AASLH

TECHNICAL LEAFLET BUNDLE

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Self-Assessment TOOLKIT

BNDL020

Do you really know your organization? Spend some time evaluating and getting to know your institution. How do you measure the performance of your programs? Do families visit you? Do you really want them to? A little self-evaluation can go a long way toward strengthening your institutional planning. These technical leaflet resources can help you get started.

TL172 – Site Analysis for Tourism Potential (1990)
TL204 – Charting the Impact of Museum Exhibitions and Programs (1999)
TL211 – Performance Checklist for Historical Institutions, Part I (2000)
TL212 – Performance Checklist for Historical Institutions, Part II (2001)
TL221 – Process Benchmarking for Museums (2003)

A A S L H

Technical Leaflet

Technical Information Service American Association for State and Local History

Site Analysis for Tourism Potential

by Linn Keller

To get the greatest benefit from this form, it is suggested that you first read and think about the questions. Then, accurately fill in your answers, considering the responses as contributing to an overall summary of the site's tourism potential. Each segment of this form yields specific information to assist in analyzing that component and to indicate support of the site's mission statement, as should all brochures, activities, or promotions, forming a positive, but accurate, picture.

Site Accessibility determines the amount of signage needed to let people know who or what you are and where to find you. This information also will assist in determining the kind of map necessary for any promotional literature.

Site Appearance and Facilities are what constitute the visitors' "first impressions," including on-site conveniences/constraints. Answers to these questions should be given objectively and from a visitor's viewpoint, carefully including negative as well as positive points.

Site Security/Safety Procedures are paramount to the security of the site and its collection as well as to visitors on the property. The better known the site and collection are, the greater their potential as targets for thieves. Analysis of potential problem areas should occur before an emergency occurs.

Site Operation pertains to the establishment of regular hours. Altering hours demonstrates flexibility of operation that could benefit the site's future growth.

Linn Keller, the former director of Kent Plantation in Alexandria, Louisiana, now is the director of Chinqua-Penn Plantation located in Reidsville, North Carolina.

Museum Shop, a potential moneymaker, must be managed carefully, paying attention to tax status, conflicts with state or local laws, and using realistic buying to support the efforts and overall message of the site.

Tours are important because they permit more visitors to interact with the site. It is also important that they give the message the site wants communicated about itself. This complex issue involves both people and expenses and determines whether changes in the site or its structure(s) are required to increase visitation.

Marketing Plan/Strategy, made realistically, with goals, methods of evaluation, and sensible time frames for achievement are critical to increasing public awareness of the site. Measurable, consistent change in marketing in under a year is unlikely, with three to five years probable for motorcoach activities.

Staff and Funding expenditures demand constant resources. It is important to decide realistically how much can be afforded before any commitment to staff or funding. Prioritizing also assists if needs to cut back arise.

Group Services are extremely important to the ongoing visitation of the site. Any "no" answer in this group should be closely examined, for a site should never promise what can not be delivered.

Co-operative Ventures yield benefits for all. Not everyone benefits equally all the time, but over time the cost is less and the benefits greater. Additional indirect benefits accrue to participants with professional interaction and training.

Site Assessment should include staff assessments compared with visitors' lists. Differences should be analyzed and validated. The positive, best, and most interesting points should be highlighted in site literature and releases along with a summary of the site's collection; the negative should be identified for change or elimination.

Site Accessibility

Site Name: ______________________

Site Address: ______________________

Site Location: ______ urban ______ suburban
______ rural ______ other.

Distance from nearest interstate highway? ______.
Estimated driving time to site? ______.
Easy directions to site? ______ yes ______ no.
Good roads? ______ yes ______ no;
______ 2-lane ______ 4-lane.
Highway signs? ______ yes ______ no.

Distance from nearest state highway? ______.
Estimated driving time to site? ______.
Easy directions to site? ______ yes ______ no.
Good roads? ______ yes ______ no;
______ 2-lane ______ 4-lane.
Highway signs? ______ yes ______ no.

Distance from closest city? ______.
Estimated driving time to site? ______.
Easy directions to site? ______ yes ______ no.
Good roads? ______ yes ______ no;
______ 2-lane ______ 4-lane.
Highway signs? ______ yes ______ no.

Distance from closest town? ______.
Estimated driving time to site? ______.
Easy directions to site? ______ yes ______ no.
Good roads? ______ yes ______ no;
______ 2-lane ______ 4-lane.
Highway signs? ______ yes ______ no.

Distance from closest other attraction? ______.
Estimated driving time to site? ______.
Easy directions to site? ______ yes ______ no.
Good roads? ______ yes ______ no;
______ 2-lane ______ 4-lane.
Highway signs? ______ yes ______ no.

Type of attraction?
______ history museum
______ art museum
______ science/nature
______ children's/hands on
______ amusement park
______ sports stadium/complex.

Do they advertise? ______ yes ______ no
______ don't know.
If yes, ______ multimedia ______ TV
______ print ______ radio ______ other.

Does the site's staff know the administrative/decision maker(s) at each attraction?
______ yes ______ no.

Do they know the administrative/decision maker(s) at this site? ______ yes ______ no.

Have the staffs visited each other "professionally"?
______ yes ______ no.

Have the staffs worked together on a joint promotion?
______ yes ______ no.

Site Appearance and Facilities

Describe the site's surroundings:

____
____
____
____
____
____
____
____

Describe the parking area, including shape, flatness, surface materials, relation to site, visibility from road, handicapped area, approximate size/number of cars, number of buses, obstructions, etc.:

____
____
____
____
____
____
____
____

Describe the physical layout of the property, including size, nature of grounds, access to visitor, outbuildings and their access, paths, gardens, hazards, security, guides, etc.:

____
____
____
____
____
____
____
____

Describe physical layout of the facility, where objects are displayed/interpreted and including number of floors, rooms, levels, stairs, elevator, etc.:

____
____
____
____
____
____
____
____

Site Security/Safety Procedures

Does the site have a security system?
________ yes ________ no.

Is the site fenced? ________ yes ________ no;
________ ornamental ________ security.

Is the site patrolled? ________ yes ________ no.
If yes, is the site patrolled 24 hours/day?
________ yes ________ no.

Live-in? ________ yes ________ no.
Contracted? ________ yes ________ no.
Staff? ________ yes ________ no.
Time clocks? ________ yes ________ no.
Dogs? ________ yes ________ no.

Mechanicals? ________ yes ________ no.
Monitored? ________ yes ________ no.
24 hours/day? ________ yes ________ no.
Passive? ________ yes ________ no.
Interior? ________ yes ________ no.
Exterior? ________ yes ________ no.
Silent alarm? ________ yes ________ no.
Fire alarm/smoke detector? ________ yes ________ no.
Current/updated call list? ________ yes ________ no.

Is there currently a relationship with local law enforcement forces? ________ yes ________ no.
With the local fire department?
________ yes ________ no.
With the local emergency medical department?
________ yes ________ no.

Are these existing relationships good?
________ yes ________ no.
If any existing relationship is less than good, is work underway to improve the situation?
________ yes ________ no.

Site Operation

Are the site's hours of operation regular?
________ yes ________ no.

Is the site open daily? ________ yes ________ no.

What are the hours of operation for each day:
____________ Mon. ____________ Tues.
____________ Wed. ____________ Thurs.
____________ Fri. ____________ Sat.
____________ Sun.

Is the site's administration willing to open the facilities other hours? ________ yes ________ no.
Can the site be open other hours?
________ yes ________ no.
Is grounds lighting available for evening hours?
________ yes ________ no.
Is grounds lighting adequate for evening hours?
________ yes ________ no.

Other operation features not otherwise noted: ________
____

Museum Shop

Do you have a museum shop?
________ yes ________ no.
If yes, is there a demonstrated relationship between shop items and the museum?
________ yes ________ no.
Can the museum shop truthfully be called a "gift shop"? ________ yes ________ no.
Is the site's administration aware of UBIT (Unrelated Business Income Tax)?
________ yes ________ no.
If yes, did UBIT influence item selections?
________ yes ________ no.
Does the museum shop pay for itself?
________ yes ________ no.

Tours

Does the site have guided tours?
________ yes ________ no.
Self-guided tours? ________ yes ________ no.

Are both types of tours available?
________ yes ________ no.
Guided only? ________ yes ________ no.
Self-guided only? ________ yes ________ no.

Does the site have paid guides?
________ yes ________ no.

Are volunteers available to assist with tours?
________ yes ________ no.
Volunteers only? ________ yes ________ no.
In addition to paid guides? ________ yes ________ no.
Available to tour buildings and objects only?
________ yes ________ no.
Available to tour grounds only?
________ yes ________ no.
Available to tour both? ________ yes ________ no.

Is there an existing volunteer program?
________ yes ________ no.
If yes, is there a designated coordinator for the volunteer program? ________ yes ________ no.
If no, is a formal volunteer program being considered?
________ yes ________ no.

Is the site a member of any tourism organization(s)?
________ yes ________ no.

Do any staff members attend tourism functions?
________ yes ________ no.
If yes, do they receive registration?
________ yes ________ no.
Lodging? ________ yes ________ no.
Meals? ________ yes ________ no.
Mileage? ________ yes ________ no.

Do any staff members participate in FAM tours?
________ yes ________ no.
If yes, who? ____________________________________
____

Marketing Plan/Strategy

Does a marketing strategy exist?
________ yes ________ no.

Who determines marketing strategy? ________________

How is it determined? ________________

What market segments can be pursued? ________________

Who determines where advertising/promotion funds would be spent? ________________

How would success of a promotion be determined?
________ increased inquiries
________ increased visitation
________ increased gate receipts
________ increased shop receipts
________ other (specify) ________________.

When/how frequently would comparison/analysis occur?
________ daily ________ weekly
________ monthly ________ 6 months
________ annually
________ other (specify) ________________.

Time frame anticipated for results?
________ immediate ________ 0-3 months
________ 3-6 months ________ 6-12 months
________ 1-2 years ________ 2-3 years
________ other (specify) ________________.

Staff and Funding

How many staff hours per week are available for site promotion? ________________

What staff members are available to work on tourism promotions? ________________

Are these staff personable? ________ yes ________ no.
Skilled? ________ yes ________ no.
If no, are they willing to learn new skills?
________ yes ________ no.
Is there someone available to teach these new skills?
________ yes ________ no.

Is there money available for film and developing?
________ yes ________ no.
Brochure design? ________ yes ________ no.
Printing? ________ yes ________ no.
Postage? ________ yes ________ no.

Is there money available for advertising?
________ yes ________ no ________ maybe.

Costs of ad design and production in house?
________ yes ________ no ________ maybe.
Costs of ad design and production outside?
________ yes ________ no ________ maybe.

Where are advertisements placed?
________ magazines ________ newspapers
________ radio ________ TV
________ billboards ________ other.

Other information to be noted: ________________

Group Services

Can the site's parking lot handle increased traffic?
________ yes ________ no.

Can the parking lot accommodate motorcoaches?
________ yes ________ no.

Can the entrance/ticket area adequately handle more people? ________ yes ________ no.

Can the current tour staff handle more people?
________ yes ________ no.

Is the current tour staff willing to handle more people? ________ yes ________ no.

Are more tour staff needed to handle any anticipated increases in attendance? ________ yes ________ no.

Can the tour staff handle groups?
________ yes ________ no.

Are current restroom facilities adequate to accommodate more visitors? ________ yes ________ no.

Are other facilities appropriate for more visitors?
________ yes ________ no.

Can the site's space safely accommodate more people?
________ yes ________ no.

Can the building tolerate more people?
________ yes ________ no.

Can the grounds support more visitors?
________ yes ________ no.

Are other site staff willing to support more visitors?
________ yes ________ no.

Is the security system adequate to handle more visitors? ________ yes ________ no.

