DIY evaluation and research

Marge Ainsley offers some helpful advice, resources and pointers for those who a) haven't got budget to buy in research or evaluation support, b) haven't any in-house experts or c) haven't a clue where to start!

I'm writing this shortly after the Visitor Studies Group[1] annual conference where delegates met to share knowledge and ideas on research and evaluation. Many of the seminar sessions focused on idea sharing and toolkits to help with conducting in-house research and evaluation.

A sign of the times perhaps – evidencing, job responsibility changes and a lack of budget for buying in support are probably all contributing factors. Love it or loathe it the need for research and evaluation is more vital than ever. And rightly so I say. It should continually be a holistic, integrated part of what we do.

As a freelance practitioner I often find myself talking to colleagues who have already got part through or are at the end of a project and then realise they need to 'do some evaluation'. It's frustrating for all involved.

Of course, there are organisations out there which have the time and expertise for carrying out research and evaluation in-house. They continuously integrate the resulting learning points into their forward strategy and have the cyclical process pretty well wrapped up. However in my own experience this isn't the case for everyone.

Before I put myself out of a job, I must say that there are numerous benefits for buying in external support. An independent view is often so useful, for example, reducing bias within responses or gaining richer data through use of specialist techniques. But realistically not all cultural organisations have the budget to appoint external help. I disagree with those who say it should be left to a professional researcher – as long as you're careful with how you use your data and what you claim. Lack of budget shouldn't be an excuse for getting some idea of whether you've met your project aims. And if that means doing it yourself then just get stuck in. But where do you start?

Helpful ten point guide

1) Get on the right track from the start – do your background reading and check available research and evaluation resources for inspiring examples, step-by-step guidance and pitfall tips. Look at guides like these; *Evaluation, good-practice guidance*[2] and *The Guide to Researching Audiences* from JISC[3] on approaches to evaluation and audience research – useful starting points if nothing else for structure and content of your final report. There are also plenty of transferable toolkits within the cultural sector such as *Evaluation toolkit for museum practitioners* from Renaissance, East of England www.sharemuseumseast.org.uk/shares/resource_34.pdf whether you're working in museums, galleries or performing arts.

2) Set up a 'research champion' group with representatives from across your organisation. Share your ideas with them, get them to help in data collection or brainstorm how they can best disseminate your findings to their own departments afterwards.

3) Don't reinvent the wheel. If it's a new research project you want to undertake find out if any research has already been published in that area before you start. Check CultureHive – http://culturehive.co.uk/, the new online resource of latest thinking and innovation in cultural marketing and audience development best practice, scan toolkits like Arts Council England's *Audience Insight Family and Community Focused* toolkit[4], raid sites like Delicious[5] or Quora[6] using relevant tags (particularly useful intelligence outside the sector) or consult best practice examples on the Guardian Culture Professionals blog.[7]

4) Set your objectives – what are you trying to find out? If you're evaluating a project, draw up a framework outlining your intended outputs, outcomes and measures of success. Ask a) what do you really want to find out, b) what is going to be the most appropriate method to get that information and c) when and from whom are you going to get it? Read the above guides and consider does a quantitative or qualitative approach – or a mix – meet your needs? If you're looking at evaluating participatory projects in particular check Nina Simon's *The Participatory Museum*[8], or I often adapt methodologies from; www.artemis-services.com/downloads/tools-for-participatory-evaluation.pdf[9].

FOOTNOTES

1. Visitor Studies Group http://visitors.org.uk

2. *Evaluation, good-practice guidance* http://www.hlf.org.uk/HowToApply/goodpractice/Documents/Evaluation_Good-practice_guidance.pdf

3. *The Guide to Researching Audiences* – Dr Rachel Quirk, Martin Olver, Dr Max Hammond and Dr Claire Davies www.jisc.ac.uk/media/documents/themes/eresources/sca_audiences_guide_v1-03.pdf

4. *Family and Community focused toolkit* www.artscouncil.org.uk/media/uploads/pdf/Family_Community_toolkit.pdf

5. Delicious: https://previous.delicious.com/

6. Quora: https://www.quora.com/

7. Guardian Cultural Professionals Network: www.guardian.co.uk/culture-professionals-network/culture-professionals-blog/2013/feb/07/museum-evaluation-sharing-audience-data

8. The Participatory Museum: www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter1/

9. *Useful tools for engaging young people in participatory evaluation* www.artemis-services.com/downloads/tools-for-participatory-evaluation.pdf

10. *Market Research Society – Code of Conduct*: www.mrs.org.uk/standards/code_of_conduct/

11. SMSpoll: www.smspoll.net/

12. www.quicktapsurvey.com/

13. www.tweetdoc.org/

14. Emilia Spitz and Linda Uruchurtu of digital arts marketing consultancy Lume Labs share their thoughts and tips on planning, commissioning and producing your own data charts and infographics: http://blog.a-m-a.co.uk/2013/01/infographics-arts-marketing.html

5) With any research and evaluation you need to make sure you're working ethically – check the Market Research Society's Code of Conduct[10] for guidance.

6) Keep things simple. Make use of technology when collecting your data to keep things efficient. Most of us have used Surveymonkey either as a researcher or completer – and whatever your opinion it can be a quick and easy tool for basic quantitative data capture (bear in mind that paid users get improved design and analysis tools). It's also mobile optimised. Or try using SMS poll[11] (and their free plan) for immediate snapshot quantitative feedback (you could use this in public spaces e.g. during intervals on a screen in the foyer showing 'live' audience feedback). If you've got a tablet take a look at software such as Quicktap survey[12] which allows you to collect data in-situ offline and manipulate it online afterwards (avoiding any time needed for inputting paper surveys). Use tweetdoc[13] to record specially hash-tagged tweets in one place. Or if it's qualitative feedback you're after give your sample of participants five key questions and film their responses in makeshift video booths/record audio vox pops on your phone – you don't always need expensive technical equipment.

7) Analysing your resulting evidence can be daunting if you're faced with a stack of qualitative feedback or stats you're not sure what to do with. Have a rifle through the V&A's excellent evaluation reading list for helpful analysis guides (the list is relevant for non-museum professionals).

8) Keep people interested. Think about how you can approach the research or evaluation creatively. How can you communicate the results to staff? If anyone is a whizz with design you could consider producing infographics[14], or if there's a budding film maker create a video based on your key findings like this example from the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad WE PLAY project evaluation: http://weplayevaluation.org

9) Are there any aspects of the process that you can turn into a training opportunity for staff – and provide you with additional help at the same time? For example, could you train volunteers in survey fieldwork best practice, or could front of house staff be trained to conduct visitor observation?

10) Gain permission to share any useful findings with the wider sector through CultureHive www.culturehive.co.uk or other channels in your own area. Make sure you put systems in place to embed any learning points into your future strategy.

And finally ... as promoted by the Visitor Studies Group on their promotional postcards, remember;

> Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count; everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted.
> **Albert Einstein**

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