

# Role of Evaluation in Exhibit Planning

Tara D. Knott  
Evaluation Resources, Inc.  
Memphis, TN

Doug R. Noble  
Memphis Museum System  
Memphis, TN

Whittlin (1970) suggests that "there are two unoccupied chairs at the (exhibit planning) committee table: A chair awaiting a communication specialist and a chair for an evaluator who will pay occasional visits at appropriate times." But what is the role of the evaluator in exhibit planning? What does he or she actually do? Using an exhibit planned by the Memphis Museum System, *Mr. Crump's Memphis*, this paper will elucidate the evaluator's role in exhibit planning.

Grant proposals, contracts, legislative bodies, mission statements, etc. usually do not set specific goals and/or objectives for an exhibit. . . nor do they specify means for achieving those objectives. Instead, only broad guidelines or general goals are given. That is, the stated goals are usually abstract, idealized statements of desired outcomes. In order to actually attain the desired outcomes of an exhibit, these abstract ideas must be specified in detail.

As stated in the planning grant, *Mr. Crump's Memphis* (henceforth referred to as the *Crump* exhibit), like most planned exhibits, has a vague central focus, i.e., Mr. Crump's impact on Memphis and Tennessee. *The primary task of the evaluator is to help the planning team convert this vague focus into clear goals and measurable objectives. It is this major activity which defines the evaluator's role in planning.* In order to establish a brief backdrop for our discussion, the following description of *Mr. Crump's Memphis* is provided. "Boss" Crump was mayor in Memphis from the early 1900s to the 1950s. The exhibit will focus on Crump's long lasting and widespread influence on Memphis and explore the issues of democracy, bossism, corruption, reform movements, the changing role of women, racial separatism and economic growth that were all a part of Crump's "Memphis Machine." The planned exhibit will attempt to reveal a broad range of ideas and issues to museum visitors. In the *Crump* planning proposal to NEH, the goal is stated as follows:

*“The project will plan a permanent, 9,000 square foot exhibit focusing on Memphis history from 1910-1954. The goal further states the theme of a southern city “boss” will be used to integrate many subjects including bossism, race relations, progressivism, and economic change. The exhibit will also explain the fate of democracy in the hands of a powerful political machine. Finally, the goal states that the exhibit will be ‘thought provoking.’”*

In this case, as in many, the stated goals are what evaluators often call “Save the World” goals; that is, they are much too broad and ambitious to actually serve as a guide for exhibit design. Explaining the fate of democracy in the hands of a powerful political machine and provoking thought about the fate of democracy is an ambitious, if not impossible task for one 9,000 square foot exhibit! Therefore, it is necessary to translate this goals statement into a more clear, specific and meaningful guide for exhibit design. To do this, several specific evaluation activities are necessary. It should be noted that some of these activities concern the planning team per se, while others deal primarily with the visitor. First, we will examine those which deal with the planning team.

### **Evaluation Task I: Develop a Consensus for Exhibit Goal(s)**

As is typically the case, the initial *Crump* planning grant proposal was basically written by two people. Although input from consultants was requested and received, it is not surprising that the viewpoints of the primary authors were the strongest ones actually expressed on paper. However, once the planning team began to work together in earnest, other equally strong and valid viewpoints also emerged. Because the backgrounds and roles of individual planning team members are varied and disparate, each favors emphasizing a particular theme or aspect of the exhibit. For example, on our planning team, the following areas of expertise are represented among the consultants:

- historians
- sociologists
- anthropologists
- educators
- museum director(s)
- curator of collections
- curator of exhibits

Further, within these areas of expertise, each team member has a sub-specialty or primary area of interest; e.g., one of the historians is an expert in the role of black churches and their impact on Memphis’ past and present and believes that their role should be emphasized. Another historian is especially interested in the black artifacts and their role in perpetuating segregation in Memphis’ past and present and wants that to be represented in the exhibit. The curator of collections wants, where possible, to use

artifacts already available, and one of the consulting museum directors encourages the planning team to focus on topics of interest to the NEH and to avoid topics it does not favor; e.g., politics.

In fact, each of the specific team members was selected because of his or her specific knowledge and expertise of a particular topic and the diversity of their knowledge will result in a richer exhibit; however, these very traits can become problematic if there is not early agreement of a clear and constant goal towards which all planners can focus!

In order to help the planning team reach agreement on exhibit goals, the evaluator can use several techniques:

### **1. Content analysis of all brainstorming sessions, meeting outlines, research reports, etc.**

By identifying the frequency with which a topic appears in documents related to planning activities and the length of time taken to discuss it, certain themes or topics will become apparent. These topics can be used as the basis for reaching consensus about the exhibit's goal. That is, the evaluator records and analyzes the content of planning meetings, correspondence, and other documentation and specifies each of the themes mentioned by one of the planners. This analysis, coupled with a review of assigned research topics, can be used to establish the commonality of particular themes and sub-themes which are mentioned frequently and, therefore, appear to be favored by the majority of planning team members. For example, via early content analysis, it became obvious that race relations and women's issues were the most frequently mentioned themes for most members of the planning team. Economic and other social issues such as city planning were not covered as frequently and were not discussed at any length or depth.