If ANY of the Group Services questions is answered with a "no," is the site's administration willing to support the work necessary to correct the situation?
________ yes ________ no.

Cooperative Ventures

Are cooperative/collaborative promotional efforts being made with another site, institution, property, or group? ________ yes ________ no.

If no, why not? ________________________________

____

____

____

Is there a history of cooperative efforts?
________ yes ________ no;
________ on-going ________ one time.

Currently doing? ________ yes ________ no;
________ on-going ________ first time.

Are cooperative efforts planned in future?
________ yes ________ no.

If no, why not? ________________________________

____

____

____

Cooperative partner(s) include:
________ other museum(s)/historic sites;

Public:
________ CVB (local or associated)
________ other local tourism-related office
________ state office of tourism;

Private:
________ other attraction(s)
________ hotel/motel (local)
________ hotel/motel (national chain)
________ motorcoach
________ campground
________ other (specify) ________________;

Group:
________ formal/organized non-profit
________ informal.

Active involvement from your site?
________ yes ________ no.

Co-op grants? ________ yes ________ no.

Granting agency:
________ public ________ private
________ state ________ local.

Does staff write grants? ________ yes ________ no.

Partner write grants? ________ yes ________ no.
Dollars? ________ yes ________ no.
In-kind? ________ yes ________ no.

Rate the institution's cooperative ventures:
________ very successful
________ successful
________ moderately successful
________ not very successful
________ unable to rate.

Are cooperative efforts evaluated when completed?
________ yes ________ no.
By partner? ________ yes ________ no.
Joint evaluation with partner?
________ yes ________ no.
Individual evaluation without partner?
________ yes ________ no.
Shared with partner? ________ yes ________ no.

What is the purpose of doing tourism?
________ more visitors
________ more money
________ for operations
________ for projects
________ increased reputation
________ increased community/area visibility
________ economic development for community/area/region
________ other (specify) ________________________.

Site Assessment

Using a professional point of view, list the five specific significantly positive items about the site, including any aspect of the property from structure to component of collection, feature of grounds, or personnel:

____

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____

Using a professional point of view, list the five significantly negative aspects of the site:

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Using a visitor's point of view, list the site's five best and worst qualities:
Best: ________________________________

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Worst: ______________________________

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How were these determined? ______________

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Are there plans to correct the negative qualities?

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Are the positive qualities being utilized to their fullest potential? ______________

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Describe your collection, including approximate number of pieces, geographic area(s) reflected, time period(s), overall themes, scope of collection (area, regional, international, etc.), type(s) of item (furniture, textiles, decorative art, folk art, etc.), and significance of collection: ______________

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Summarize the nature, scope, and depth of the collection described above: ______________

____

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____

What do visitors recognize as the two most interesting pieces in the collection? ______________

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____

Are these pieces readily accessible?
________ yes ________ no.

Are they pointed out during tours?
________ yes ________ no ________ generally.

Summary/Additional Site Information: ______________________________

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Technical leaflets are issued by American Association for State and Local History to provide the historical agency and museum field with detailed, up-to-date technical advice. Technical leaflets and reports are available through *History News* magazine to AASLH members or through the AASLH Press catalog to any interested buyer. Membership information or technical leaflet or report reprints may be ordered by contacting American Association for State and Local History, 172 Second Avenue North, Suite 202, Nashville, TN 37201, (615) 255-2971, FAX (615) 255-2979.

HISTORY NEWS TECHNICAL LEAFLET

A PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Charting the Impact of Museum Exhibitions: Understanding the Public's Perspective

BY GAIL ANDERSON AND ADRIENNE HORN

Today, museums operate in an increasingly more complex and changing marketplace. Survival means understanding the needs and perspectives of different museum audiences, both actual and potential, and finding the specific niche that is relevant and appropriate to the communities that each museum serves. Many management tools have helped museums navigate through these challenging times. Evaluation, the study of customer perspectives about specific programs or ideas, remains one of the most effective tools that museums have used.

The goal of this technical leaflet is to explain evaluation as a tool for strengthening museum exhibitions in order to help museum leaders determine what approach is best suited for the particular exhibition needs in their organizations. It should be noted that the evaluation methods discussed can be used to assess the broad range of public programs that museums and historic sites offer.

This technical leaflet reviews:

- What is evaluation?
- What questions should you ask before conducting an evaluation study?
- What are three common types of evaluation?
- What evaluation methods exist?
- Who should conduct evaluation?
- What is the role of evaluation in museum decision making?
- What are some good resources on evaluation?

WHAT IS EVALUATION?

For the purposes of this technical leaflet, evaluation is defined as the activity which gathers and analyzes museum visitor responses and perceptions of a particular museum exhibition. Museums conduct evaluation because they want to improve what they do and they want to know what their customer, the visitor, thinks about their exhibitions. The ultimate value of evaluation studies is how the gathered data informs museum leaders and impacts future decisions for enhancing the public's enjoyment of museum exhibitions.

WHAT QUESTIONS SHOULD YOU ASK BEFORE CONDUCTING AN EVALUATION STUDY?

Before addressing the list of questions below, consider: is your institution ready to conduct an evaluation study, and is an evaluation study appropriate given the resources and museum leadership in place? If the answer is yes, answer these questions.

1. What exhibit or program do you want to evaluate? What are your reasons for conducting an evaluation study?
2. What are the goals and objectives for your evaluation study?
3. At what point are you in the development process in the exhibition?
4. If you conduct an evaluation study, who within the museum would be responsible for overseeing the study? Professional staff? Volunteers? Board members?
5. What resources will your museum commit to the evaluation? Financial? Time? Staff or volunteer time? Space? Leadership?
6. Who will conduct the study? Staff or volunteers? Consultant? University students?
7. What level of training for staff and volunteers, if any, will be needed to conduct the evaluation?

Front-end evaluation helps museums better align the focus and content of its exhibitions with its intended audiences.

WHAT ARE THREE COMMON TYPES OF EVALUATION?

1. FRONT-END EVALUATION

Front-end evaluation gathers information about an audience's knowledge, perceptions, or attitudes about a topic, theme, or concept for an exhibition in the early stages of development. A museum planning team may wish to test an idea for an exhibition with members of the public BEFORE investing substantial time and funds to develop the exhibition.

The goal for conducting front-end evaluation is to determine the public's receptivity and understanding of an idea proposed for an exhibition. The information gathered provides insight into the potential success of an exhibit. Sometimes, feedback may instigate a change in the name of the exhibit, the focus of the exhibit, the contents or objects featured in the exhibit, etc. It can fundamentally change an exhibit before resources have been allocated for development, installation, promotional activities, etc. Front-end evaluation helps museums better align the focus and content of its exhibitions with its intended audiences.

The public that is chosen for the front-end evaluation will depend on the emphasis of the exhibition and its goals. For example, the public may include current visitors, visitors of a certain age bracket, or weekend visitors. Or the evaluation could examine several different subsets of audiences including current visitors, people who live in a certain neighborhood or have a certain zip code, or people who frequent a certain section of your city. It all depends on the goals of the exhibition, funding, time, and available expertise.

One example of front-end evaluation took place at The Oakland Museum of California. The members of the Natural Sciences and Education Departments wanted to develop an exhibition about the most pressing urban environmental issues facing the San Francisco Bay Area. The staff knew that input from the Oakland community was necessary to assure a broad perspective on the topic. Over 200 community members representing a broad and diverse spectrum of individuals from businesses, the public school system, environmental agencies, churches, neighborhood associations, etc. were invited to a community meeting held at the museum. After two community meetings and the work of a community organizer, who interviewed leaders in the community, the museum felt that it had a broad representative sample of viewpoints.

The top urban environmental issues identified by community members were violence and opportunities for youth to engage in productive activities, including job training. The museum worked collaboratively with the Oakland Men's Project, an organization devoted to the prevention of violence, to help shape a conceptual plan that addressed both of these issues. Following this work, the museum hired three teen interns to organize and lead after school activities, in a local vacant lot, that focused on environmental issues impacting the children's local community. Part of the project involved creating a mural on a vacant wall, formerly a target for graffiti. All of this work eventually evolved into an exhibit that featured the urban environmental issues central to these inner city teens.

Had The Oakland Museum of California mounted an exhibit without community input, there would have been little connection to the very audience they wanted to reach, Oakland citizens–specifically teenagers. The museum altered their approach, involved local teens in an innovative educational program and exhibition development process, and created a much more relevant exhibition as a result of this front-end evaluation.

2. FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation collects critical visitor feedback about aspects of an exhibition DURING the development or design phase. The reason for conducting formative evaluation during the developmental stages is to provide feedback that may cause alterations or modifications to the exhibit before the exhibit components are finalized. This can save time and money in the long run.

The point at which formative evaluation occurs may depend on staff availability and funds as much as it may depend on identifying the best time(s) to conduct the evaluation. If the exhibition is substantial in size and scope, staff may wish to conduct formative evaluation at several points during the development of the exhibit.

Like front-end evaluation, the public that is selected to participate in the evaluation is dictated by the goals and objectives of the exhibition, the time and funds devoted to evaluation, and the level of expertise of those individuals conducting the study.

For example, at the California Academy of Sciences in San Francisco, an in-house evaluator conducted a formative evaluation using a prototype of a three-dimensional model about earthquake fault lines. The goal of this exhibit component was to help the visitor better understand the impact of fault movement. The result of the formative evaluation revealed that visitors had some confusion with terms used in the labels, and a strong desire to manipulate the components in the model. Since the model prototype had no moving parts, the visitors' responses pointed to the need to modify the model itself and to clarify terms in the labels. Since time did not allow for making a new model, the project team painted a road on the surface of the model showing the effects of the shifting earth. Because roads are familiar to the visitor, the staff felt that showing a dramatic break in a road would show the impact of fault movement and would help demonstrate the main message of the exhibit. The addition of the painted road also strengthened the connection to the label illustrations.

3. SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Summative evaluation gathers visitor feedback and response to an exhibition AFTER it has been installed. The reason for conducting summative evaluation is to assess the response of visitors who viewed the exhibition. In this sense, summative evaluation focuses on how well an exhibit met its goals. The target audience for summative evaluation is already defined: it must be someone who saw the exhibition or used the exhibition. In addition to informing staff of areas that might require modification while the exhibit is still up, the results of summative evaluation can also inform the development and design of future exhibitions.

An example of summative evaluation occurred at the Monterey Bay Aquarium, where a trained evaluator studied visitor behavior in an exhibit called, Kelp Lab. The goal of the evaluation was to note how visitors used the exhibit and to determine how well the exhibits held the attention of aquarium visitors. Using the evaluation method of timing and tracking, the evaluator documented visitor behavior and movement in the exhibit.

This summative evaluation study revealed: the majority of visitors stopped at more than 51% of the exhibit areas in the Kelp Lab; some areas of the exhibit space were not as heavily used as others; and the use of the microscope stations pointed to the fact that the microscopes were installed at the wrong height for easy use. Further observations revealed that: visitors tended to move around Kelp Lab, often backtracking in order to spend more time at a particular exhibit; when visitors could face each other at an exhibit area they tended to stay longer than if they stood next to one another looking straight ahead; and last, during busy hours, visitors would only wait five to ten seconds to gain access to an exhibit area before moving on.

The feedback from this summative evaluation study shed new light on some of the assumptions that the staff had about their visitors. The staff learned that visitor behavior in Kelp Lab countered some of the main assumptions made about aquarium visitors in general, such as: visitors do not backtrack in long, low lit halls with exhibits; and visitors will wait to view an exhibit if they are interested. The staff recognized that while this summative evaluation revealed visitor movement and behavior in Kelp Lab, it did not reveal what the visitors learned since interviews or questionnaires were not part of this study. Last, the results of the evaluation helped inform the design of a new interactive lab area at the aquarium.

