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Visitors' Voices

THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE AASLH VISITORS' VOICES AFFINITY GROUP

May 2011 Volume 1

Can You Hear Me Now?

Visitors' Voices? What are they? Are they the sounds you hear outside your office door? Are they those high-pitched squeals you've been hearing this spring as loads of yellow buses pull up to your door? Are they the word-of-mouth recommendations (hopefully!) people pass along to family and friends after visiting your museum or site? Yes, yes, and yes!

Visitors' Voices is also AASLH's newest affinity group and membership is free! Visitors' Voices is a networking group for people who are interested in discussing, learning about, sharing, and advancing the work of audience research and evaluation in history museums and related institutions of all sizes. Are you new to evaluation and want to know where to begin? This group is for you! Have you dabbled in visitor surveying but want to learn more? This group is for you as well! Are you an experienced evaluator working either in a museum or as a consultant? We value your participation in Visitors' Voices too!

Did you know that Visitors' Voices has an online discussion group? The discussion group offers you the opportunity to network 24/7 with others working in history museums and sites. When you sign up, you will receive by email all of the questions, comments, and discussions your peers in the field have posted to the listserv (you also have the option of receiving group messages via a daily digest or to "read from the web" if you don't want to receive individual emails). To join the discussion group, go to the homepage at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aaslh-visitorsvoices>. Click on "Join" and follow the instructions. You will then receive an email message asking a few brief questions like your name (necessary to ward off spammers). Once you reply to the email, we'll get you up and going in the discussion group. Sign up today!



Visitors' Voices

Visitors' Voices is a quarterly email newsletter for members of the Visitors' Voices affinity group. Through this publication, Visitors' Voices members share helpful resources and news of group activities.

Want to Learn More?

Did you receive this newsletter from a colleague or find it on the Internet? If so, go to www.aaslh.org/visitors-voices.htm to learn more about the Visitors' Voices affinity group.

Join the Discussion

Click here to join the [Visitors' Voices discussion group](#).

Welcome from the Visitors' Voices Co-chairs!



Hi, I'm Conny Graft and I am an evaluator. I've been experimenting with different ways to evaluate history exhibits and programs for over twenty years. I believe that history organizations can be very powerful agents of change in our communities. Engaging visitors in the issues of the past and connecting them to the critical debates surrounding us today is what I think history organizations are all about – or should be about. Finding efficient

ways to measure the impact that history organizations have on visitors is a never-ending journey but it is what I love to do. Much of what I have learned is from talking with many talented people in our field. It is my hope that you and others reading this will be inspired to join Visitors' Voices, share your experiences with evaluation, and contribute articles as well as pose questions for discussion.



I'm Anne Guernsey and I am Manager of Institutional Advancement at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) in Hartford, CT. Compared to Conny, I'm relatively new to evaluation but educated myself by researching material and networking with colleagues in the field for a few years. All that hard work paid off as I implemented a formal evaluation program at CHS. This involved standardizing attendance tracking

and audience evaluation with a concentration on visitor motivation/expectations; quality of visit/physical use of the building; visit outcomes; and demographics. Pretty dry stuff, right? I get excited when sheet upon sheet of Excel data come together with formulae and one can see the "big picture." I feel fulfilled when anecdotal comments can be substantiated by stats. Evaluation has enabled us to make smarter decisions; we know our audience better so we can serve them well—now and in the future. And, there's always more evaluation projects on the horizon! Both Conny and I agree that hard data enables museums and libraries to operate in a cost-effective and mission-driven manner, while at the same time, providing critical information to stakeholders—all of this so critical in today's economy.

As your co-chairs, we want to share lessons and tips we've learned to maybe make your job a little easier. One tip we want to share is a link to a website that contains evaluations conducted in a museum—not a history museum as there are unfortunately very few published evaluation reports in history museums—but a science museum. Do you want to know how to evaluate an interactive part

Are you already signed up for the Visitors' Voices discussion group but did not receive this newsletter by email? To make sure you received all future issues, click here to [update your record](#) at AASLH or to create a new one. There is no cost to create your record. Once you complete the process, be sure to look for the list of affinity groups and click on Visitors' Voices and any other Affinity group with a topic that interests you.

Not an AASLH member?

Not an AASLH member? Check out all the [BENEFITS](#) that our members enjoy. AASLH is the ONLY national organization dedicated to the field of state and local history. It is a membership association - a home for institutions and people who work in the field of state and local history. AASLH provides leadership and support for its members who preserve and interpret state and local history in order to make the past more meaningful.

AASLH Annual Meeting

The AASLH 2011 Annual Meeting will be held in Richmond, VA September 14-17. Check out the [2011 Annual Meeting](#) website for more information.

of your exhibit? These reports are some of the best on the subject, even though they deal with science.

Hot Tip: Here is the link to Exploratorium's web site page that lists their evaluations:

http://www.exploratorium.edu/partner/visitor_research/allVRE.htm

So take a look, print a few, and consider starting a brown bag lunch group with your volunteers and staff to talk about how the Exploratorium evaluates and how you might try something like this in your organization.

Advisory Committee

Along with co-chairs Conny Graft and Anne Guernsey, the AASLH Visitors' Voices Advisory Committee has the following members:

- John Blexrud, Consultant
- Dale Jones, Making History Connections
- Kerry Lippincott, Chemung County Historical Society

Join Us for Breakfast in Richmond!

Are you planning to attend the AASLH Annual Meeting, September 14-17 in Richmond, Virginia? If so, be sure to join us for the Visitors' Voices breakfast meeting on Thursday, September 15th. Guest speaker Scott Harris, Director of the New Market Battlefield State Historical Park, will share the ins and outs of visitor research at his site. The breakfast event is open to all meeting attendees. Look for registration and ticket information in the Annual Meeting preliminary program available later this spring. Check out more information about the Annual Meeting here on the [AASLH Annual Meeting](#) webpage.

Surveying Visitors, Plain and Simple by Andrea Lewis

"Scanning the guidelines for the grant you so desperately need, you freeze like a deer in headlights when you came to the section about evaluation. It's one of the few things that unravels your composure. You've heard about the impressive evaluations conducted by the larger museums with hundreds of people on staff, large endowments, and a list of corporate donors that circles the globe. It all sounds wonderful, and it makes sense. But how does an organization like yours, with a small staff and little-to-no money, evaluate programs and exhibitions? Doesn't it require a sizable budget and experts steeped in cognitive research to collect useful visitor feedback?" To read more, [click here](#).

The Visitors' Voices group has compiled an annotated list of print and electronic resources to help colleagues begin or expand their audience research and evaluation efforts. The above article by Andrea Lewis, originally published in the Spring 2007 issue of History News, is our spotlight resource for this newsletter issue. To

**More AASLH
Programs**

StEPs

Standards and Excellence Program
for History Organizations

**VISITORS
COUNT!**
Building Stronger History Organizations
through Survey, Analysis,
and Benchmarking

view the entire resource list visit

<http://www.aaslh.org/images/Visitors-Voices-List.pdf>

Once again, welcome to the inaugural issue of the Visitors' Voices newsletter! If you're interested in sharing your experience with audience research or evaluation in an upcoming issue of this newsletter, please contact Conny Graft at cgraft6@gmail.com.



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1717 Church Street, Nashville, TN 37203 - 2991 | 615-320-3203 | Fax: 615-327-9013
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