Content analysis is a technique which, although time consuming, is relatively easy for an evaluator to accomplish because the information is already available as a result of planning meetings. Further, it is non-intrusive and places no demand for additional data collection. Novice evaluators should, however, note that it is important to obtain copies of all planning documents and to audio tape planning meetings.

### **2. Nominal Group Technique**

Another technique which is often used to help planners reach consensus is the Nominal Group Technique (NGT). This technique is particularly useful if it is feasible to gather all of the decision-makers in one place in a timely fashion *and* if no particular team member emerges as "overly influential." NGT is another method which allows individual judgements to be effectively pooled by having each planning team member individually verbally suggest those themes which s/he feels are most important in a round robin fashion. The evaluator simply records each theme as stated on a blackboard. No criticism is allowed during the initial rounds wherein

themes are suggested; themes are simply recorded as stated. Once all of the themes suggested are recorded, the evaluator leads a discussion of each of the themes listed and they are discussed and categorized so that similar themes are combined, those felt to be unimportant by the group are dropped, and those which are vague are stated more specifically. After the themes have been "cleaned up," the evaluator asks the group to vote for the most important, the next most important and so on. In this way, the group agrees to the exhibit's major themes and their priorities in terms of emphasis in the exhibit.

### 3. Delphi Technique

Still another technique which may be used to gain consensus is the Delphi. The Delphi is typically used when decision-makers are in different geographic locations and/or when one person may dominate the others with a strong and forceful personality. It uses a series of mailed questionnaires to solicit the individual opinions of planners about an exhibit's major themes. These individual suggestions are then analyzed by the evaluator to determine those themes mentioned most frequently. Once the resulting themes have been identified and restated to reflect the opinions of *all* of the planners, they are sent back out to the whole group; i.e., the results from each initial questionnaire are used to construct the next questionnaire. For example, if, on the first questionnaire, four of the five planners suggest that women's rights is a major theme for the *Crump* exhibit but only one suggests that economic development is a major theme, the second questionnaire would include women's issues but would not include economic issues. After several mailed iterations of the questionnaire during which the major exhibit topics become more apparent, planners are asked to rank order all themes by importance. In this way, a consensus about exhibit goals and their importance to the exhibit is reached.

As suggested, each of the techniques described above can be used to promote joint decision-making and may be used with groups of planners to encourage commonality in their decision about important exhibit goals. However, it is important that the reader realize that only in Utopia does a true democracy exist! Clearly, ensuring consensually agreed to exhibit goals and approaches to exhibit design is difficult. In fact, such agreement may not even be possible in some situations. For example, such considerations as the specific objects available for the exhibit, the amount and structure of the exhibit space, time and budget allotments are realistic limitations which exhibit planners must bear in mind when determining exhibit goals. However, these constraints should not excuse the planning team from the systematic determination of exhibit goals. Every exhibit needs a single, clear target towards which all members of the planning team can aim. In fact, having clear, consensually agreed to exhibit goals may help the team better manage the constraints specified above.

## **Evaluation Task II: Rearticulate Exhibit Goal(s)**

After exhibit goals are determined, a second major task which is incumbent on the evaluator is to help the planning team clearly state or articulate its intention for an exhibit via a clear goal(s) statement. The goal(s) statement is vitally important because it will provide direction for selecting those aspects of the topic, era, or event which will be addressed in the exhibit and those which will not. For the *Crump* project, the initially stated proposal goal might be more clearly articulated as follows:

“To provoke thought about the local, regional, and national impact of the Crump political machine and other southern city bosses on the following aspects of democracy:

- changing race relations
- economic change
- social reform
- political reform.”

The goal is now stated in a more concrete and clear manner than it was in the proposal. It is still, however, much too vague to actually guide exhibit planning. The evaluator, working closely with other members of the planning team, must then:

## **Evaluation Task III: Convert the Goal Into Measurable Objectives . . . For Each Major Intended Audience (see Note 1)**

According to our newly stated goal, the *Crump* exhibit should impact visitors by “provoking thought about democracy’s fate under the rule of a political boss.” Once the desired visitor impact is agreed to, measurable objectives can be developed and these specific objectives can be translated into individual design elements which will have the most potential for achieving that objective.

If the exhibit is to produce different outcomes in different visitor groups – as is often the case – we feel strongly that each visitor group and the objectives for that particular group must be individually specified so that those objectives can be more effectively attained via the selection of specific features and/or additional materials for each group. For example, an objective for adult visitors might be that, as a result of the exhibit, they are more aware of early women’s rights activities. However, to determine if visitors are *more* aware, the evaluator must first:

---

### **Evaluation Task IV: Determine the Present Level of Exhibit Awareness and Knowledge for Each Major Audience Identified**

For example, the narrative of the *Crump* planning grant specifies two major target audiences for this exhibit: (1) seventh grade students (and teachers); and (2) adult museum visitors. Therefore, it is imperative to determine the expectations and current level of knowledge about the exhibit's subject for each of these visitor groups.