WHAT EVALUATION METHODS EXIST?

Each type of evaluation requires the selection, design, and use of the appropriate method(s) to achieve the goals and objectives of the study. There are several key elements that impact the effectiveness of evaluation: (A) the size of the sample; (B) the method(s) used; and (C) pre-testing.

(A) Each evaluation identifies who will be studied and how many people will be included in the study. This is very important because a study may not be valid if an inadequate number of people are included. Mathematicians and scientists have developed statistical formulas to guide decisions about sample size.

(B) Evaluation methods collect either qualitative or quantitative information. Depending on the scope of the study, using both methods can provide more balanced feedback. Qualitative evaluation yields information about public perceptions and attitudes. A focus group is a good example of qualitative information, however, because the sample size is small (8 to 10 people), the results are of an anecdotal nature. A telephone survey is a good example of a quantitative study. Telephone survey responses are numerically analyzed and are statistically reliable.

(C) Pre-testing is an essential step for finalizing the evaluation instruments that are used. Pre-testing refers to a trial run of the instrument on a small sample size. The value of pre-testing is finding the flaws in the study before extensive amounts of data have been collected. It provides information so that the evaluator can modify the instrument to be more effective in meeting the goals of the evaluation.

BELOW ARE BRIEF DESCRIPTIONS OF THE MOST COMMON EVALUATION METHODS USED.

Observations

Observation techniques refer to observing visitors in an exhibition. There is no discourse between the trained observers and the visitor. Rather the observer predetermines what will be observed and how it will be noted. Then the observer collects the information.

There are several types of observation methods:

• *unobtrusive observation* refers to an evaluator who observes visitors in a non-intrusive manner while making notes of their movement and behavior through the exhibit.

• *timing and tracking* refers to the process of recording the amount of time a visitor spends in front of individual display cases and/or engaged in interactive components during their pathway through an exhibit.

• *media-collected information* may include a video tape or other means that captures visitors in the exhibition usually at a particular place where the camera has been stationed.

Interviews

Interviews require an individual or several individuals to interact with a visitor or prospective visitor by asking a predetermined set of questions. There are several types of interviews used for evaluation studies.

• *Telephone surveys* are interviews conducted via the telephone by trained individuals. The interviewer uses a script that outlines a list of questions, exactly what information is desired, and how the information is to be collected. The size of the sample is important to determine whether or not the sample size is valid.

• *Visitor intercept interviews* are conducted with visitors in the museum. Guidelines about the selection of interviewees is essential for validating the information. Random selection is a common method and avoids the trap of the interviewer selecting "people who look nice".

• *Focus groups* are groups of selected individuals who participate in a discussion. Focus groups are usually facilitated by trained experts who ask a series of questions about a specific topic. Unlike individual interviews, a focus group provides a forum for interaction among the focus group participants. Frequently, lively discussion takes place as the participants respond and react to the questions and each other.

Many museums choose to conduct focus groups in a focus group facility. Behind a one-way mirror, observers, such as staff or board members, may watch the focus group session. Still others use video to document the session in order to share the proceedings with museum staff or board members. However, a focus group can also take place in a meeting space within the museum.

Questionnaires

Questionnaires are used to conduct surveys about the public's response to a particular exhibition. Questionnaires may use multiple choice questions, open-ended questions, or a mixture of both. If the sample size is substantial, the questionnaire should be developed and analyzed by individuals who specialize in collecting this type of information.

Mock-ups/Prototypes

Mock-ups refer to models of an exhibit component or rough version of a proposed element of an exhibit. Frequently, a mock-up is created out of butcher paper, foam core and magic markers to mimic the intended exhibit component. If a museum has ample resources, a close replica, a prototype, may be created to test visitor response.

Evaluation can be one of the best tools for assisting a museum in strengthening the impact of its exhibitions and increasing visitor satisfaction.

Mock-ups/prototypes are usually made for:

• *exhibit components,* like an interactive device or an interpretive panel, etc.

• *labels* that replicate various versions of text in support of an exhibit component. This may be provided in addition to the exhibit component mock-up.

• *pamphlets or printed materials, that accompany the exhibition,* may be developed to test visitor response. These may be developed in a format close to the final intended version, a prototype, or created in simple formats to indicate design and layout.

WHO SHOULD CONDUCT EVALUATION?

Who conducts evaluation studies is a critical question. Every museum has several options.

1. Conduct the evaluation in-house.

Many museums use volunteers and appointed staff members to carry out their evaluation studies. A few, large museums have an evaluator on staff or a staff member with training in evaluation to oversee and conduct evaluation projects.

2. Hire a trained evaluator or research firm.

The reason many museums use an outside consultant is to gain objectivity about the museum and to benefit from their expertise and experience. If a museum wishes to engage in extensive evaluation, it is recommended that the museum speak to several people who are trained in evaluation to learn of their approach, experience, and fees for conducting the type of study desired. Consultants frequently prepare an estimated budget for a conducting an evaluation. Clearly, some forms of evaluation, such as telephone surveys and similar types of quantitative research, require trained experts.

3. Engage the services of the local university.

Many museums reside in communities that have universities with graduate students eager to gain experience in evaluation. Consider contacting your local university to see if your museum might be a site for a class project or research project for a particular student.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF EVALUATION IN MUSEUM DECISION-MAKING?

Often, evaluation occurs because it is required by funders or is prompted by external pressures. It is best to conduct evaluation when it is genuinely valued by the museum leadership as a useful tool for understanding the public's viewpoint and when management is prepared to make decisions based on the feedback resulting from evaluation. Much wasted time and financial resources have been lost on ill-directed evaluation studies; however, even more time and financial resources have been lost when evaluation has not occurred. Evaluation can be one of the best tools for assisting a museum in strengthening the impact of its exhibitions and increasing visitor satisfaction.

In the end, each museum must decide what is best and most appropriate for their institution given their resources, time, and long term goals. Ideally, each museum should incorporate evaluation in some form into their exhibition development process. Once evaluation is incorporated into a museum's long term exhibition schedule, it is wise to budget at least 10% of the total cost of the exhibition for post-installation evaluations and modifications.

WHAT ARE SOME GOOD RESOURCES ON EVALUATION?

This technical leaflet is an introduction to evaluation for museum exhibitions. For those interested in learning more about evaluation, there are many reference books and articles that provide in-depth information on evaluation. Further, many evaluation and visitor studies experts and professional organizations can provide guidance, information, and training on evaluation. Below are listed some selected references and resources on evaluation in the museum field.

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INTERNET

A bibliography on visitor studies, evaluation, market research, and performance measurement compiled by three museum professionals is available at http://www.civilization.ca/cwm/biblio/bievaeng.html.

MUSEUM-L—Museum Discussion List
To subscribe, send e-mail to
LISTSERV@LSOFT.EASE.COM

SIRIS-Smithsonian Institution Research Information System
http://www.siris.si.edu/

This site allows you to search the Smithsonian Library catalog, the Art Inventories catalog, Smithsonian chronology, and the Smithsonian Research and Bibliographies catalog. The last catalog includes the museum studies database which includes citations of museum studies theses and dissertation and indexes ALI-ABA proceedings, the *Journal of Museum Education* and AAM conference proceeding audio tapes.

EVALTALK—Evaluation Discussion List
To subscribe, send e-mail to
LISTSERV@UA1VM.UA.EDU

ORGANIZATIONS

The museum and history field is supported by a number of professional associations and organizations. Many of these may be useful resources for information about evaluation. Check AASLH's home page at http://www.aaslh.org, the *Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada, the Official Museum Directory* for additional organizations.

American Association for State and Local History (AASLH)
1717 Church Street
Nashville, TN 37203
615-320-3203
http://www.aaslh.org/

American Association of Museums (AAM)
1575 Eye Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, D.C. 20005
(202) 289-1818
http://www.aam-us.org/

Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE)
Ellen Giusti
American Museum of Natural History
Central Park West at 79th Street
New York, NY 10024
(212) 769-5646
http://members.aol.com/intlabel/care

American Evaluation Association
PO Box 704
Point Reyes, CA 94956
888-311-6321
http://www.eval.org

Association of Science and Technology Centers (ASTC)
1025 Vermont Avenue, Suite 500
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 783-7200
http://www.astc.org/

Educational Research Association
Informal Learning Environments Research Group (ILER)
Ohio State University
947 East Johnstown Road
Columbus, OH 43230
http://darwin.sesp.nwu.edu/informal

Museum Education Roundtable (MER)
621 Pennsylvania Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20003
202-547-8378
http://www.erols.com/merorg/

Museum Reference Center
Smithsonian Institution
A&I Building, Room 2235
900 Jefferson Drive SW
Washington, DC 20560-0427
202-786-2271
http://www.sil.si.edu/Branches/mrc-hp.htm

National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME)
1220 L Street NW
Suite 100-270
Washington, D.C. 20005
800-450-6602
http://130.160.178.161/NAMEindex.html

Qualitative Research Consultants Association (QRCA)
PO Box 2396
Gaithersburg, MD 20886-2396
888-674-7722
http://www.qrca.org

Visitor Studies Association (VSA)
Department of Psychology
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523
(970) 491-4352
http://museum.cl.msu.edu/vsa

CREDITS

Gail Anderson, vice president of Museum Management Consultants (MMC), wrote this technical leaflet in collaboration with Adrienne Horn, president of MMC, and Larisa Somsel, project manager at MMC. MMC, located in San Francisco, is a consulting firm specializing in audience research, strategic planning, program development, and executive search for museums across the United States.

Examples of evaluation studies featured in this article were provided courtesy of the following museums and staff members:

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HISTORY NEWS

TECHNICAL LEAFLET

A PUBLICATION OF THE
AMERICAN ASSOCIATION
FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Performance Checklist for Historical Institutions

By Charles F. Bryan Jr., James C. Kelly, Frances S. Pollard, William B. Obrochta, Nelson D. Lankford, Pamela R. Seay, Thomas P. Illmensee, and Robert F. Strohm of the Virginia Historical Society.

MEASURING SUCCESS

How do you measure success? Webster's International Dictionary defines success as, among other things, "a favorable accomplishment," "to achieve ones aims," and even "prosperity." With increasing frequency, historical institutions, along with other not-for-profit organizations, are being asked to measure their performance and to be held accountable for their results to a variety of stakeholders, be they donors, the public, or government. There is considerable evidence that the rising generation of philanthropists is becoming more involved in the decision making of how gifts will be used, and they are requiring measurable results. "Best practice" and performance measurement models developed in the business world during the last decades of the 20th century are now being applied to museums and historical societies.

The Virginia Historical Society (VHS) has achieved success in a variety of measurable and quantifiable ways in recent years. Within the last decade it has raised nearly $60 million, tripled the size of its building, more than doubled its endowment, nearly quadrupled the size of its membership, increased annual giving by 900%, raised annual visitation numbers from less than 10,000 to more than 80,000, and taken programs and services to almost every county in Virginia. It has opened itself to a more diverse public, reaching across age and ethnic lines to a far greater extent that it did in the past. Its collections have grown by nearly 40% in a decade.

Each of those numbers is impressive, but how accurately do they measure "success?" The current mission statement of the VHS posits simply that the institution "collects, preserves, and interprets Virginia's past for the education and enjoyment of present and future generations."

The statistics listed above, in part, help measure how successful the VHS is in fulfilling its mission, but they do not provide all of the answers. The increase in visitation, for example, is impressive, but would we say the institution was <u>more</u> successful if the figures had reached 100,000? Many other museums in Virginia achieved higher attendance figures. Are they more successful? Conversely, most of those museums have not expanded the size of their buildings. Are they less successful than the VHS? The collections of the VHS have grown remarkably, but are we successful if we don't have the space to house them properly?

