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Visitors' Voices
THE NEWSLETTER FOR THE AASLH VISITORS' VOICES AFFINITY GROUP

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New Tools to Capture Visitor Feedback

By Chris Catanese & Kristie Smeltzer

Collecting, analyzing, and sharing visitor comments effectively can be daunting when you are working with limited resources. Technology, however, can make the process easier, more effective, and more efficient. It can also make the process of leaving feedback easier, more enjoyable and more thematically engaging for visitors. This article offers two examples of how technology was successfully used to gather visitor feedback at the New-York Historical Society and at Monticello.

The New-York Historical Society's "Talk to Us" Phone Booth

In the fall of 2005, the New-York Historical Society opened the exhibition *Slavery in New York*. The exhibition was extremely popular, partly because many visitors were fascinated and shocked by a dark side of a familiar story that they had never learned about in school. But part of the reason for the show's success was that visitors had very intense personal reactions to the content and the New-York Historical Society wanted to capture those reactions. A video response booth was placed at the end of the exhibition where visitors left many invaluable comments and stories some of which were edited into a highlight reel that was integrated into the exhibition.

In the following years, we used the video response booth in several other exhibitions, but none generated the same volume or quality of responses that it did in the *Slavery* show. We came to realize that the success of the response booth was tied not only to its ease of use and placement in the space, but more so to the types of reactions visitors have in an exhibition. The more personal the themes of an exhibition—themes that visitors can relate to from

Visitors' Voices

***Visitors' Voices i*s** a quarterly e-newsletter for members of the Visitors' Voices affinity group. Membership in the group is free. Join us by either updating your record in AASLH's database or creating a new one. Be sure to look for the list of affinity groups and click on Visitors' Voices.

Want to Learn More?

Check out our web page at www.aaslh.org/visitors-voices.htm to learn more about the Visitors' Voices affinity group.

Join the Discussion

To join the Visitors' Voices discussion group, go to the Visitors' Voices homepage and click on the "Join" button.

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their own lives—the more likely they are to want to share their reactions and stories.

For our current exhibition, *WWII & NYC*, we installed an audio recording element in hopes of capturing visitor feedback and especially stories from visitors who lived through the war. We constructed a small phone booth with a sign that reads "Talk to Us." Visitors enter the booth and follow very simple printed instructions which are basically, "Pick up the phone, leave your message and then hang up." The 1940s-era handsets give the booth an authentic feel. For visitors with mobility issues, we have an additional phone set up just outside the booth at a lower height. Our AV specialist wrote software that runs on a Mac Mini to capture the incoming audio from the handset. The system places the recorded WAV files into a folder on the server where they are listened to, sorted into categories (praise, gripes, comments, stories) and then finally transcribed and entered onto a spreadsheet shared with various staff members including the show's curator.

The response has been phenomenal. Thus far we have captured nearly 400 recordings with wonderful feedback about the exhibition and amazing stories from those who lived through and fought in the war. In addition to selecting an exhibition that is conducive to eliciting personal stories, what has made the system so successful is the simplicity of the feedback mechanism, its strategic placement at the end of the exhibition and designing it in such a way that it feels like the visitors are a part of the exhibition. Older visitors enjoy the nostalgia of walking into a phone booth and sliding the door closed behind them. Younger visitors are intrigued by its novelty. And all visitors are excited to so easily leave their feedback and become a part of the exhibition.

Chris Catanese is director of museum administration for the New-York Historical Society Museum & Library, in New York, NY. You can reach him at ccatanese@nyhistory.org.

Monticello's iPad Visitor Interviews
In December of 2012, Monticello undertook a three-stage visitor evaluation to better understand visitor engagement during house tours. One stage culminated in interviews with visitors. As an afterthought, we opted to record the interviews not only with a digital voice recorder but also using an iPad 2. Initially, we thought the iPad video would serve as a backup for the audio

Check out Visitors Count!

