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**Introduction**

How do you really know whether your interpretation is working, that it is engaging visitors and helping them to enjoy a positive museum experience? Do visitor comments books provide you with a level of information that influences the type of interpretation you produce, and allows you to plan for change?

These notes will help you choose methods of evaluation that provide more concrete data, data that can reassure you that you are fulfilling your visitors needs, that can inform future decision making and that can prove your level of performance to other stakeholders. These notes will help you to

- decide what information to collect
- choose a method of evaluation
- use your data constructively.

**Decide what information to collect**

Before you choose a method of evaluation, it is important to be quite clear about what you want to know, why, and how you intend to use the data that you gather. For example,

- Do you want to know whether the subject matter of a new exhibition is attracting younger visitors, to prove that you have successfully targeted a new audience?
- Do you want to know if a new computer interactive works and that your visitors understand any instructions or information, before installing it in your gallery?
- Do you want to know which objects attract visitors' attention the most, to help you plan changes in gallery content or layout?
- Do you want evidence to report to funding bodies that your new interpretation boards are a success and that money was wisely spent?

There are many other questions that you could ask, but essentially each question should aim to answer your **interpretive objectives**. Interpretive objectives spell out what you want your interpretation to achieve, whether it is giving your visitors a particular message or new idea, inspiring pride of place, or encouraging visitors to look more closely at objects in your collection and spend longer in your galleries. You will not find the answers to these questions in your visitor comments book.

## **Choose a method of evaluation**

To answer different questions, you will need to gather different types of data using a variety of evaluation techniques. Some methods will engage directly with your visitors, whilst others are indirect, or observational. They can provide **quantitative** data, numbers and statistics, or **qualitative** data, information about people's opinions, attitudes and feelings.

Depending on what you want to know, you will also need to decide at which stage of your project to evaluate, either to inform planning, to refine design, to find out if everything works, or to seek feedback on the whole. A selection of evaluation methods, and the stages at which they can be used, are given below. You do not have to use them all for each project but choose one or two that are appropriate for you.

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### **Planning Stage**

#### **- Front end evaluation**

At this stage you will be looking for information to inform the planning of your interpretive project, for example helping you to define your audience and to plan for interpretation that you know will meet their interests and expectations.

You can use

#### **Questionnaires**

- Collect numerical data. For example, how many people visit your museum or a particular exhibition, what age are they, where are they from, have they visited before etc.

- Gauge interest in, and attitudes towards, existing interpretation. For example, what have visitors learned from their visit, what did they find most interesting or enjoyable? Out of a list of subjects, what they would like to see added etc?

### **Focus groups (semi-formal group interviews)**

- Find out if you are meeting, or can meet, the needs of particular target groups, for example families, ethnic minority groups, schools, or people with disabilities. Try inviting groups to your museum, give them a chance to explore and then hold a semi-formal discussion to get feedback on particular aspects of your interpretation. Use prompts and open-ended questions to elicit a detailed response.

### **Observation**

- Find out where visitors spend most time in your museum. Which themes or objects appear to attract them most? Do they pass through without stopping to engage with any of your interpretation? Do they repeat or discuss any of your interpretation with other family members?
- Find out if any instructions are understood. For example, are your visitors using interactive devices as intended, and do they take the time to read all the instructions?

Information gathered at this stage can be used to refine your interpretive objectives and to shape your ideas into actual interpretation.

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## **Design Stage**

### **- Formative evaluation**

At this stage you should be testing interpretation that is in final draft form, that you are happy with, but that you want to check works for your visitors. You can do this through

#### **One to one visitor interviews**

- Invite museum visitors to comment upon the content, tone, length, legibility, clarity, format etc of a piece of interpretation. Use simple computer printouts of your draft panel or label text, to allow you to make changes without incurring any cost.

- Gauge whether your message is getting across. Try asking visitors to complete a simple questionnaire before and after reading a piece of interpretation or using an interactive exhibit, to test whether their knowledge or understanding increases as a result.
- Find out which style of writing attracts visitors the most. Write the same label or panel content in four different ways and ask visitors which engages them most and why.
- Test whether the content of any interactive devices works, and whether operating instructions are clear, the right length etc. Use simple paper mock-ups of each computer screen and ask visitors to comment.