More than once in recent years we have been asked to measure the success of our educational programs. Have we made a difference, for example, in improving student performance on the history portion of the state standards of learning objectives? Have we determined if the teachers who participate in our teachers' institutes now do a better job in the classroom? Do people who read our quarterly journal get anything out of it? Do our exhibitions truly educate and inform the people who go through them? How about the lectures and other public programs we offer? How do we measure the success of our research library? Our Web page?

With increasing frequency, historical institutions, along with other not-for-profit organizations, are being asked to measure their performance and to be held accountable for their results to a variety of stakeholders, be they donors, the public, or government.

All of this goes to show that measuring success at historical institutions is complicated. While there are several quantifiable ways of measuring the success of our institutions, many aspects of our operations simply cannot be measured by numbers alone. Our staff has talked a lot about measuring performance. We have examined standards recommended by several professional organizations including the American Library Association and the American Association of Museums through its accreditation program. We are very familiar with the Institute of Museum and Services general operating support grant proposals. While encompassing some aspects of our operation, none of these provided an exact fit for a hybrid institution like ours. The Virginia Historical Society is a repository, library, museum, educational institution, tourist attraction, learned society, field service, and publisher all rolled into one.

As a result, we developed a simple system of performance measurements by creating a set of questions, a checklist, to ask ourselves about as many aspects of our operation as possible. We asked the senior members of our staff to imagine themselves evaluating the performance of an institution similar to the VHS. If, for example, the head of our library evaluated another research library, what questions would she want answered? What would our museum curator look for to determine if another museum was performing at the highest professional level? And so on.

In coming up with a series of questions, we asked our staff to consider both external and internal issues.

In other words, how well is the institution doing in a public sense, and how well does it perform behind-the-scenes? A historical society may do an excellent job of providing first-class public programs, while at the same time performing poorly in collections stewardship, financial management, or personnel policy.

In this technical leaflet, we provide a checklist of questions that we attempt to answer about the external or public side of our institution. As you can see, most of the questions do not have quantifiable answers; rather they are basic questions to determine if the right systems and policies are in place to ensure a strong operation. We provide these questions merely as a template for other institutions to adapt for their own uses. In applying this format to your organization, you may want to add questions of your own. This technical leaflet is the first of two on performance measures. A subsequent technical leaflet will provide a checklist for internal operations.

— Charles F. Bryan, Jr.
Director

In school and youth programs, students should learn history, but they should also gain an appreciation for the past and the special role museums play in the preservation of community memory.

CORE MISSION PROGRAMS

Exhibitions:

Some people consider an exhibition successful if it attracts numerous visitors or results in new members. However, even mediocre exhibits can do those things if the topic is sensational or even salacious. Gate receipts and membership levels may well be critical to enabling a museum to fulfill its mission, and the successfulness of marketing efforts should certainly be evaluated, but the success of an exhibition itself ought not be measured alone by its popularity, but by whether it was physically, intellectually, and emotionally engaging to those who experienced it.

The Standing Professional Committees Council of the American Association of Museums has developed a document called "Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence." It provides an outline of exhibition features that generally results in success. Wonderful exhibitions, however, sometimes emerge from purposeful but brilliant deviations from the norm. Moreover, it may be desirable for museums to have democratic, inclusive exhibition development processes, but excellent exhibitions can emerge in other ways, even from the mind of a single person. The "Standards" only judge the exhibition product as seen by the visitor.

There are six categories of standards. The full document provides sub-sets of questions under each heading here. The full document is used to judge the annual exhibition competition sponsored by the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE), the National Association for Museum Exhibition (NAME), and the Curators' Committee of the American Association of Museums, and is available through them.

Did the audience respond well to the exhibition and was the response consistent with the exhibition's goals? Information accommodates different learning styles and degrees of interest; goals are measured by audience and peer evaluation and published exhibition reviews.

Does the exhibition respect the integrity of its content? Subject is within the mission of the museum; subject is appropriate for the exhibition format; there are enough objects to support the storyline; the information is accurate and based on recent and reliable scholarship.

Have conservation and security matters been appropriately addressed? Objects are properly mounted; light levels, climate control, and security needs are met; if going to multiple sites, crating and shipping is appropriate to protect the artifacts and exhibit elements.

Is the information/message of the exhibition clear and coherent? If not, is there a good reason why not? Ideas are clearly expressed; there is a pattern to content; labels are written to the reading level of the intended audience; design elements are appropriate to the exhibition's goals and intended audience.

Are the media employed and the means used to present them in spatial planning, design, and physical presentation appropriate to the exhibition's theme, subject matter, collection, and audiences? Design supports exhibition ideas and tone; spatial organization supports story organization; the traffic flow is clear (or there's a good reason why not).

Is the exhibition physically accessible? Are visitors comfortable and safe viewing the exhibition? Visitors are forewarned about troubling materials; instructions are clear; seating is adequate; the needs of all potential visitors are addressed.

Using these guidelines will assure competence. Excellence, however, usually requires some of the following: a new perspective or fresh insight on a topic, or a synthesis of existing information presented in a provocative way; innovative use of media and design elements; an exceptionally beautiful presentation that evokes an emotional response; or making a personal connection with the visitor so that the exhibition is a memorable or even transforming experience, resulting in such exclamations as "I finally get it!" or "I'll never see that the same way again."

— JAMES C. KELLY
Assistant Director for Museums

In today's hectic world, personal attention to all patrons remains the hallmark of enduring institutions.

Research Library:

Every research library is unique, but all of them share certain characteristics. Libraries assemble, provide access, and preserve collections of material. Although the virtual library with its virtual collections is a reality, the challenge of providing accurate and prompt information remains constant for every kind of library. Increasingly, the public expects more from libraries because research needs have become more complex. Libraries must meet this challenge by assisting users to locate the ideas, information, and materials to meet their diverse interests. The library then becomes a crossroads between available reference resources and the community of users.

Are the facilities allocated for researchers user friendly—adequate seating, well lighted, properly equipped (microfilm reader-printers, photocopiers) and adequately maintained?

Is the institution's personnel professionally trained, knowledgeable about resources, and large enough to effectively serve a variety of users?

What level of assistance is given to patrons and is the service accurate, prompt, and courteous?

How well does the library serve the off-site visitor—phone queries, letters, and email?

Does the library maintain tight security without intimidating users?

Does the institution have a high level of access to collections, including easy to use catalogs (on-line or card), in-house finding aids, regular announcements of recent acquisitions, and availability of collections on-line?

— FRANCES S. POLLARD
Assistant Director for Library Services

Programs for Youths: School tours, workshops, in-school programs

Regardless of how your institution defines its mission, the public probably believes you exist to teach history to school children. And when it comes to justifying your position in the community—to funders, legislators, and your own members—you, too, spotlight the children you reach. In many institutions, school groups drive attendance. They are often the most demographically diverse audiences served. In school and youth programs, students should learn history, but they should also gain an appreciation for the past and the special role museums play in the preservation of community memory. Students should become invested in history at an early age and maintain that commitment, if not to our institution, but to its ideals as adults.

Are teachers and educators outside of the museum consulted regularly in the development of programs?
Do programs, including school tours, support the educational requirements of the school systems served?
Are they well-grounded in solid and up-to-date scholarship?
Are docents or museum teachers given thorough training prior to giving tours?
Are evaluations of programs done regularly, and is the information provided used to improve those programs? Is the percentage of positive evaluations high?

—William B. Obrochta
Head of Educational Services

In the past decade, historical organizations have embraced the Internet as another way of reaching out to current and potential constituencies.

Programs for Adults:

Most history-related institutions view educational programming as an integral element in fulfilling their missions. These programs usually divide into the two main audiences of adults and school children, each with its particular challenges. Educational programs for adult audiences typically consist of workshops, symposia, and, perhaps most commonly, lectures. Institutions seeking to optimize such adult programming need to consider the basics: proper facilities and commitment of financial and staff resources. They must also answer more philosophical questions to ensure the appropriateness of the content for their specific mission. The schedule of programs should reflect the diversity of the institution's potential audiences and should appeal to both traditional constituencies and new ones.

Are regular adult education programs core to the institution's mission?
Are some or all programs open to the general public?
Is the subject matter of the programs consistent with the institution's mission and purpose?
Does the range of topics include some subjects that are historically significant but may not draw large audiences?
Does the institution conduct audience evaluations of its programs, and are evaluations used to shape future programs?
Does the institution commit adequate resources to attract highly qualified presenters?
Does the institution commit adequate resources to promote the programs?
Does the institution have appropriately equipped and sized facilities to support the programs?

—Nelson D. Lankford
Assistant Director for Publications and Education

Publications:

Publications offer a way for history institutions to reach and serve a range of constituencies. Monographs, periodicals, exhibition catalogs, and archival finding aids to make collections more accessible are among the most prevalent types of publication. Institutions whose scope is a whole state or region often publish a journal of record for the history of that area. All of these publications provide links for the institution to both the academic community and the broader world of historical inquiry. Other types of publications include newsletters to inform members about the institution's activities and many other incidental print pieces that serve a similar purpose. It is just as important for the institution's integrity as a good steward and interpreter of its collections that its other publications should be able to pass muster according to most of these standards.

Does the institution have formal editorial and publication policies in place? If the institution publishes a journal, do the editors use a double-blind referee system?

To what extent do the institution's publications reflect solid scholarship, editing for content, copy-editing, and fact checking?

If editorial functions are contracted outside, does the institution have proper control over editorial quality, content, scheduling, design and format, and budget?

Is the content of publications independent of undue influence by, for example, the institution's governing board or donors?

Does the institution's publication program keep up to date with the most current electronic practices in the printing industry?

Do editors attempt to promote an inclusive range to subject matter in keeping with the scope of the institution's publications?

Is the design and format attractive and consistent with the institution's image?

How an institution looks will often form the first and, perhaps, most enduring impression on visitors.

—Nelson D. Lankford
Assistant Director for Publications and Education

SUPPORT ACTIVITIES AND SERVICES

The economy of recent years has fueled the growth of new museums, museum expansions, new centers for specialized study, libraries, and cultural tourism attractions. How will these new non-profits survive? How will the established non-profits survive and continue to grow? The key to survival in almost every case is the ability to raise funds. Institutions that are the most successful at attracting funding are those whose staffs realize that fund-raising is not a linear process—from the point of identification of prospects, to the point of cultivation, to the point of solicitation. Successful institutions realize that fund raising is much more complex and multi-leveled. A donor has myriad opportunities to make a decision about a gift and chances are you will never know at exactly which point the donor was persuaded. Was it a letter of solicitation? Was it the way she was treated in your museum shop? Was it an article in your newsletter? Was it seeing your curator conducting a workshop at another historical society? Successful institutions realize that donor-centered support services are vital to the advancement of their mission. In today's hectic world, personal attention to all patrons remains the hallmark of enduring institutions.

Visitor Services and Reception:

Are visitors dealt with promptly and courteously?

Is accurate information for visitors easily and readily available?

Is visitor service personnel trained and/or experienced in customer relations, communications skills, providing a variety of information, and dealing with difficult or special visitors?

Is equipment (cash registers, attract screens, audio phones, etc.) adequate to the job and is it well maintained?

Are policies regarding photography, backpacks, strollers, and museum etiquette clearly communicated to the visitor?

Are the institution's public hours consistent and sufficient to serve the needs of the publics it serves?

Museum Shop:

Are the shop and the items it sells relevant to the institution's mission?

Is it compliant with unrelated business income tax laws?

Is the shop's personnel adequately trained and/or experienced to handle all operations, including high customer service, buying and selling, inventory control, and cost accounting?

Is the shop properly located, equipped, appointed, and sufficiently sized to do its job?

Member and Donor Services:

Does the institution maintain detailed, accurate, up-to-date and easily retrievable membership and donor information?

Does it have the equipment to support this function?

