting an outside researcher, don't use a formal, blind RFP process. Talk freely with potential vendors and learn from their questions and ideas.
- Don't be too specific in your request for research services. It's better to explain your challenges and goals and let the vendor suggest an appropriate research process.
- Pick a researcher based on her knowledge of research, not her knowledge of museums. (Sector knowledge is easier to pick up on the job than methodological expertise.)