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After the show: Making sense after the event

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Abstract

This case study shows how indepth evaluation of the visitor experience can provide useful evidence on the ways visitors interact with exhibitions and what they learn from them. 'Coffee shop' debriefs replicated the natural way that visitors talk about an exhibition visit with their companions. The study comments on methodology and the implications of the findings for exhibition design, learning outcomes and effective promotional strategies. The study was carried out at the National Gallery of Australia in January 2007.

Large-scale art exhibitions have a dynamic of their own. The visitor experience is shaped by four main elements:

- the exhibition is available for a limited time
- the content is widely regarded as important
- you have to pay to see it, and
- most blockbuster exhibitions have a fairly linear layout.

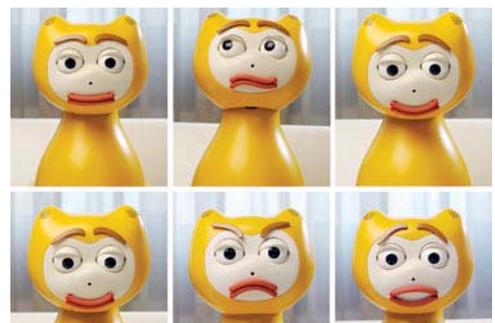


Exhibition planners at the National Gallery wanted to look more closely at how these factors affect the visitor experience so they could incorporate the learning into planning for future exhibitions.

They commissioned Environmetrics to evaluate for two exhibitions: *Constable* and *Egyptian Antiquities from the Louvre*, using visitor research.

For each exhibition, we surveyed 200 visitors to gather data on things like the visitor profile, rating of particular attributes, and spend. We used standard questions and were able to provide comparative data with other Australian cultural venues, with permission from those venues.

In addition, we needed to find a way to have indepth conversations with exhibition visitors, to gauge their reasons for visiting and their responses to the whole experience. We were guided by a need to facilitate an 'Expressive' setting that would encourage full expressiveness from visitors.



Our solution was to devise Coffee Shop Debriefs where small groups of visitors were invited to join us in the staff lunch room to talk about the exhibition.

These Coffee Shop Debriefs worked extremely well. Visitors were happy to join us and happy to discuss and share their experiences. In fact, they tended to linger and we almost had to chase them out. The meetings worked well because the research method was closely aligned with natural behaviour – most visitors to exhibitions like to talk about it afterwards. So, instead of the research cutting across natural behaviour, as when an exit survey takes the individual out of their group for a few minutes, this research method fitted nicely into the natural behaviour of many visitors.



The Coffee Shop Debriefs were able to explore questions such as:

- Why come?
- What purpose does the visit serve?
- How did you move through the exhibition?
- What was it about, do you care?
- Were you touched/moved?
- How could it be better for you?
- What now?

These indepth conversations with visitors fresh from the experience gave key insights into exhibition conception, design and communication.

The power of metaphor

This research showed that a metaphor is a powerful communication tool. The exhibition was called: *Egyptian Treasures from the Louvre: Journey to the Afterlife*. Participants in the Coffee Shop Debriefs picked up the travel metaphor of ‘journey’ and used it extensively in discussing the exhibition and the ideas it presented.

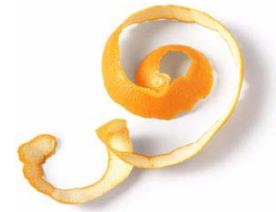
The metaphor gave them an organising principle for comprehending the key ideas of the exhibition and it gave a language for discussing the experience afterwards.

In this case, the metaphor of a journey was particularly apt for the exhibition because it aligned closely with the world view of ancient Egypt wherein life after death was envisaged as a journey ending in the Field of Reeds.



Every exhibition has the potential to be framed by a metaphor. For example, an exhibition that aims to get beneath the surface could use a metaphor of unpeeling layers.

Alternatively, peeling could represent the process of getting rid of the protective cover to get at the useful ingredients. We would encourage exhibition planners to spend some time looking for an appropriate metaphor that can frame the visitor experience and give shape to communication about the exhibition.



Beginning :: Middle :: End

Egyptian Treasures from the Louvre used a journey metaphor, and visitors discussed their experience of the exhibition in terms of a beginning, a middle and an end.

Most visitors arrive at a blockbuster exhibition with a weight of momentum that impels them forward. Most visitors have days or weeks of pent up anticipation when they enter the doors of the gallery or museum.



This anticipation is heightened by promotion and word of mouth.

