

Interpreters' soapbox

Who are you looking at?



An anonymous interpreter lets off steam...

If I hear 'we get everyone here' one more time when I ask who the audience is for an interpretation project, I'm likely to say something rude. I think there are two things about this kind of answer that wind me up: the idea that there are places that attract 'just about everyone'; and that audience profile is the same thing as target audience.

Firstly, I don't believe that the majority of experiences on offer attract 'everyone'. Even the most eclectic of attractions can't lay claim to that. If I'm challenged at this point I have to try and think of a group of people who wouldn't visit, for example, a museum or nature reserve. Homeless heroin addicts from an inner city? Base jumping snowboarders looking for the next adrenaline fix? Russian oligarchs wooing a new business associate? It is entirely possible that a Premiership footballer was spotted once, but that doesn't make them part of your audience profile. And yes, I'm sure all those groups could conceivably go and enjoy what's on offer; but that's not the point. Everyone can watch Coronation Street. But they don't. The Corrie audience has a very wide range of professions, ages and social groupings, so that's probably not the way to break the audience down; but I bet the scriptwriters and editors can. And I'd love to see the face of a commissioning editor at the BBC if a new programme was pitched as being 'for everyone'...

Alright, I'll grudgingly concede that there is a wide range of people at most attractions, but they can't all be the target audience. So what if there are primary school children and university professors, farmers and city dwellers? What's important is which of these groups the interpretation is targeted

at and why. Rattling off dozens of different visitor types doesn't prove anything except that even more thought is needed to pin down what the interpretation is trying to achieve.

What matters when we look at our audience and then at our target audience? Does it matter how old they are or where they've come from? Well sometimes it does, but sometimes it doesn't. How useful is it to categorise visitors to one of Scotland's mountains as hillwalkers? Isn't that a bit like saying the people who visit swimming baths are swimmers? Of course there's a need to know how people interact and engage, and their reasons for visiting, but what's important here? How old a hillwalker is and where they've come from, or what their opinion on land management is and their knowledge of the Outdoor Access Code?

Of course, we know all this. We know the importance of visitors' expectations, lifestyles, learning styles, behavioural and social norms. I'm not saying anything new here. So why is it that I keep hearing and seeing audience profiling that doesn't really help in pinning down what's being done and why? Is it just laziness? Is it that the planning process is boring and folk just want to crack on with the exciting bit –



We get everyone here!

dreaming up gizmos and contraptions? Or is it all too complicated and there aren't the tools to do the job properly?

When compared with marketing men and advertisers (who seem to know what colour underpants I like to wear and just how to get me to buy more) interpretation doesn't take understanding the audience very seriously at all.

Well, I'd love to carry on this rant over a pint sometime. If anyone feels like it, I could meet you in my local – you'd like it, you get everyone there...