The reader should also note that, although not specified in the original planning proposal, in contemplating the needs and expected impacts of the exhibit on seventh grade students, it became obvious that an additional visitor group must also be considered; i.e., seventh grade teachers. Because these teachers will be responsible for introducing their students to the topics presented in the exhibit and will also be the ones leading student discussions about the exhibit, they are an important group for whom specific objectives must be developed.

Each of the three audiences identified will require specific exhibit objectives which are suited to their individual characteristics, wants and educational needs. Therefore, each group must be carefully described and the present level of knowledge for each of the groups determined.

#### **Seventh Grade Teachers**

We know, from previous teacher surveys, that most teachers want exhibit background material sent to the schools prior to the students' visit. Teachers have also indicated that exhibits should relate directly to the experience of children, and should provoke discussion and stimulate thought about the themes presented. This knowledge about teachers' general educational needs will be used as a starting point to better determine teacher wants and needs for the *Crump* exhibit *per se*.

Additionally, a content analysis of the curriculum guides used to teach social history about the early 1900s to seventh grade students was conducted and it was determined that very little information about Crump and his influence on Memphis and Tennessee is actually presented in the current Memphis city and county schools' curriculum.

A focus group of seventh grade teachers was also conducted to help develop a survey questionnaire through which the evaluator will be able to better identify the needs of Memphis teachers relative to the exhibit. Based on the results, specific measurable exhibit objectives can be developed for seventh grade teachers (see Note 2).

#### **Seventh Grade Students**

Although, based on the content analysis mentioned above, it can be assumed that little information is actually made available to seventh grade students, a brief content analyses of social science text books, outlines,

lesson plans, etc. currently used in the schools will be used to determine the present level of student knowledge about the Crump era. Additionally, several seventh grade social science classes may be asked to form focus groups from which more specific information about their knowledge of the Crump era can be obtained. If needed, content tests may also be used to determine current student knowledge about Memphis from 1912 to 1954. A careful analysis of all of this data will be conducted to identify specific educational objectives for seventh grade students (see Note 3).

These analyses and the resulting objectives are, of course, imperative in deciding which exhibit features should be emphasized, which should have additional learning guides or specific types of interpretation devices; e.g., docents, etc.

### Adult Museum Visitors

The initial step in setting exhibit objectives for general audiences will be the analysis of visitor study data collected over the past year and a half. From this data, a demographic profile of a typical visitor can be established. Additionally, important differences between seasonal, weekly, and daily visitors can be identified.

These differences may be important in determining if and when certain types of interpretive devices should be made available; e.g., docent-led tours, interactive devices, etc. Further, an analysis of existing visitor data by race, and perhaps by age, may be helpful since understanding and reactions to the *Crump* exhibit may differ significantly by racial background and age range.

The evaluator also used focus groups and associated questionnaires to expand the existing visitor data; i.e., to determine the specified interests, perceptions, and knowledge level of adult visitors about the Crump era and its impact on Memphis' present and to determine visitor expectations of the exhibit.

Results from the analysis of all of this data will be used to develop specific intended exhibit outcomes for adult visitors to the exhibition.

## Conclusion

The reader should note that *all of the evaluation activities described above focus on helping the planning team determine, articulate, and maintain clear exhibit goal(s)*. This major task, and *the translation of these goals into specific exhibit objectives, defines the evaluator's role in exhibit planning*. Hopefully, this description of the evaluator's activities during the planning of the *Crump* exhibit has illustrated the role evaluators can play in exhibit planning in general. To reiterate, evaluators can help the planning team to:

- Reach agreement about the expected outcome(s) of a planned exhibit.

- Articulate agreed-to exhibit goals so that they are clear.
- Convert the agreed-to exhibit goals into measurable objectives . . . for each major intended audience.
- Determine the present level of exhibit awareness and knowledge for each major audience group identified.

These are important activities for the planning team and one to which an evaluator can clearly lend expertise and credibility.

## Reference

Whittlin, A. S. (1970). *Museums: In search of a usable future*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

## Notes

1. Notice that at this point the focus of the evaluation work has shifted from the planning team to the visitor per se.
2. An important point which should be emphasized is that the teachers' objectives may not be specific learning objectives per se – these will be developed by individual teachers – instead, the focus of the exhibit staff may be on providing specific supplementary materials, in-service, workshops, etc., which will meet the educational needs of teachers.
3. Of special interest here – as is true with all three audience groups – are the misconceptions these students might have and their sources for this misinformation. For example, it will be interesting to learn whether or not students have heard their grandparents, some of whom could have been Crump's contemporaries, discuss Memphis as it was in the first half of the 20th century.