Is personnel well versed and able to effectively answer questions regarding tax information, benefits, programs and services, and other related matters?

Does the institution maintain strict privacy regarding member and donor information?

Are members and donors thanked in a timely and proper manner? Is the cost of memberships at least break-even?

Are memberships adequately leveraged for fund raising purposes?

Are membership levels broad enough to make membership available to as wide a public as possible?

Is staff trained to recognize and deal with potential ethical conflicts in donor relations?

Are member and donor special events consistent with and help enhance the institution's mission?

Public Relations and Marketing:

Are advertising media appropriate to the program being promoted?

Does the institution make use of public service announcements, free publicity, editorial listings, and in-kind promotion to stretch advertising dollars?

Does the institution look for economies in printing, postage, and photography by consolidating mailings, targeted mailing lists, and appropriate use of color and multiple images?

Is there a graphic standard for print pieces that reinforces and maintains the identity of the institution by way of a logo, signature image, or type style?

Are marketing efforts aimed at a broad and diverse audience?

Is the message accurate, correct, and suitable to the mission?

Facility Rentals:

Has the board and staff determined the objective for facility rentals? Is a rental program expected to be profitable? Is it an extension of the marketing effort?

Is the institution in compliance with unrelated business income tax legislation?

Are safeguards in place to protect the collections and museum furnishings at each event?

Are the eligibility requirements, regulations, and pricing consistent for all qualified donors?

Do the staff and board have a clear understanding of the regulations?

Are caterers' insurance policies, alcoholic beverage licenses, and other liability factors considered for each event?

Does the institution have access to the guest lists for rental events?

Are emergency procedures and refund policies in place for weather closings, power outages, and other unpredictable circumstances?

Is there an opportunity for the institution to have promotional material at each rental event or to have appropriate staff available to serve as hosts or greeters?

—Pamela R. Seay
Assistant Director for Development and Public Affairs

Web Site:

In the past decade, historical organizations have embraced the Internet as another way of reaching out to current and potential constituencies. Web sites offer great opportunities for organizations of every size and budget. Indeed, they may be even more valuable for smaller institutions than large ones as a way of projecting the organization's mission and programs. The following checklist is appropriate whether the site is maintained with part-time help or by a large well-funded Web office.

Does the site clearly convey the mission of the institution?

Is the site design attractive and consistent with the organization's image?

Does the institution have a plan so that the page layout is always up to date by Internet standards?

Is the content of the site regularly updated?

Does the Web manager have a systematic way of ensuring the site receives complete and timely information from every appropriate area of the institution?

Does the site generate usable tracking data, not just a simple counter of visitor "hits"?

Is there a system for evaluating visitor usability of the site, for example, through surveys or feedback forms?

Does the institution commit adequate resources to the design and maintenance of the web site?

If the institution has a collection, is a catalog or other access to it a feature of the web site?

—Thomas P. Illmensee
Web Site Production Manager

PHYSICAL FACILITIES

Buildings and Grounds:

A institution's physical facilities are usually its most visible, and in some instances most important, asset. How an institution looks will often form the first and, perhaps, most enduring impression on visitors. A clean and well-maintained site that is in compliance with all relevant safety and access codes is an invaluable development and marketing tool. It also is essential in providing an acceptable environment for irreplaceable collections, a pleasant venue for both staff and visitors, and one of an institution's best bulwarks against costly litigation. Though additional funding is usually cited as the panacea for substandard maintenance, in many instances greater vigilance and more careful planning would accomplish as much.

Do the grounds and facilities satisfactorily support the institution's mission, programs and services, collections storage, personnel, and meeting space?

Is the institution's physical location adequate to the fulfillment of its mission?

Do the grounds look neatly tended and inviting?

Is parking convenient and sufficient to the needs of all the institution's visitors?

Are facilities readily accessible and well lighted, and is information signage highly visible and easily comprehended?

Are grounds and facilities ADA compliant?

Are there sufficient public amenities such as bathrooms, telephones, benches or other forms of seating, and eating facilities?

Do facilities maintain a high standard of maintenance and cleanliness?

Does the climate control system maintain facilities at proper temperature and humidity levels for both people and collections?

Are building mechanical and structural systems regularly inspected and serviced?

Are pest control programs in place?

—Robert F. Strohm
Associate Director

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HISTORY NEWS

TECHNICAL LEAFLET

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FOR STATE AND LOCAL HISTORY

Performance Checklist for Historical Institutions, Part II

By Charles F. Bryan Jr., James C. Kelly, Frances S. Pollard, William B. Obrochta, Nelson D. Lankford, Pamela R. Seay, and Robert F. Strohm of the Virginia Historical Society.

In Part I of this series, we shared a simple system of performance measurements that we have developed at the Virginia Historical Society (VHS) by creating a set of questions about as many aspects of our operation as possible. We asked the senior members of our staff to imagine themselves evaluating the performance of an institution similar to the VHS. For example, what would the head of our research library look for in another library to determine if it was performing at the highest professional level? In what ways would the editor of our journal evaluate that of another institution? What questions would we raise in evaluating the exhibitions of another museum?

In creating the questions, we asked our staff to consider both external and internal factors. In Part I, we provided a checklist of questions to measure an institution's external factors relating to core mission programs, support activities and services, and physical facilities. Most of those questions do not have quantifiable answers. But rather they are basic questions to determine if the right systems and policies are in place to ensure the best service possible to the public. In this leaflet, we provide a checklist for internal operations. The questions below apply to the Virginia Historical Society, and, as such, they should be adapted to fit the needs of your institution. In applying this format to your own organization, you will probably want to add questions of your own.

BEHIND THE SCENES: HOW WELL ARE YOU DOING?

In evaluating performance, how well does your institution do with those things that are never visible to the public?

Until the late 1970s, the activities of most historical institutions revolved around their curatorial departments, and any public programs that were offered came from curatorial personnel. But in the last two decades of the 20th Century, historical institutions of all kinds began a major shift in philosophy and mission. By embracing education as central to their missions, they developed innovative public programs and exhibitions, created education departments independent of curatorial offices, and began to expand greatly the size and composition of their audiences.

All of these factors had a dramatic effect on historical societies and museums. Along with major building expansion efforts, education and museum programs led to significant increases in visitation, public visibility, and expectations. And none of it could have happened without large sums of money. Publicly funded institutions effectively used the education trump card to persuade elected officials to fund a host of new public outreach programs and services. For private institutions, public funding sources on the national and state level made available millions of dollars for exhibits and educational programs for institutions that clearly demonstrated widespread public outreach. Many corporate and private foundations shifted much of their giving emphasis to education.

The move to an education-based mission has been greeted with approval by the public and those who run and govern historical institutions. Both externally and internally, these institutions have been transformed as a result. While curatorial departments have tended to remain about the same in size, other public and administrative divisions have been added or grown. For many institutions, the portion of their budgets devoted to public programs now outweighs curatorial functions. And now as historical institutions embrace technology on all levels of operation, people with related skills are becoming indispensable members of any staff. The image of an institution can be based on the sophistication of its Web site as much as anything else it does. The pressures to embrace technology and to pay for it are enormous. But they and other demands are not replacing old pressures placed on historical institutions. With this increase in size and complexity, not to mention public expectations, historical agencies now require more professionalism and business acumen to run them. The resources required to maintain programs and capital outlays have risen at a corresponding rate.

All of this goes to show that measuring a historical institution's performance is a two step process—one external, the other, and just as important, internal. By the very nature of their missions now, historical societies and museums are public institutions. Obviously they should be held to high accountability standards as gauged by how well they visibly serve the public, but there is more to it than that. For example, one museum may score high marks for its innovative educational programs, yet at the same time do a poor job when it comes to the care and conservation of its collections. Another may be noted for its beautiful building, splendid exhibitions, elaborate gala events, and clever marketing program, while behind the handsome facade lies an institution that suffers from personnel strife, poor working conditions, an unhealthy board-staff relationship, or a fragile financial underpinning. In evaluating performance, how well does your institution do with those things that are never visible to the public? The following set of questions may help you determine the answer.

Personnel

Of a historical institution's three most important tangible assets—collections, physical facilities, and personnel—the needs and requirements of personnel often are the most challenging to manage. The Virginia Historical Society is a library, museum, educational institution, field service organization, publisher, tourist attraction, special event site, shopping venue, and garden among other things all rolled into one entity. Therefore, our complex organization requires the talents of a wide variety of people, all of whom have certain expectations and needs. We have people on our staff with no degrees beyond a high school diploma. On the other hand, we have several people who have their Ph.D. People who are aging "Baby Boomers" and people who are "Twenty Somethings." Staff members who are married with families, but many others who are single. People who are exceptionally hard workers, but a few who have to be pushed. People with friendly and warm personalities, yet others who are "prickly pears." People, many of whom are retired, serving as volunteers in a variety of capacities.

Despite the complex mix of people who work in our institution, they all have in common certain expectations: to be treated as the adult professionals they are; to be fairly and equitably compensated; to have a pleasant and healthful work environment; to have a sense of fulfillment and accomplishment based on clearly established goals and objectives; to feel appreciated for what they do; and maybe the most challenging of all, to being informed as much as possible about what is going on in the organization.

- Does the organization have thorough and written personnel policies in place that have been approved by legal council?
- Are changes in labor and personnel law monitored on a regular basis and incorporated into the institution's policies?
- Does the institution attempt to inform staff, particularly new staff, thoroughly about personnel policies and any changes that are made? Does it provide a new staff member orientation?
- Does the institution have a clear "chain of command" that is understood and adhered to by all personnel, yet is not overly rigid?
- Are personnel problems handled fairly, consistently, efficiently, and with strict confidentiality?
- Within available resources, are salaries and benefits competitive with peer institutions?
- Is staff compensation monitored on at least an annual basis by management and board, and adjustment made if possible?
- Is staff compensation made fairly and equitably?
- Is compensation administered in an efficient and thoroughly professional manner?
- Is every member of staff given a meaningful, written performance evaluation at least once a year?
- Does the institution provide sufficient and appropriate space for staff and volunteers to do their jobs well and happily?
- Are these spaces kept safe, clean, well lit, properly ventilated, heated and cooled for comfort, and generally conducive to a good work environment?
- Does the institution attempt to ensure the safety and security of its personnel if the neighboring environment is considered unsafe?

By the very nature of their missions now, historical societies and museums are public institutions.

Collections

Historical institutions are the stewards of remarkable collections, most of which are unique, rare, and irreplaceable. At the Virginia Historical Society, the collection is the essential tool we use to fulfill our mission. It undergirds all of our efforts—our library, museum, educational programs, publications, and partnerships with other institutions. The great majority of our collections have been donated to us because of our strong reputation for stability and integrity. Therefore, we accept a solemn obligation to ensure the collection's security, preservation and conservation, proper use, and accessibility.

- Does the institution have a formal, board-approved collections policy that covers all aspects of acquisitions and deaccessioning?
- Does the policy and its subsequent implementation closely reflect the institution's mission and the public it serves?
- Is the policy adhered to closely?
- Do members of the board and staff avoid conflicts of interest regarding collections?
- Does the institution allocate sufficient and appropriate space to house collections properly?
- Are spaces environmentally sound for collections?
- Are these spaces secure from potential theft, both internally and externally?
- Are materials for housing collections appropriate and acid free?
- Does the institution have long-range plans in place for collections growth?
- Are acquisitions processed in a timely manner, avoiding large backlogs of materials?
- Does the institution have a professionally approved, standardized cataloging system in place to ensure known location and easy retrieval of collections?
- Does the institution attempt to establish a strong provenance for all collections acquired?

