

COVES Pilot Study (Oct. 2015 – Mar. 2016)

Executive Summary

ABOUT COVES

The Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES) is a transformative data service, created *by* museum professionals *for* museum professionals, to help museums be more effective and economically strong through collaborative collection, analysis, and interpretation of visitor experience data. It is designed to unite science centers – and soon, all museum types – in systematically collecting audience-level data, with a focus on institutional and field-wide improvement.

PURPOSE OF THE PILOT

In order to provide data that can be validly compared across institutions, it was critical that we first develop a standardized method of collecting data from our visitors. This involved not only creating a common instrument to be used across sites, but also agreeing upon a feasible sampling strategy and data collection method. Not only was it important that we test several data collection methods that many evaluation professionals may “take for granted” as the most effective or efficient manner of gathering visitor-level data, but this also provided an opportunity to rigorously test data within and across sites to determine if there are actually differences depending on the methodology used. Most importantly, COVES is designed to be inclusive of all size and manner of institutions, regardless of prior evaluation experience or operating budget; therefore, our pilot was also intended to study potential challenges to implementing such a system across sites with varying contexts.

METHODOLOGY

The COVES Pilot studied three data collection techniques using virtually identical data collection instruments: an onsite survey method, in which visitors completed the survey onsite at the completion of their time in the museum in the exit area; an emailed survey method, in which visitors were asked at some point during their museum visit to provide an email address which we could then use to send a link to an online survey for completion anytime following their visit; and an interview method, in which visitors were asked to participate in an interview at the completion of their time in the museum in the exit area. For this interview, questions were necessarily modified for appropriate read-aloud techniques by data collectors. The COVES Pilot also studied two different sampling techniques: systematic random sampling in which a visiting group was approached and participation was solicited from *any* adult visitor in the group, and systematic random sampling in which a visiting group was approached and participation was solicited from *one specific individual* in the group.

Eight sites participated in the pilot study, collecting visitor data from October 1, 2015, through March 31, 2016. Each site was given a specific set of parameters governing their data collection methods. Two sites (one medium-large institution with an internal evaluation department and one small institution with no internal evaluation department) collected data through all three data collection methods using group sampling technique; two sites (one large institution with an internal evaluation department and one small institution with no internal evaluation department) collected data using both sampling techniques, one using the onsite survey method and one using the email survey method. The remaining four sites were assigned one method and one sampling technique exclusively for the entire pilot period, to ensure that adequate data were collected across methods.

It is important to note that the explicit intention of the pilot was to address questions concerning the efficiency and feasibility of the data collection and sampling methods, and *not* to summarize or compare the visitor-level data that were collected through these methods.

FINDINGS

Across sites, 735 completed responses were collected over 6 months (96.7% of our overall target of 760). Guiding our analysis of the aforementioned methods were two primary research questions:

1. Are there differences in response rates or the time necessary to collect data between methods/sampling techniques?
2. Are there differences in the data between methods/sampling techniques (e.g., socially desirable responses, responses to potentially sensitive questions, etc.)

Analyzing response rates, the onsite survey method was found to have the highest overall response rate (62%), while the interview had the next highest rate (51%), and the email survey method had the lowest (19%). It is worth noting that although each method had two potential points of refusal – saying no to the data collector’s request to participate, and subsequently failing to complete the survey/interview – the email method suffered from the greatest drop-off in participation at that second point (those individuals who provided an email address but failed to attend to the survey post-visit). The response rate for group sampling (33%) was only slightly higher than that of individual sampling (30%) across sites. Largely the result of these response rates, the time necessary to collect complete responses was shortest for the onsite survey (14 minutes per completed response, on average), followed by the interview method (17 min./response), and then the email survey method (21 min./response). Likewise, the time data collectors spent on the floor was shortest for the group sampling method (17 minutes per completed response, on average), 2 minutes faster than sampling individuals (19 min/response).

At one site conducting all three methods, a statistically significant difference was found in responses to a question about likelihood-to-recommend (i.e., Net Promoter Score). At this site, the interview method elicited more high responses (specifically, scores of 10 on a 0-10 scale) than either the onsite or email survey method. No differences were found at the second site conducting all three methods, nor were meaningful differences found within the data when comparing responses from the group and individual sampling methods.

To supplement these findings and assist in establishing one systematic data collection method and sampling strategy for the collaboration moving forward, additional input was collected from data collectors at each of the eight sites regarding their impressions of the various methods. Although preferences varied between the two survey methods (no one preferred the interview), data collectors overwhelmingly preferred the group sampling method. Finally, interview data were collected from museum visitors at three of the eight sites regarding which method – the email or onsite survey – they were most likely to complete if asked by a data collector. Data suggest that while visitors say they are more likely to complete the emailed survey, factoring response rates in to these preferences leads to an equivalent number of visitor responses between the two methods.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Based on pilot findings, the COVES Governing Body members agreed the data collection method that introduced the least amount of response bias was the onsite survey method, and that using this method was likely to correspond to the highest response rate and least amount of time spent collecting data. The group sampling method was selected for ease of use and because there were no advantages to data collected from the individual sampling strategy. On July 1, 2016, thirteen institutions began collecting data using a systematic data collection method, for the first year of COVES that will produce comparative data.

We are currently preparing a research article to more fully describe our pilot study results – please keep an eye out (most likely in the Visitor Studies Journal) or check our website (understandingvisitors.org) for more information.