

Strangers lurking with clipboards

Jenni Fuchs' new post as Visitor Studies Officer at the National Museums of Scotland reflects a commitment to putting visitors first.

We probably all know the feeling of seeing a stranger with a clipboard lurking ahead on the street corner, eyeing us up as their next target. We hurry past, head down, or even cross the street to escape. But what about the panic of the person on the other side of the clipboard? Ten more surveys to do before the next tea break, and nothing but rejection.

At the National Museums of Scotland (NMS) there has been more activity by strangers with clipboards in the past twelve months. Like many museums, NMS has moved towards a visitor-centred focus and improving the visitor experience is one of our priorities. In order to focus on the needs and expectations of our visitors we need to understand the visitor experience, and this is the role of Visitor Studies.

Of course, accosting visitors with clipboards is only a small part of Visitor Studies. Over the past year we have used a variety of methodologies, including self-completion questionnaires, interview-led surveys, focus groups, audience forums, observing and tracking visitors and mind maps. NMS has carried out Visitor Studies projects in the past, but the new post has enabled more coherence and consistency between projects and departments, in contrast with the previous ad hoc approach.

Evaluation of learning outcomes and interpretation is the flip side of good planning, and should be the responsibility of everyone on an exhibition team, from curator to designer. As part of raising awareness I have been running introductory workshops in Visitor Studies and evaluation across different NMS departments, to show the potential across the board. Visitor Studies can support Exhibition or Learning and Programmes teams through evaluating interpretation against set learning objectives, showing whether the interpretation does what we want it to do and providing evidence of the impact of their programmes. Or it can allow Marketing to go deeper into understanding our audiences, and help front of house staff to improve their customer service by helping them learn more about our visitors.

Already, visitor research outcomes have led to changes in the way NMS does things. Last summer, we carried out major research at our Museum of Flight, including summative evaluation of the new Concorde Experience and formative evaluation of future development options for the rest of the site. What we discovered will help to shape what happens here. For example, audience feedback highlighted the lack of hands-on interpretation and activities. As a result, an interactive gallery has been prioritised in the Development Plan for the museum.

A more short term outcome was the research we did for our summer exhibition last year, *Nicholas and Alexandra: The Last Tsar and Tsarina*. Through a visitor survey we evaluated the pre-set learning outcomes and interpretation styles of the exhibition,

which included a large interactive map, text panels, photo albums, film footage and music. Since our temporary exhibitions only run for a couple of months evaluation often takes the form of tail-end feedback to learn from for next time. This survey was carried out in the opening weeks of the exhibition. Feedback from visitor comments books backed up our results, and we were able to make some changes to improve the visitor experience for the rest of the exhibition run, for example by adding family trees of the Romanovs to aid interpretation.

Sometimes results from visitor research can show that what our visitors want differs from what we were hoping or expecting. This has not been an issue with any of our projects so far, but we are fully aware of the risk. We don't avoid asking questions because we might not like the answers. We don't let evaluation reports disappear in drawers. At NMS, evaluation is decision oriented and aimed at action. The ultimate goal is to improve the interpretation of our displays and exhibitions for the benefit of our visitors.

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Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.
Zora Neale Hurston, American author.