

Is it working?

Interpretive planning

In issue 13 of the Journal, the Interpret Scotland group published the first of a series of quick-reference guides to the key stages of interpretive planning. These guides will also be published on the IS website and when complete, will provide 'bullet point' introductions to the questions:

- What do you want to say?
- To whom do you want to say it?
- How do you want to say it?
- Is it working?

Gillian Findlay, of the Scottish Museums Service, has been working on the guide to evaluating your interpretation.

Is it working?

Evaluation is simply about measuring how well you are doing. It can tell you how successfully you are engaging your visitors and how effectively you are getting your message(s) across. Your findings can then help you to use your resources to best effect, to improve what you already have or to plan and produce new interpretive media in the future.

Here are three basic questions to consider when you're thinking about evaluation:

Why evaluate?

Regular evaluation, based on clear interpretive objectives, will help you to:

- understand your visitors better; to know what they like or don't like, and to be able to react to their needs
- assess whether your visitors understand the stories or messages you are trying to communicate to them
- judge how well you are doing, and allow you to target funding and plan for change
- advocate what you do with others, by providing a record of your achievements

When should I evaluate?

Evaluation can, and should, take place at several different stages during your interpretive project:

- planning stage: discover who your visitors are and what their prior knowledge and pre-conceptions are. Use this information to refine your interpretive objectives
- design stage: test your visitors' response to each piece of your proposed interpretation. Does it communicate your message(s)? Change it now if you need to
- completion stage 1: install your interpretation, checking it all works physically, is accessible, well lit etc. Make any final amendments

- completion stage 2: once in place, find out how the finished product actually works. Does it meet your interpretive objectives? Share your findings with sponsors, funding bodies and colleagues in order to guide future work.

How do I evaluate?

Various techniques exist which can help you to evaluate your interpretation, but no matter what stage of a project you are considering, there are two basic types of information to collect:

- methodologies: questionnaires, focus groups, and carrying out critical appraisals (or professional reviews) are all established evaluation techniques. You might also consider observing your visitors' behaviour or tracking their movements in order to understand how they relate to pieces of interpretation or use a certain space
- data: quantitative data is numerical, ie numbers of visitors, amount of time visitors spend on a particular piece of interpretation. It's useful because it can be analysed statistically. Qualitative data includes your visitors' opinions, feelings, perceptions and attitudes. To be meaningful it requires deeper organisation and interrogation.

For more on evaluation, try these resources:

SNH Guidelines on Interpretive Planning

www.snh.org.uk/wwo/Interpretation/default.html

SMC Factsheet and Guidance on Evaluating your Interpretation:

www.scottishmuseums.org.uk

The Evaluation and Visitor Research Special Interest Group, also in Australia

<http://amol.org.au/evrsig>

A site run by Roger Greenaway, who specialises in evaluation techniques

www.reviewing.co.uk/evaluation/index.htm

Research Councils UK guide to evaluation

www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/evaluationguide_print.pdf

Issue 4 of Interpret Scotland focused on Evaluation. Back copies of this journal can be viewed online at www.interpretscotland.org.uk

Gillian Findlay, gillianf@scottishmuseums.org.uk

'Grown-ups never understand anything for themselves, and it is tiresome for children to be always and forever explaining things to them. '

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, The Little Prince