"Naper Settlement participated in Visitors Count! so we could get to know those people who so often remain silent in our planning processes—our visitors. Through Visitors Count! we heard what we were doing right, what met expectations and what needed work."

Donna Sack, Director of Visitor Services (former), Naper Settlement, Naperville, Illinois

"Visitors Count! gave us highly detailed data about our visitor demographics that can support grant proposals, help us renovate exhibitions, and learn more about the preferences of different visitor groups. We fully intend to participate in this program on an ongoing basis so we can continue to update our knowledge about our visitors and how they learn at our museum."

Tracy Lauritzen Wright, Director, Administration / Special Projects, National Civil Rights Museum, Memphis, Tennessee

recording. However, once we saw the video, we were simply blown away.

Capturing our visitors' intonation as well as their facial expressions and body language told a much fuller story. The video topped what we had from the audio alone and proved more effective than if the interviewer had feverishly scribbled notes or handed the visitors a questionnaire. The video also yielded an easy, powerful way to analyze the interviews and report results. After purchasing the iPad application called iMovie, we compiled footage about similar topics. Analysis of the interview feedback—when thought of in the context of information from the other stages of the evaluation, anecdotal perceptions, and other visitor surveys and comments—yielded several big picture trends about how our visitors perceive aspects of the house tour.

For example, we often hear from visitors that their tour felt too rushed and/or too crowded. Through this evaluation project, we learned that frequently the real underlying issue is less about time and more about visitors' ability to see things. In the interviews we were able to dig into the idea of what "seeing" meant from the visitor's point of view, and not surprisingly, "seeing" is subjective—not one-size-fits-all for every visitor. For some, "seeing" meant being able to get close to items, such as being able to read the titles of books in Jefferson's library or seeing all the faces in large engravings like John Trumbull's *The Declaration of Independence.* It could also mean hearing more stories about objects or having time to look at more items. Suddenly the bare and enigmatic bones of "too rushed" and "too crowded" had some meat on them, and we could see and hear what those comments really meant to our visitors.

For reporting, we created a PowerPoint that summed -up those big-picture trends and then supported it with one or two embedded video clips of visitors providing context for what those big ideas really meant to individuals. So far, the presentation has been shared with those who manage our interpreters, our interpretive staff, and will later be shared well beyond. iPad 2 - $350, iMovie App - $5, seeing and hearing our visitors' perspectives– *priceless*.

View video (click on the photo above) of Sean Passan and Julie Holden as they participate in an outdoor interview at Monticello on a warm December day (shot on an iPad propped on Kristie's knee).

Small Museums Toolkit Now Available

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Technology can be a powerful way to not only increase the volume of your visitor feedback but also the quality. Whether it's the novelty of being videotaped via iPad or the nostalgia of stepping into an old phone booth, modern technology allows you to capture your visitors' voices in ways that paper and pen cannot. Allowing your subjects to speak freely rather than write a response results in longer, more meaningful responses and allows you to get a sense of the emotion behind their comments. This can mean the difference between "My grandfather died in WWII—thank you for doing this exhibition" and "My grandfather died in WWII—thank you for doing this exhibition" (*audible sniffle as subject chokes back tears*).

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HOT TIP!

Transom. org's *SHOUT OUT – A Kid's Guide to Recording Stories* - A little dated and seemingly simplistic as it's for high school kids, but if you substitute "smartphone" or "tablet" for "Radio Shack tape recorder" it addresses some great basics about getting good sound and also getting the subject to tell good stories, which is sometimes hard.

MacLife. com - *5 Essential iMovie for iPad Tips and Tricks* -Posted 03/31/2011 by Steve Paris, some excellent pointers for using iMovie to edit videos on an iPad.

Join Us in Birmingham

In our continuing effort to socialize with the neighbors, Visitors' Voices is having lunch with the Corporate History affinity group when AASLH holds its annual meeting September 18-21 in Birmingham, Alabama. Our guest speaker will be Peggy Dalman from Biltmore. Program and registration information will be available at http://www.aaslh.org/am2013.htm beginning in early June.