

## A smell of Jaguar pee

Careful evaluation has helped the Royal Museum test the success of their exhibition on Cats

Cats... the ultimate predators, the Royal Museum's major exhibition for Spring 2004, broke the mould in several ways. Our exhibition brief emphasised that the experience should be "fun, inspiring, informative and entertaining", and "accommodate a range of different learning styles within the 5 to 12 age range". Everyone on the exhibition team agreed we were creating an exhibition for families and stuck to this throughout the process. Crucially, the external designers, John Csaky Associates, took this on board from the start and worked closely with us to create a truly family-focused exhibition.

In-house taxidermists spent over five years bringing new cat specimens vividly to life – the first time all 37 species have appeared in the same room. A high-profile marketing campaign reached out to new audiences, using TV adverts filmed in supermarket meat aisles and bus shelters that roared on Princes Street.

Learning is a social activity, and visits to museums are social experiences, particularly for families. Therefore it was vital that we provided opportunities for co-operative learning, and encouragement to talk about the displays and share ideas. Throughout, we used questions and direct active text to encourage family interaction. Our text hierarchy imposed strict maximum word counts, which certainly focused our minds when writing it! If we struggled to fit in content we always returned to the brief – if it wasn't a key message it was dropped.

Of course, the cats themselves were the heart of the displays, but we worked hard to integrate the interpretation and hands-on activities fully into the main storyline. In particular we wanted to make it easy for visitors to make connections between the activities and the displays, so interactives were spread throughout the show rather than rounding up all the fun stuff and sticking it in a corner so as not to disturb the "serious" visitor.

### Evaluation

With over 40,000 visitors in 15 weeks, the exhibition was certainly a success in terms of ticket sales. But did we succeed in achieving the objectives we spent so long deliberating over in the planning process? To find out, we carried out two types of detailed evaluation: visitor observations and a visitor survey. Here are a few of our findings.

### Observation

We had set ourselves a key objective that "Families and school groups will be encouraged to learn together, through a wide variety of interpretive methods including interactive displays and direct active texts".

We observed 100 family groups in two distinct areas of the exhibition. 88% of families observed stayed together as they went round. In the first area, 74% used the whole range of interpretation methods (panels, displays, interactives and film). In 90% of families, adults and children explored the interactives together. Perhaps unsurprisingly, 60% of adults looked at text panels on their own, but both children and adults were observed reading out information to the rest of their group. Adults were also actively explaining and discussing the exhibits with their families.

## Survey

The most memorable interactive was the smelly one, where visitors were asked to identify and match four quite grotesque smells, including jaguar pee! However, for most of these visitors, their learning outcome was that “jaguar pee stinks”, rather than our more complex message about how scent marking works. Does this mean it failed? It was certainly entertaining (“Mum, come and smell this!”), and who knows how intense experiences such as smelling foul smells might stick in the long-term memory, and act as a trigger for future learning.

A pleasing result from the survey was that 51% (out of 120) said they'd looked at all the panels, with another 40% looking at more than half. While we can't be sure how true this is, we did set some questions to test how many of our learning objectives had been taken on board, of which 81% were answered correctly.

Informal evaluation is also valuable - four comments books were filled with overwhelmingly positive feedback. Even some of the negative comments actually showed we had met our brief, for example: “Interesting but not sufficiently academic – too geared to children”!

## The future

Families are only one of our target audiences. Our special exhibition programme is now designed to offer a range of exhibitions through the year to cater for different audiences, from schools and families to festival goers. The evaluation results and lessons learned from Cats will also feed into planning for new longer-term galleries, helping us to fulfil NMS's vision to “inform, educate and inspire” future generations of museum visitors.

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Thank goodness I was never sent to school; it would have rubbed off some of the originality.

*Beatrix Potter*