They are ready to engage with the material of the exhibition. At busy times, queues form and the energy of anticipation is heightened further by the extra investment of time waiting in the queue.

Most visitors in this research were very clear that they wanted galleries and museums to control the number of people in the exhibition at any time. They were prepared to wait because this ensured that they would have a quality experience in the exhibition when they finally entered.

At busy times, galleries and museums should regard queues as an opportunity to enhance their visitors' experience. At the National Gallery, staff and volunteers engaged queuing visitors in conversation about the exhibition.



An important insight from this research was that the common practice of placing a video in the first room of an exhibition contradicts the natural momentum whereby, released from anticipation, visitors wish to finally 'get into' the exhibition itself.

Research participants suggested that the natural place for an informative video was during the enforced wait in the queue to enter the exhibition. Another natural pausing place would be in the body of the exhibition about half or two-thirds of the way through. At this place, visitors may be ready to sit for a while and reflect on the exhibition, or engage with a different form of presentation such as a video.

Beginning

We have noted that visitors entered the exhibition with a forward-momentum and strong willingness to engage with the content. In this study we found that the main task that visitors need to accomplish in the first few minutes, is to see the big picture of what the exhibition is about. This is where a metaphor can be so helpful – a metaphor is a suitcase that packs a lot of meaning into a small space and makes it easy to carry around.

Some characteristics of good introductory spaces are:

- spacious enough to allow free movement even at busy times
- uses a few large objects (key, iconic objects but not the main treasures) and simple text panels to give the bones of –
 - core message/purpose of the exhibition
 - scope and scale
 - outline of main sections or organisational themes
 - mood and tone

This introduction sets the scene for the exhibition to unfold according to the curator's design.



Middle

Visitors recounted a variety of ways of moving through crowded blockbuster exhibitions. Once they began and moved along, the exhibition pieced itself together for them. In successful exhibitions, visitors grow confident in knowing what this exhibition is about and they are more able to take control of their experience. They may back-track, jump forward, compare and contrast, explore and review.



To some extent, visitors can make an exhibition as complex as they want it to be. *Egyptian Antiquities* allowed and encouraged multiple paths to the extent that the later spaces were quite large and had objects in island displays as well as on walls. This encouraged long sightlines and multiple paths, especially as visitors accommodated congestion by working around others who were viewing the same objects.

End

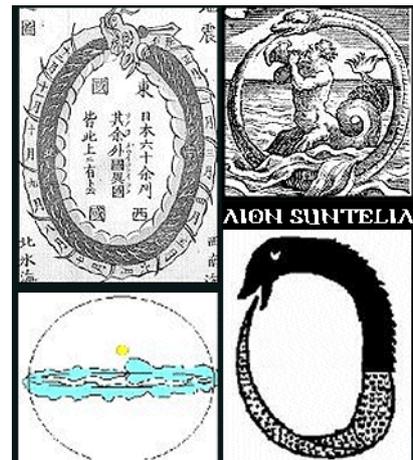
Whatever the metaphor, the visitor experience in an exhibition has a beginning where they lay the foundation for understanding the objects and ideas they encounter, a middle section where they detail, explore and develop the theme, and an end point when they leave the exhibition. Ideally, an end point will provide a resolution of some kind. This could be a quiet review, a dramatic high point, a call to action, or a bridge to the contemporary world. There are many kinds of resolution.

Without a transition that provides some kind of resolution that delivers on the promise made in the introduction, visitors can experience a clunky jolt as they step from the midst of valuable cultural ideas into the commercial world of the gift shop.

This was the experience of many visitors in *Egyptian Antiquities*. The large final gallery was perceived to introduce new material that was tangential to the linear sequence of the afterlife journey of the soul. And then the exhibition simply ended and visitors walked out into the exhibition gift shop.

Visitors suggested that in this exhibition a more powerful end note would have been to use the large space of the final gallery to create a theatrical impression of the Field of Reeds, using darkness, light, music and projected images to create a reflective space.

This suggestion is in line with current trends towards more experiential elements in major exhibitions.



Conclusion

The Coffee Shop Debrief approach provided a relaxed setting where visitors could do what they did naturally – talk about the exhibition. This allowed the researchers to gather finely detailed information about the experience of visitors in the exhibition.

The research has generated valuable insights about the visitor experience in large-scale, busy exhibitions. It suggests that metaphor is a valuable tool in meaning-making. Future research should explore the nature of the visitor 'journey' in other types of exhibitions.