- Within existing resources, does the institution have a consistent program for preservation and conservation in place?
- Are personnel properly trained in these fields to do the job professionally?
- Does the institution have proper equipment available and is it well maintained?
- Does the institution have an up-to-date disaster plan and the proper materials and equipment on hand to react to a disaster?
- Are collections mounted and housed in ways that will not cause permanent damage?
- Are lighting levels in exhibitions low enough to retard permanent damage, yet high enough for visitors to see?
- Does the institution limit the time for displaying certain materials such as objects on paper to retard permanent damage?
- Does the institution have a policy in place on photography in its galleries?
- Are objects mounted securely to prevent theft or damage from visitors?

Physical Facilities

An institution's physical plant can consume an enormous amount of resources. This is especially true for institutions that are located in old buildings or operate as house museums. A leaky roof, damp basement, inadequate climate control system, or environmentally unsafe building can spell disaster for a museum if immediate action is not taken or preventative systems are not in place. Substandard maintenance of physical facilities or ongoing "deferred maintenance," which often occurs when budgets are tight, can lead to serious problems and expensive bills in the future. At the same time, not having qualified and properly trained personnel to deal with these issues can be costly in the long run.

- Do facilities maintain a high standard of maintenance and appearance?
- Is the maintenance team adequate in size, sufficiently trained and experienced, and prepared to do its job effectively?
- Does the climate control system keep facilities at proper temperature and humidity levels for people and collections?
- Are building and mechanical systems regularly inspected and serviced?
- Are pest control programs in place?

Just like staff, board members need to have an understanding of their responsibilities and duties. New trustees at the Virginia Historical Society receive a thorough orientation and are given the following documents describing their responsibilities and committee assignments. They are included in this technical leaflet as a reference and guide for helping to developing policies for your organization.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Virginia Historical Society

The board's role in the governance of the Virginia Historical Society is the same as it is in a for-profit corporation. This covers moral and legal responsibility, strategic planning, strengthening and allocation of resources, goal setting, hiring and evaluation of the chief executive officer, making decisions on policy, and being willing and available to assist in areas of special experience. Those roles are essential to the effectiveness of the Society.

To fulfill those roles, we ask the following of you:

1. Regular attendance and constructive participation in board and committee meetings. According to the bylaws, trustees are obligated to attend at least three board meetings a year.

2. A willingness to serve as an ambassador of the Society by regularly attending Society programs and events in your area. We ask that you attend, in particular, exhibit openings, evening lectures, special cultivation events, and the annual Garden Party (which is the Society's official annual meeting.)

3. Provide financial support to the Society through your own giving and by obtaining access to other sources of funding. We ask that you become a member of the Battle Abbey Council, participate in any special campaigns, and consider a bequest to the Society.

4. A willingness to work closely with management and staff in fulfilling the Society's mission. This is particularly important in the area of development and committee work.

5. Avoid all ethical conflicts of interest or personal gain from board membership.

6. Avoid ethical conflicts with other not-for-profit organizations

Safety and Security

Security is everyone's job. This applies both to salaried staff and volunteers, regardless of their other duties and the size of the museum in which they work. For all of the technological developments now available to museums, security is still a balancing act between public accommodation and safety and security of collections to produce a positive visitor experience. Motion detectors, card access, and other sophisticated equipment will enhance security efforts, but they are no substitute for an alert, dedicated, and well-trained staff.

- Have all potential dangers to human safety, collections, and facilities been identified and addressed?
- Does the institution have formal security and emergency preparedness policies in place, and are all personnel fully aware of them?
- Does the institution conduct periodic fire and safety drills?
- Is security equipment adequate, and is it properly maintained and used?
- Are all staff, volunteers, and vendors who may have access to non-public areas of the building identified and badged?
- Is the security staff adequate in size, sufficiently experienced, and properly trained to do its jobs well?
- Are security personnel courteous and informative with the public, while maintaining proper standards of security?
- Is the staff trained and certified to handle medical emergencies, criminal acts, fires, power outages, mechanical failures, or other problems that could endanger the public, collections, and physical property?
- Are security measures during closing hours adequate and appropriate to institutional requirements?
- Are police, fire, and other emergency services familiar with the institution's physical facilities and special requirements?

Finances

By their very nature as not-for-profit organizations, historical institutions operate with public and private support, and therefore have an obligation to manage their money carefully and honestly. Almost more than any other factor, poor financial management can plunge an institution into serious trouble and damage its reputation. In recent years, several museums around the country have been on the verge of ruin or forced to close their doors because of fiscal irresponsibility or unsound business practices caused by unrealistic revenue projections, weak cost control systems,

with which you may be affiliated. Names or lists of donors, members, or benefactors are privileged information not to be shared with others.

We hope that you are comfortable with these simple rules and look forward to working with you over the years.

VIRGINIA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Board of Trustees

Standing Committee Assignments 2001

Executive Committee

Meeting Frequency: As needed.

Purpose: To exercise the authority of the Board of Trustees to the extent permitted by law and subject to such limitations upon its authority as the Board of Trustees may from time to time impose. See the Society's bylaws, article 4.01, for restrictions placed on this committee.

Finance Committee

Meeting Frequency: Minimum of four required. One for mid-year evaluation of budget, one for final approval of the next year's budget to be submitted to the full board at its November meeting, and two with representatives of professional investment counsel.

Purpose: To oversee, evaluate, and approve the preparation, implementation, and maintenance of the Society's annual budget by staff. Committee members will be provided with monthly financial reports by staff and will carefully monitor the income and expense statements. In addition, annually this committee will conduct a five-year review of the Society's financial performance and evaluate a four-year budget projection prepared by staff. While the Development Committee will be charged with finding the means of providing income to the Society through fund raising, the Finance Committee will determine and monitor other sources of revenue such as admission and user fees, the sale of merchandise (including the operation of the gift shop), the use of special funds for collections development and maintenance, or any other appropriate means that will ensure the financial well-being of the Society. This committee is charged with overseeing the personnel matters of the Society, including salaries, benefits, employee relations, and other concerns of staff policy. This committee will oversee, evaluate, and make recommendations to professional counsel concerning the investment philosophy, performance, and composition of the Society's portfolio. This committee will ensure that the portfolio's total return sufficiently inadequate monitoring of budgets, or financially related crime. Both board and management must do everything within their power to secure and protect the financial strength of the institution they serve. Without a strong financial underpinning, the ability of an institution to fulfill its mission is jeopardized.

- Does the institution have qualified personnel both on the staff and board level to manage its financial assets properly?
- Does the institution have formal, written financial policies in place regarding the handling of funds, financial reporting, investment guidelines, and audit procedures?
- Does the institution develop and adhere to realistic budgets based on solid research and sound projections?
- Are budgets reviewed regularly and fully understood by board and management?
- Are corrective measures taken if necessary?
- Does the institution ensure that all investments are protected and well managed?
- Are endowments protected from over spending or from an investment policy that is overly conservative?
- Are the institution's finances audited annually, and are the results fully reported to management, the board, and the public if required?
- Is the audit firm fully qualified and capable of doing the job well?
- Do all members of the board and staff avoid conflicts of interest in the financial management of the institution?

Board/Staff Relations

Regardless of size, most historical institutions perform well if they have a strong board and effective management team working in concert with each other to carry out the mission. Working in concert with each other with clearly defined roles and common objectives is the key. Traditionally not-for-profit institutions have been guided by the precept that "the board makes the policy and the staff carries it out." But a new paradigm is more fitting for today's institutions: "The board, with the help of the staff, develops the policy. The staff, with the help of the board, carries it out."

In using the term "strong" board, we mean it in a positive sense. High performing institutions spend a lot of time developing strong and effective boards, using an active nominating committee to select the best people possible. Most have a rotating system that regularly

supports the operating needs of the Society. The Finance Committee will report at least twice a year to the full board on the performance of the Society's portfolio.

Nominating Committee

Meeting Frequency: Minimum of one required, or as needed.

Purpose: This committee will identify, solicit, and recommend the best people possible to serve as Officers and Trustees of the Society. In determining nominees, the committee will consider the current and future leadership needs of the Society, the background and record of potential candidates, and the ability of the candidates to serve in the best interest of the Society. This committee will ensure that all nominees will be considered regardless of race, gender, or ethnic background. Broad geographic representation from throughout Virginia also will be a factor in selecting Trustees. Regular nominations are to be submitted to the Board of Trustees at its November meeting. Nominations to fill vacant slots may be made and submitted at the next regular board meeting throughout the calendar year.

Development Committee

Meeting Frequency: Quarterly, or as needed.

Purpose: To oversee and assist the staff in identifying the types of fund raising to be undertaken, establishing realistic goals, determining the role of each Trustee in development efforts, and carrying out an annual development plan of action. Development activities include the recruitment and retention of members of the Society (including the Battle Abbey Council), creating and implementing a focus and schedule for annual giving, coordinating lobbying efforts for state and local funding, and raising funds for endowment, including planned giving. This committee also is charged with ensuring that the other development needs of the institution are met. All federal and state grant prospects and awards will be reported to this committee. In addition, the Development Committee will oversee the public relations activities of the Society, including relationships with the media, the development of appropriate print materials (brochures, posters, special mailings, etc.) and special events.

Collections and Conservation Committee

Meeting Frequency: Minimum of two required, or as needed.

Purpose: To oversee and monitor all curatorial functions of the Society relating to its collections. This committee will ensure that brings in new people and cycles off others, including officers. These boards are actively involved in the governance and policy decisions of the institution, and they work hard to ensure its financial strength. They work closely with staff to determine the institution's vision and long-range plans. And, maybe most important of all, they ensure that the institution has effective management in place. This can have the greatest impact on an organization's development and effectiveness.

While strong boards are actively involved in issues of governance and policy making, they do not attempt to do the job of the staff, especially if there are clearly defined lines of authority and a chain of command. It is also essential to have good lines of communication between board and staff. There are no hidden agendas, cliques, factions, and the board and staff work hard to avoid surprises! The board sees the executive director and his/her staff more as colleagues than the "hired help." But the executive director and staff never forget that they work for the board. Institutional performance and plans for the future are reviewed at regular board and committee meetings attended by both board and staff. If the board and staff have a positive working relationship, they should feel entirely comfortable expressing opinions, tackling tough issues, and giving and receiving constructive criticism. In measuring an institution's performance, it is often best to start at the top by examining the relationship between board and staff. More often than not, if that relationship is strong, other performance measures score high as well. Every institution should strive to make its boards and its relationship with the staff a model for other institutions to follow.

- Does the institution have a defined chain of command between board and staff, and is it followed?
- Are the organization's mission, structure, duties, lines of authority, and other issues of governance spelled out in a set of by-laws?
- Are the by-laws adhered to strictly? Are they reviewed periodically and revised according to need or changed circumstances?
- Are there good lines of communication within the board and between board and staff, with no hidden agendas and potential surprises?
- Do the board, board committees, and management meet frequently enough to ensure good communication and productivity?
- Does the board provide a constructive performance review of management at least once a year?

the collections maintenance policy of the Society relating to the acquisition, disposal, care and maintenance, and use of collections is carried out properly and to the fullest extent. Staff will provide biannual reports to this committee concerning collections maintenance.

Publications and Education Committee

Meeting Frequency: Minimum of two required, or as needed.

Purpose: To oversee and monitor all scholarly and educational functions of the Society. These activities include the Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, the quarterly newsletter, volumes in the Documents Series, exhibitions and their related publications, programs conducted by the education department such as workshops, conferences, and related publications. Coordination with local historical societies also will be monitored by this committee.

Buildings and Grounds Committee

Meeting Frequency: Quarterly and as needed.

Purpose: This committee will monitor all matters relating to the maintenance and upkeep of Battle Abbey, Virginia House, and their grounds, including needed capital improvements, security, disaster prevention, safety standards, equipment and hardware (computers, telephone system, furnishing, etc.), and grounds upkeep. This committee will also ensure that proper relations are maintained within the neighborhoods of Battle Abbey and Virginia House. Policy relating to the special purpose usage of Battle Abbey, Virginia House, and their grounds is monitored by this committee.