If, as a result of testing, you need to make any changes, you can easily alter and reprint mock-ups, and test again to make sure you get it right.

### **Observation**

- Watch for visitors' reactions as they respond to different pieces of interpretation, and keep a written log or record. For example, how do visitors respond to a new guided tour?

Once you are happy with test results at this stage, you can finalise content and design, and complete the production process.

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## **Completion Stage**

### **- Remedial evaluation**

At this stage you should know from testing whether individual pieces of interpretation engage and interest your visitors. You will now need to know whether everything works together as a whole. You can use similar methods of evaluation to the design stage but your questions will have a different focus.

### **One to one interviews**

- Test whether visitors are using and absorbing your interpretation as a whole. Use a short questionnaire to test visitors' knowledge, opinions etc before and after they enter your exhibition, to see what impact it has made.
- Seek feedback from any visitors who have special needs, to make sure your interpretation is accessible to a wide range of users.

## **Observation**

- Find out whether visitors are following the route you intend. Are they using any sign posting or directions you've provided, or do you need to adjust the position to make it more obvious? If there is a natural chronology to the display, is it obvious to your visitors?
- Observe whether visitors have trouble reading any object captions or other written text. Is it all ideally positioned in terms of height, angle and light?

Any adjustments made at this stage should be relatively minor.

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## **Completion Stage**

### **- Summative evaluation**

At this stage your interpretation will be complete and installed. You will need to evaluate the overall success and impact of your interpretation. In many ways the questions you ask here will be the same as those posed during the planning stage, but additionally you will be identifying whether your initial interpretive objectives have been met. You can use

## **Questionnaires**

- Collect numerical data. For example, how many people have visited your exhibition, what age are they, where are they from, have they visited before, how do they rate the exhibition under a range of criteria?
- Determine whether your interpretation has had any impact on visitors' knowledge or attitudes. For example, did they learn something new, gain new insight or understanding, feel inspired to find out more or visit again? What do they remember most?

## **Observation**

- Find out where visitors spend most time in your exhibition. Are they attracted to the themes, objects or interactive devices that you predicted would engage them the most? Are they using the full range of interpretive media on offer? Do they repeat or discuss any of your interpretation with other family members? What is the average length of visit?

## **Critical appraisal**

- Invite a skilled colleague or interpretive professional to review your interpretation and give constructive comments.

Use the information gathered at this stage to inform the planning and development of future projects.

## **Use your data constructively**

Evaluation is about making improvements, so once you have collected your data you need to put it to positive use. Information gleaned during the planning or design stages will probably have been fed straight back into your work. Information gathered at the completion stage will have a longer term use. Either way, you should keep an accurate record of what you evaluated, and how, so that you can

- Compare actual results to intended results – did you meet your initial interpretive objectives? Compare quantitative and qualitative data gathered during the planning stage to that gathered at the end of the project. What changes did you bring about?
- Analyse results – what did you do and how did you do it? What worked well, what didn't, and why? What would you do differently next time?

This type of information can be presented in a project report, to be made available to other colleagues, funding bodies, sponsors and stakeholders. Most importantly, it should influence the direction of future work, helping you to understand your visitors better in order to provide interpretation that is targeted towards and works well for them.

If you want to explore the evaluation of interpretation in more detail, you are welcome to contact SMC Museums Officer, Emma Morehouse.

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## Further reading

For more information about evaluation, try the following

	Key subjects
Hillier, D A Closer Look - increasing access through interpretation Scottish Museums Council, 2001 <a href="http://www.scottishmuseums.org.uk">www.scottishmuseums.org.uk</a>	Planning for writing; Putting it into practise; Evaluation.
Masters, D Introducing Interpretation: Evaluating Interpretation Scottish Natural Heritage <a href="http://www.snh.org.uk">www.snh.org.uk</a>	Evaluation techniques; Survey sample sizes.
Serrell, B Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach Altamira Press, 1996	Evaluating written text; Questions to ask.
Evaluation Toolkit Scottish Arts Council <a href="http://www.evaluationforall.org.uk">www.evaluationforall.org.uk</a>	The evaluation process; Guide to techniques.
Interpret Scotland Journal Issue 4 Is it working? Interpret Scotland, Autumn 2001	Evaluation checklist; Evaluation case studies.
Museum Practice No 5 Interpretation Museums Association, London, 1997	

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