

# MAKING SURE THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR FRONT-END EVALUATION

by *Randi Korn*

More and more, exhibition planners are using front-end evaluation as part of exhibition development. This is good news, of course, and not just for evaluators. The public will benefit greatly from staff members' attempts to understand how their public thinks about and interprets some of the ideas that practitioners believe are important to teach. As Minda Borun notes in this newsletter (see page 11), front-end evaluation can produce information that will help exhibit developers create an exhibition that bridges the gap between public understanding and some of the difficult ideas that exhibition planners want to convey. Front-end evaluation, like the other phases of evaluation, is designed to integrate professional expertise with visitors' way of thinking and experiencing, so a visitor's experience in an exhibition will be meaningful. Front-end evaluation is a process that allows subject matter specialists and visitors to join and exchange ways of thinking. As shown in the figure below, which illustrates the division of power between visitors and professionals for all three evaluation phases, audience input and

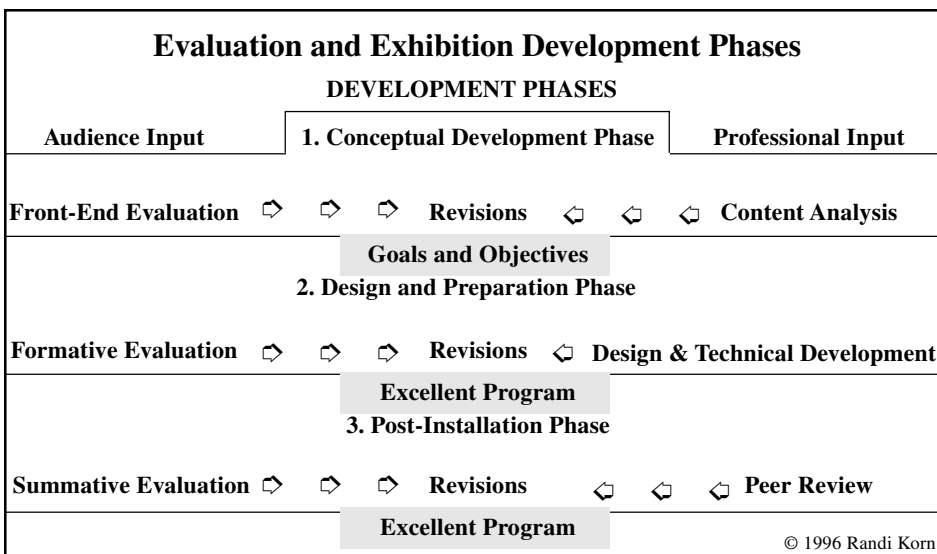
professional input are given equal weight. That is, visitors' way of thinking does not outweigh professionals' way of thinking, and vice versa. When evaluation is executed at the right time and for the right reasons, exhibition planning is off to a good start.

**“The primary goal of front-end evaluation is to bridge the gap between public perception and the messages the team wants to convey.”**

How does a team know when it is ready for front-end evaluation? How does a team know the right questions to ask about visitors? The right time for front-end evaluation is when the exhibition team has, in writing but not cast in stone, a strong conceptual plan that has withstood scrutiny and criticism. Advisors, usually subject matter specialists, have already approved the plan and, along with the team, believe that what the team has outlined deserves attention in a public

exhibition—that is, the concepts the exhibition will present are important for the public to experience, consider, and understand. If the concepts are half-baked and the team is having difficulty making decisions about what the exhibition should be about or include, it is inappropriate to turn to visitors, for they will not have the answers. Too often, visitors are consulted too early in the process and asked questions such as, “What do you want to know about X, Y, and Z?” or “Are you interested in an exhibition about X, Y, and Z?” When these questions are pursued, the team is placing too much importance on the public's way of thinking and not enough on its own way of thinking. When members of the public are put on the spot and asked what they would like to know about a topic, it is often difficult for them to propose anything that piques their interest. Similarly, asking the public if they are interested in a particular topic is futile, as interest can be generated if the exhibition team asks the right questions during the front-end evaluation and knows how to develop good exhibitions. Studies have shown that good exhibitions promote discovery and that visitors are almost always delighted with their new-found knowledge (cognitive or affective). If these visitors had been queried during a front-end evaluation several years prior to seeing the exhibition, they would never have been able to articulate their enthusiasm because they would not have known it existed until the exhibition helped them find it. Hence, a team is ready to interface with visitors when they have a conceptual plan with a strong story and well-crafted goals and objectives with which all team members agree.

For a front-end evaluation, what



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## MAKING SURE THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR FRONT-END EVALUATION (CONT.)

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are the right questions the team should be asking itself about its visitors? Perhaps the most important question is, "How does the public think about X, Y, and Z?" Learning how the public understands, conceives of, and experiences a topic can help the exhibition team make decisions about the best way to interpret it. The primary goal of front-end evaluation is to bridge the gap between public perception and the messages the team wants to convey. For example, one exhibition team decided that part of its health exhibition would teach children about germs. The team wanted to know how children typically articulate what they know about germs, which suggests how their minds conceive of germs. The front-end evaluation showed that children, when talking about germs, describe what "good germs" do and what "bad germs" do. This good germ-bad germ notion provided the team with one strategy for telling the story about germs in the human body.

Sometimes front-end evaluation is used to "field test"

interpretive strategies to help exhibition development teams determine how to communicate difficult concepts effectively. Asking questions about how the public conceives of particular ideas just before exhibition developers begin to conceptualize and design strategies for conveying those ideas will provide the team with relevant and practical information. These front-end procedures are enormously helpful during conceptual development phases. An exhibition team that looks to visitors to understand how visitors think about an idea, rather than to understand what visitors think they want to know about an idea, is a team that will produce a more compelling, communicative exhibition.

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