Audit Committee

Meeting Frequency: At least once a year.

Purpose: To review the appointment of the independent auditors for the Society, the scope of their examination, the nature of their report, and the adequacy of internal controls of the Society in order to ensure complete and accurate communication between the board and the independent auditors. This committee will be alert to the occurrence of the prospect of any conflict of interest that may develop on the part of any Trustee or staff member and to report its remedial recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

- Are strict records maintained for board and committee meetings, finances, fund raising, and other important matters relating to the institution? Are there formal written policies in place for these issues?
- Does the board maintain strict oversight of the institution's finances, including operating budgets, investments, and capital projects? Are corrective measures taken when necessary?
- Does the institution receive an external financial audit at least annually?
- Has the institution formally endorsed the AASLH and AAM codes of ethics? Does it have its own board approved code of ethics?
- With board and staff working in concert, has the institution developed a realistic and achievable long-range plan?
- Is progress on the plan reviewed periodically and are changes made if necessary?
- Would your board and its working relationship with the staff be considered a model for others to follow?

CONCLUSION

Most historical institutions usually are so busy just trying to conduct daily business that there seems to be little time to step back and evaluate how well things are going. But inevitably, someone within or outside of the organization will want to know if all of the efforts are well placed. Your institution should, therefore, have some objective measurements to evaluate whether it is running smoothly and getting the best results possible. The evaluation does not have to be a complicated process. It can start with the basics of defining goals, establishing timetables, and at a future date reviewing the progress or lack of it. But before starting to make plans, any organization needs to ask: "How well are we doing today? Where do we fall short? What can we do better? How and when do we fix it?" A well governed and managed institution will attempt to answer these questions before putting long-range goals and objectives in place. It is something that we do at the Virginia Historical Society by asking the questions presented in this and the previous Technical Leaflet. The great French social historian Marc Bloch wrote that the key to being a good historian is the ability to ask the right questions. We will continue to try to ask the right questions about our institution, and we hope that you will do the same.

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HISTORY NEWS

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Process Benchmarking for Museums

BY BARBARA WINDLE MOE

Benchmarking is a term talked about today at conferences and in conversations between museum professionals, but there often seems to be some confusion as to what it really means.

Simply defined, benchmarking identifies ways of operating more efficiently or effectively by incorporating the use of best practices exhibited by other organizations, both for-profits and not-for-profits. It involves sharing information between organizations on practices, procedures, and performance. Benchmarking is an organization development intervention primarily used by for-profit organizations as a method to improve processes. To benchmark a service or process is to designate it as a standard against which to measure your own service or process. These standards are visible in highly successful organizations and part of what makes them successful—they are doing some things extremely well.

As museum professionals, we have used informal benchmarking for problem solving for years as we share better methods of doing our jobs. Conferences and workshops are full of helpful ideas to incorporate good ideas. This article presents help for museum managers to understand better this important tool. It has intended to move understanding of the process from a casual use and application of benchmarking principles, or sharing of information and techniques, to a more defined, systematic methodology for the deliberate planning for change. *Process* Benchmarking, a process evaluation with low-intensity metrics, is presented rather than the industrial strength, metric-crunching *Classic* Benchmarking methodology used in industry.

Gail Campbell-Ferguson, Curator, and Nina Hallett, Trustee, of the Kitsap County Historical Society Museum, Bremerton, Washington, inspect artifacts. Professional and volunteer staff contacted and visited many federal, state, and private museums and archives in Washington State and Washington, D.C. prior to making the decision about the purchase of new storage units. Photos courtesy of author.

Benchmarking provides an opportunity to analyze better ways of doing something without reinventing the wheel—you incorporate someone else's methodology. You do not want to copy just anyone else's process, but you want to copy the very best. No organization does everything the best way—that is impossible. However, some organizations are using strategies and practices in a superior way—and that is what we want to emulate or exceed.

Using the six working steps described below, the reader will move from mythology to methodology of change. This process provides a way for museum professionals to exchange ideas that really work into a formal, systematic process for copying the best of class.

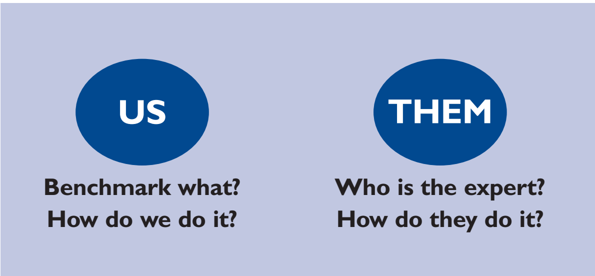
HISTORY

Congress established the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award for quality achievement for organizations in services and manufacturing. This award identifies seven target areas: leadership; information and analysis; planning for quality; human resource utilization; quality assurance of products and services; quality results; and customer satisfaction. The Baldrige award was one of the first national quality awards, but since it appeared in 1987, other quality achievement awards have also been established. These awards are intended for rigorous evaluation process improvements for organizations and are much more extensive than the process discussed in this paper. However, it was through this quest for improvement that organizations began to assemble lists of "best practices" and laid the groundwork for Process Benchmarking.

Government agencies got involved with process improvement a few years later when on September 11, 1993, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12862: Setting Customer Service Standards. This order directed government agencies to take eight actions to improve their customer service to equal or exceed the best in business. One of the eight actions was: "benchmark customer service performance against the best in business."

Although benchmarking is used in the marketplace to provide a competitive advantage against other industrial leaders, museum managers, whether managing curatorial efforts, education programs, physical facilities, or other efforts, can use the same process to identify best practices or standards that will lead to superior performance. Process benchmarking provides organizations the opportunity to make quantum leaps forward by copying organizations that are already succeeding in a particular area. By going through the benchmarking process, priorities and targets are established and evaluated. This baseline analysis helps determine where your organization stands with respect to other organizations or museums that are considered the best in their class.

One of the most significant opportunities for benchmarking for museums is the accreditation process through the American Association of Museums. The quest for accreditation allows an institution to improve significantly all aspects of its operations and provides a focus for benchmarking. Accreditation can occur, of course, without utilizing a formalized benchmarking process, but it can become a useful tool to improve the quality for any museum through first providing guidelines of excellence and then allowing managers to evaluate their own systems. If, while evaluating the museum through the standards of the accreditation, you discover an area where improvement can be made, it's to your advantage to not only improve that area but to copy someone who's doing it very well—or even better—the very best!



BENCHMARKING STEPS

Basic process benchmarking includes the following six steps:

- Identify a process for benchmarking;
- Form a team to work with the process;
- Identify benchmarking partners;
- Collect information;
- Analyze information and develop recommendations;
- Implement recommendations.

I discuss each of these steps below to provide a basic understanding of how the benchmarking process works. By following these steps, you can begin a formal, systematic change process in your organization.

1. Identify a Process for Benchmarking.

Any process, service, or practice that your organization performs that can be measured, observed, or documented is a candidate for benchmarking. You should select an area for benchmarking based on an essential organizational need. Spend considerable time looking at your own organization before making a decision about which process to tackle first. A helpful guide for identifying performance measurements is the *History News* Technical Leaflets "Performance Checklist for Historical Institutions, Parts I and II." Part II discusses five major "behind the scenes" activities: Personnel; Collections; Physical Facilities; Safety and Security; and Finances. Answering the questions queried here is a good start.

Pick a project that is easily definable. The more defined the project is at this point the better. Next, determine and define the project boundaries. To do this, you need to make sure you thoroughly understand your own process. Develop answers for *who* does *what, when, where,* and *why. Who* should take the action or who is doing the action; *what* does the action consist of, what does it look like; *when* is the action going to happen—is there a specific time when it happens; *where* is the action physically going to occur; and *why* this process needs to be improved. Processes do not exist in a vacuum. Organizations are made up of people, groups, and everyone is somehow connected or influenced by all the other parts. Therefore, when you change one aspect of any organization, there will be ramifications that cause changes to occur elsewhere. These changes may not be apparent at first, so careful thought and analysis at this point is extremely important.

Lack of up-front planning or having unclear objectives are two reasons that organizations frequently experience failure with this type or any type of change intervention. Along with having clear goals, there also needs to be some flexibility. As further exploration occurs, the problem may suddenly be entirely different from what you originally diagnosed it to be. The perceived problem may also need to be investigated as


New storage units provides easy access to the collection.

Creating an Organizational Change Map

1. In the space below, write a one-sentence description of the change you've identified for your project.

____

____

2. Begin analysis by completing the following 4 steps.

Step 1
In Column 1, identify what you want to change. Circle your selection. Briefly describe. Example: Machines. Upgrade the computers to include customer survey capabilities.

COLUMN 1
PEOPLE
MACHINES
METHODS
MATERIALS
ENVIRONMENT
INFORMATION

Step 2
Indicate which items from Column 2 best describes how you want it to change. Circle your selection. Draw a line from your selection in column 1 to your selection in column 2

COLUMN 2
ACCURACY
COMPLETENESS
COST
QUALITY
RATE OF COMPLETION
TIMELINESS

Step 3
In Column 3, identify the change you want to make. Circle your selection. Draw a line from your selection in column 2 to your selection in column 3

COLUMN 3
INCREASE
DECREASE
STAY THE SAME

Step 4
Identify the actions you plan to take by circling your selection. Complete your map by drawing a line from your selection in column 3 to your selection(s) in column 4. (You may select more than one from Column 4.)

COLUMN 4
START DOING
1. ________________
2. ________________
3. ________________

STOP DOING
1. ________________
2. ________________
3. ________________

CONTINUE DOING
1. ________________
2. ________________
3. ________________

3. Re-write your description in the space below including the concepts identified in the Organizational Change Map completed above.

____

____

____

well as the actual problem. In one instance, an organization with which I consulted was thoroughly convinced they needed to upgrade their computer systems as the answer to completing their work on time. Whereas the computer system may have ultimately needed to be changed, it was not the real problem causing the backlog of reports. By looking for real problems rather than possible solutions, I helped them see that the forms they were using were out-of-date, redundant and, in some cases, totally unnecessary. The staff found the computer system adequate to handle the workload once the forms requirement was changed. (It also gave the staff considerable satisfaction in eliminating useless forms and reports.) They had jumped ahead to identifying solutions but failed to clarify the real problem.

Make sure you understand not only the process but also the terms and any lingo associated with the process—you need to speak the language. This is especially important when you begin talking to people outside your own organization; to query them effectively, you need to understand clearly the process and possible ramifications of change. You cannot refer to "thingama-jigs" and "do-hickies" and have meaningful conversations. Familiarize yourself with the language.

Develop a baseline. This will provide a good starting point and provide a comparison point from which to measure changes. Identify the exact characteristics you are attempting to change and what they look like now. Many of the following attributes are taken from for-profit organizations, but it is still helpful to consider which ones apply. You will need to ask the following questions: Are you looking at people, machines, methods, materials, environment, or information? Are you hoping to affect accuracy, completeness, cost, quality, rate of completion, or timeliness? Do you want something to increase, decrease, or remain the same? What do you want to start doing, stop doing, or continue doing?

So what does this look like in real life? Here is an example: the decision is made that the museum organization and staff should become more involved in professional organizations at several levels: local, regional, national, and international. The first step is to identify the current status of the museum organization. You must establish parameters or boundaries. Ask questions like: How many of the staff are currently dues-paying members of any professional organization? How many organizations does the museum belong to? How many professional organizations should the museum join? What are the available organizations to join? How would joining a professional organization benefit the individual, the museum, or the professional organization? Look for hidden ramifications: If the individual instead of the organization pays the dues, how appropriate (or legal) is it to ask who belongs to what organization? Who is going to pay for this? Will employees ask for a raise to pay dues to professional organizations if asked to join? Will the Board or Foundation fund these expenses for individuals or the organization? Will the cost be greater than the gain? Again ask, what do you want to start doing, stop doing, or continue doing.

