

From creepy crawlies to cafes

Janet Sylvester's work with market research group Scotinform shows some interesting results.

Interpretive techniques have changed enormously since our first involvement with interpretation related research in the early 1990s, when we conducted focus groups for the National Museums of Scotland to test different interpretation methods for the new Museum of Scotland. As techniques have developed, so has the demand to show how effective they are, and to learn how they can be used to appeal to different audiences.

The methods we have used to explore the effectiveness of different interpretation techniques range from quantitative face to face and self-completion surveys to qualitative focus groups and mini groups. Many studies involve a mix of quantitative and qualitative survey work. This can provide both data on interpretation techniques, and in depth analysis showing what people really feel about their visit, but it's worth considering the differences between some of the techniques.

- Face to face interviews are useful in providing data on visitors' views of different interpretation techniques. They enable visitors to be shown material where relevant, and interviewers can explain questions. Using semi-coded questionnaires means it is possible to gather some qualitative feedback during the interview, although this is limited by the length of the questionnaire (a maximum of 15-20 minutes).
- Self-completion questionnaires are useful to measure key data and are very cost effective (in other words, cheap!), but response rates can be very variable. They also tend only to be completed by certain visitor segments, notably women and older people. I would suggest that their usefulness for exploring views on interpretation methods is limited and they should only be used if their limitations are fully recognised.
- Focus groups/mini groups are usually the key methods for exploring visitors' views of interpretation techniques. Both methods involve recruiting a group of visitors (8-10 for a focus group and 4-5 in a mini group) and holding a discussion about their visitor experience. The discussion can last anything between 30 to 90 minutes. Incentives are essential: these can be a voucher for the shop or café rather than cash. Groups should be held on site, preferably around the time of the visit. This means the feedback is immediate and provides an opportunity to talk to types of visitors who may not be available later (for example day visitors and overseas tourists).

So what do visitors like?

The results of recent research by Scotinform highlight that, for many visitors, the opportunity to see or interact with 'real' exhibits outweighs computer-based interpretation. The article on the Scottish Mining Museum in the last issue of Interpret Scotland (Autumn 2005) illustrates this: the Balloon Mine has proved a cost effective and simple way of conveying an important message to children. Adult visitors to *Scotland's Secret War* at the National Library of Scotland thought that the most interesting areas in the exhibition were the artefacts (such as the Enigma machine) and documents written at the time, whereas the computer-based exhibits had the lowest appeal. Similarly, the highlight of *Monster Creepy Crawlies* at the National Museum of Scotland was the live insects, rather than the computer interactives. Of course, there are some groups of visitors who prefer the 'high tech' approach, notably teenagers and people in their early twenties, but research can identify what techniques appeal to the different target markets and their effect on the visitor experience.

The role of external influences on the effectiveness of interpretation is another area that visitors comment on consistently. The Real Life Science sessions at the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh were held in the Real Life Science Café, where their impact was reduced by the level of background noise. *Monster Creepy Crawlies* was a victim of its own success, with visitors during the Easter holidays discussing the overcrowding and heat rather than the impact of the exhibits. It is clear from the research we've conducted that ensuring a comfortable environment is as important as selecting the interpretation methods.

Exploring visitor reaction to interpretation techniques is a fascinating area of research. Most visitors are keen to provide feedback and have lots of views on what works and what doesn't. With today's sophisticated consumer it is important to listen to these views, and understand the needs of different market segments, to maximise the effectiveness of investment in interpretation.

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The only real mistake is the one from which we learn nothing.

John Powell