

On Yon Bonnie Banks

At the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park Gateway Centre in Balloch, we have made extensive use of Information and Communication Technology in our interpretation.

Our brand new facilities include:

- A flat screen video wall showing an introductory film about the National Park.
- Computer touchscreens with interactive games about the wildlife, habitats and geology of the National Park.
- A version of the 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' game about managing the National Park.
- Listening posts and DVD-driven video monitors about the cultural and artistic significance of the National Park's landscape.
- An 'international email station' for visitors to send messages around the world and explore our web site.
- An innovative visitor information system called 'Vguide' which is relayed through several video monitors.

Is all this technology the panacea for all our ills, or does it present the same old problems wrapped up in another guise? The first few months of operation have identified a number of lessons to be learned in its use:

Fit the Technology to the Building One of the main issues is the relationship between the ICT and the building. The plasma screen video wall is a good example here. The concept of an introductory video is good, provoking attention when the visitor enters the building. In practice the effect is reduced because the wall is at 90 degrees to the entrance; the retail shelves restrict the viewing area; and bright sunlight reduces the image quality.

Links and Labels Interpretation is an holistic concept, and there have to be clear links between the technology and the other media. In the "Who Wants To Manage A National Park?" game, there are no clear labels or headers to link the interactive with the associated graphics on the surrounding walls.

Make it User Friendly "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?" is very good here. Visitors already understand how to play the game, therefore spend more time understanding the interpretative message than learning how to use the equipment.

Visitor Flows Individual touch screens are not ideal for dealing with large volumes of people. They are very much for personal use or family groups. So you must be certain that you have sufficient provision to cater for peak demands, or use other methods to cope with this. At the Gateway the outdoor promontory is used as a means of shedding visitor load at peak periods.

Out of Order! How often do we see this at visitor centres? It demonstrates a lack of understanding about the reliability of ICT systems. ICT must be available 365 days a year, and have an equipment life of five-ten years, which means all the hardware and software must be capable of delivering to that specification. You need software and hardware engineers who can support the systems for the life of the project. When the defect liability period is over, who picks up the tab?

Technical Problems All designers will test systems, but there is nothing like a real visitor to test every conceivable permutation in a multimedia system, and to test the hardware to destruction. A pre-opening evaluation period is vital if you are to have confidence in the reliability of your equipment, and to make sure that you know all the details regarding the operations of your systems, including the supporting technical documentation.

Data Collection ICT is great for collecting evaluation information. We can analyse the numerous logs that are collected by our web routing software to tell us how many visitors are using the web access and sending emails.

What Now? Having got it all working, and undertaken an evaluation exercise, we can address the problem areas and put them right. But in order to encourage repeat visits we need to be innovative and use the versatility of our ICT to develop new methods of use. For instance, using the video wall to show other areas of the National Park in real time, and using the Vguide information system to link with other Visitor Centres within the Park.

Summary Our ICT displays have had their share of teething problems, but are providing a good interpretive experience for our visitors. What is the secret to using ICT? Well, a good interpretive plan that puts the message first is paramount, and the client and designers must have a clear and mutual understanding of what the technology can do, how it can be modified, and the ongoing support required.

Bob Layden, National Park Gateway Centre Manager.
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“Where a new ENIAC calculator is equipped with 18,000 vacuum tubes and weighs 30 tons, computers in the future may have only 1,000 vacuum tubes and weigh 1.5 tons”
Popular Mechanics, March 1949