2. Form a Team

Form a team familiar with the process, preferably process-owners—those people who control or "own" the process, the stakeholders. Get the people involved who actually use the process, those who have tweaked it through time to make it work better, and have struggled with trying to make it work. The team can be from two or three to no more than 12 members, depending on the size of your organization. In the scenario given above, it would be best to include team members who are currently members of a professional organization and those who are not members. By including both joiners and non-joiners, the opportunity is there for meaningful dialogue, looking at the issue from several sides. There needs to be a high degree of trust within the group. If trust is not forthcoming as they begin working together, they will not be successful as a team.

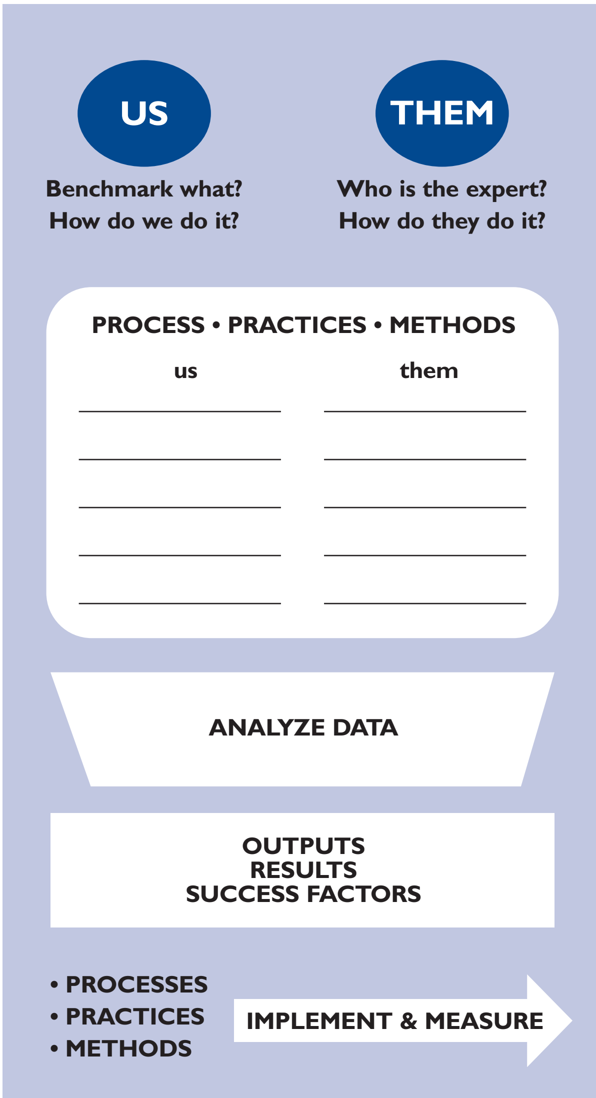
3. Identify Benchmarking Partners

These partners are the organizations considered to be following best practices in the targeted or identified areas. Look for organizations that have done not only a good job, but have done a superior job of handling a similar process. Contact other museum organizations and successful businesses and ask them who they think does this process in a superior manner. Identify organizations that have received special awards or citations. If you're going to change the way you're doing things, make it worthwhile—copy the best. Make an effort to understand similar groups. What are their approaches? By going through this process, you may also have the opportunity to develop long-term partners in similar organizations. When considering the scenario given above of increasing staff participation in professional organizations, what organizations seem to be leading or involved in these professional organizations? How are they influencing those groups? What exactly do you want to copy?

Textiles, to the left, can now be properly stored.

4. Collect Information

Collect information from other institutions and develop measurements of your own processes. Collecting information is usually done first-hand by actually visiting the other organization. In the world of for-profits, confidentiality becomes an issue as companies share proprietary information about their successful processes. In the world of museums, confidentiality is of lesser concern—we are not out to put them out of business by becoming more competitive. However, always ask the question about any degree of confidentiality that may be expected. There is a difference between confidentiality and anonymity. If an organization offers you information they consider confidential, or information they ask you not to use, refuse to receive it. It is no good to you if you cannot use it. If someone provides information under anonymity, you just do not tell anyone where you got it, but you are welcome to use it.



Data collecting falls into two distinct categories: intrusive and unobtrusive. Data you collect by making open observations and contacts in the workplace are basically intrusive in nature. These include on-site visits, behind-the-scene tours, surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and staff visits or distance interviews through telephone, Internet or televideo to compare methods of operation. Unobtrusive data gathering is not readily observable to the organization as a whole. It includes corresponding by letters, internet, and other one-to-one inquiries as well as conducting literature searches to investigate what research is currently available. Research may provide the names of leaders in the field as well. This process provides an insight into another organization to gain new ideas or to affirm managerial practices already in place. Following the professional membership scenario provided above, contact successful organizations that you wish to copy. Following a pre-determined strategy, begin collecting data on how they became interested in professional organizations, how memberships in these organizations have enhanced their own organization, how staff was encouraged to join and participate in professional organizations, and other similar questions. What have been the benefits and what were the disadvantages? It is important to begin counting the cost up front. For instance, can your organization afford the expense of active participation in professional organizations? Can you afford to have key folks away from the worksite to make this kind of change meaningful?

5. Analyze Information and Develop Recommendations—Develop Specific Actions

After data is collected, it needs to be analyzed so recommendations can be formulated that fit your organization. Answers may not translate easily from one organization to another but the essence of the answer may be used. Solutions need to be sized to your organization and situation. Recommendations need to be as specific as possible—and measurable. It is difficult to determine success or failure if your results are difficult or impossible to measure. Measurements fall into a wide variety of methods; they may be locators on a continuum, percentage measurements, or a simple yes/no—it either happened or it did not. Sometimes developing metrics or measurements for your actions is very difficult.

It is impossible to extrapolate information from uncollected data, so be sure to select the desired metrics to use ahead of time. Ask the evaluative questions first, not last. Determine what you want to know and then how to ask the questions. A Cost-Benefit analysis evaluation will probably be helpful at this point. We usually can do anything with enough money, but what can we accomplish within a budget? Will the benefit outweigh the cost?

Measure all recommendations against your mission statement and your baseline. The mission statement or vision statement should reflect your organization's core purpose and values. These are descriptions of what you do—your external focus. Even if it sounds like a great idea, if it is outside of your mission it is not a great idea for you.

Do not be afraid to think big. Once the big ideas are there, you can pare them down for use in your organization. It is much more difficult to build up than to pare down. Set realistic expectations—know your limitations. If your organization is mired in traditional thinking and has difficulty making changes, remember even small innovative changes can be made. Obviously it has to be something over which you have control. It has to be a change you can effect.

Gail Campbell-Ferguson inspects a hat.

6. Implement Recommendations—Manage the Process

Develop an implementation plan and take required actions. Your plan should identify the following: *Action,* state exactly what the action is; *Responsibility,* who has responsibility to do this action; *Start/Stop Dates,* identify the timeframe; and *Metrics,* measure to see if it is successful. Keep changing the process until you meet your desired key outcomes—your targets. Predetermine how much is good enough. If 100% is probably unattainable, what is acceptable to be successful? Identify markers that indicate that you have achieved your goals. Specific goals are the easiest to measure; for instance, you want to increase visitation by 10 percent in two years.

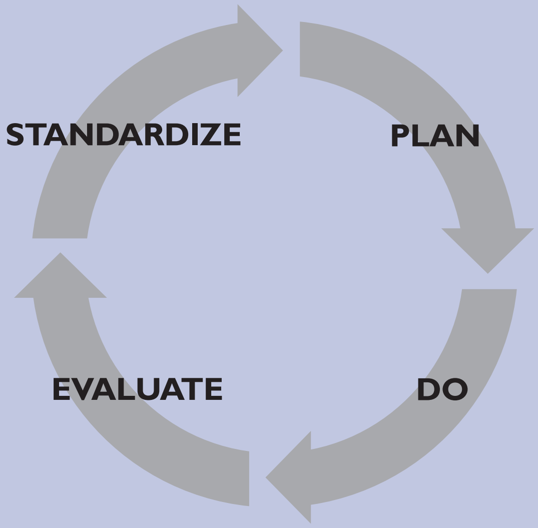
Although it may take more time than you think it should, try to put the changes in place in 90 days or less. (*Classic* Benchmarking lasts from three to nine months.) The purpose here is to improve, transform, reinvent, or extinguish a process. Generally, the more quickly you accomplish it, the better. If the process takes too long, people will not only get weary but measuring the success will be extremely difficult and your data may get out-of-date. If it has not happened, there are reasons you had not anticipated that are impeding the change. What are the resistance factors that have kept the project on hold? Resistance factors are the roadblocks that people put in the way to reduce or eliminate making changes. Resistance factors are not necessarily bad; they just need attention. Resistance factors are true data you can work with.

The culture of some organizations holds a stronger sway than you might expect. "We never did it that way before" is right up there with "We tried that and it didn't work" as methods to resist change. They are usually fronts for the real reasons someone does not want to change. Change is usually perceived as losing something rather than gaining something, so you need to provide alternate thinking. How will this process change add to what I already have—those things I already value?

The advantage of using some of the employees currently involved with the process identified as the benchmarking project is that they already know the difficulties, they want to make it better, and they may be open to try new things, especially things that already have a record of success in premiere organizations.

There is always the possibility you are trying to change the wrong thing. A 90-day time period may actually be too long to endure the agony. Do not be afraid to stop the process and say: "Hey, we made a mistake. This is not working. Furthermore, it probably will never work for our organization." Stop, go back to the beginning and start over. Do not be discouraged. You have actually learned a lot along the way. *Try a lot of stuff, and keep what works.*

Throughout all of the steps, keep everyone apprised of the progress. In fact, flood folks with information. Allow feedback to not only ensure people understand what you're accomplishing but to provide input that might be of value to helping you reach your goal.



PLAN: Develop your plan by defining objectives. What do you plan to accomplish? How do you plan to accomplish these goals? Map out a strategy. Develop a baseline.

DO: Carry out your plan. Gather data as you go.

EVALUATE: Define what was acceptable and what didn't work so well. If possible, put statistics to your efforts. Measure your success against your baseline.

STANDARDIZE: Incorporate these changes into your organizations. To sustain changes, they have to be reinforced, so make them part of the way you do business.

If you didn't accomplish all that you wanted, start over with **PLAN.**

CONCLUSION: VALUE TO THE ORGANIZATION

Benchmarking allows you to promote not only organizational improvement but in the process, it also brings about awareness of the external world. How is the rest of the museum world—or other businesses or organizations—handling this particular situation? And, more importantly, how is it being handled in the best possible way and who is doing it? Benchmarking pushes an organization to change its focus from defining a standard below which they did not want to fall, and forces them to articulate standards to achieve or even exceed. Benchmarking accentuates the positive changes we can make. It serves as a way to help us challenge or defy the status quo.

As budget cuts loom large on the horizon, we have to all work more efficiently and effectively—process benchmarking can be one of the tools we can use to get there from here. As with any other evaluative tool, it does not come cheap. It requires time, thought, energy, financial and managerial support, and commitment by the organization.

Most organizations do not want to embrace major change until it hurts too much to stay where they are. However, by the use of benchmarking, an organization can make a series of continuous changes that will enhance the whole organization in a relatively painless method with pre-tested, proven results. Setting aside resources—both people and money—to look beyond the daily business of museum work is a worthwhile investment for today and the future of your institution.

REFERENCES

There are numerous books and articles available on benchmarking. Each author will have his or her own set or number of steps to be completed, but they basically reflect the steps identified in this article.

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